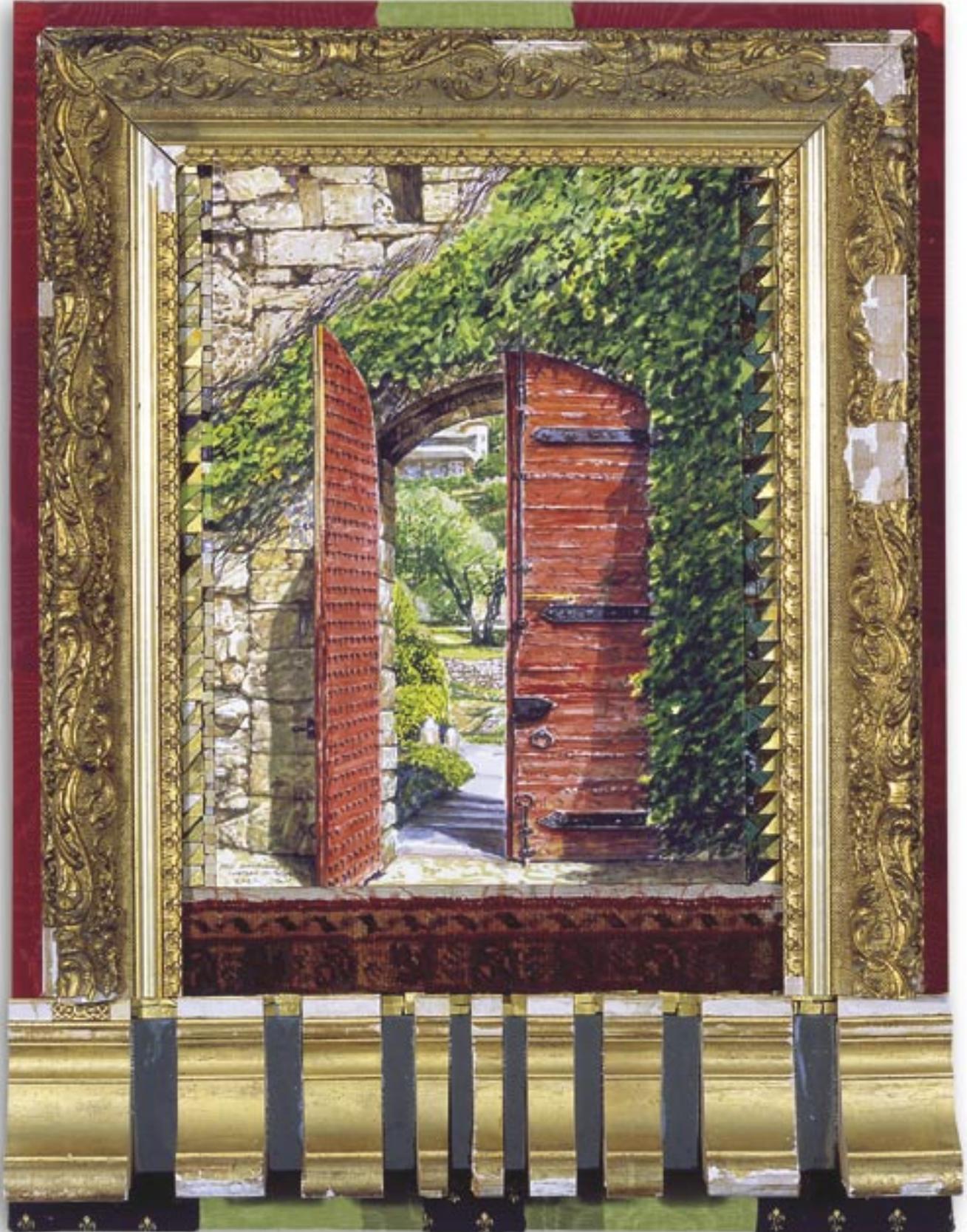


The Journal of the Alabama Writers' Forum

FIRST DRAFT

A PARTNERSHIP PROGRAM OF THE ALABAMA STATE COUNCIL ON THE ARTS • FALL 2004



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Editor: Jay Lamar

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AWF WELCOMES NEW BOARD MEMBERS

AWF is joined this fall by eight new board members. We are happy to introduce them in this issue of *First Draft*.



Huntsville resident **LINDA SPALLA** retired in 2000 as president and general manager of WHNT-TV. She was the first female CBS Television general manager in the South and first with the NY Times Broadcast Group. She is a motivational speaker and author of *Leading Ladies: 30 Tips for Dynamic Female Leaders*. Spalla notes, "I'm excited to be on the Alabama Writers' Forum board because I believe that preserving and advancing our Southern culture through the written word is vital. The older I grow, the more precious and necessary that preservation seems to me, and the Forum is the perfect vehicle. Because I am a writer novice, I look forward to all the new contacts and friends I will meet as a part of this association."



PAM KINGSBURY teaches English at the University of North Alabama in Florence. She is a regular reviewer for *Library Journal*, *ForeWord*, *Southern Scribe*, and *First Draft*, as well as a member of the National Book Critics Circle and the Southern Book Critics Circle. Kingsbury has been active in public literary programming for many years. According to Kingsbury, "The Forum is an extraordinary gift to the writers, readers, teachers, students, and humanists in Alabama. While we often think of ourselves as 'a poor state,' AWF reminds us that we have a rich cultural heritage and a vibrant literary community. As a board member I will promote AWF and to work with local groups and/or institutions that are interested in the literary arts in the state."

CHARLOTTE CABANISS ROBERTSON is the former director of the Bay Minette Public Library, founder of Alabama Athenaeum, and founding member of both the Alabama Center for the Book and Gulf Coast Storytelling. She co-directs the Southeast Mystery Writers Workshop in Bay Minette and is a free-lance writer and columnist/contributor to *Mobile Register's* Book Page, *First Draft*, and *Southern Scribe*. She currently coordinates events for Page and Palette Bookstore/Fairhope. Robertson is "honored to be entrusted with the fostering of the great talent I see emerging in Alabama's literary arena. I hope that I will be able to use my resources and contacts to elevate national opinion of Alabama writers."



BONNIE G. SEYMOUR has served as the director of the Public Library of Anniston and Calhoun since 1984. She notes, "The Public Library of Anniston and Calhoun County has always supported literary programming and has an Accent on the Author program that brings four to six authors to the library for readings/discussions each year. I am honored to join the board of the Forum. Our state has so many talented writers and wonderful literary events. The Forum does such a good job of supporting and publicizing them."

RUTH OTT lives in Montgomery. She has been active in the League of Women Voters for twenty-five years and currently serves as president of the Montgomery Genealogical Society. She also writes a column for the Montgomery *Independent* newspaper. Among the interests Ott brings to the Forum is that "as a member of the AWF board, I look forward to encouraging young writers to work at their craft and to showcasing the considerable talents of our many experienced writers."

Cover art by Alabama artist Nall, a native of Troy who divides his time between Vence, France and Fairhope, Alabama. "Red Doors at Chateau Saint Martin, Vence France, 2002" was one of the featured pieces in "Nall Paysages," a major showing of the artist's watercolor mosaic landscapes at the Galerie de la Marine in Nice, France, June 24-August 31, 2004. For further information visit www.nall.org.

In This Issue



University of Alabama Creative Writing Program faculty member **MICHAEL MARTONE** is the author of more than a half dozen books, including *Blue Guide to Indiana* and the award-winning *Flatness and Other Landscapes*. He was editor of *The Scribner's Anthology of Contemporary Short Fiction*, among other works.

In addition to UA, Martone has taught at Iowa State, Harvard, Syracuse, and Warren Wilson College. As an AWF board member, he looks forward to "making more connections with other writers and poets around Alabama."



JIM BUFORD is a management consultant and adjunct professor at Auburn University. He is also author of three volumes of essays, the most recent of which is *Pie in the Sky: A Few More Clues to the Meaning of Life*, as well as a social history, four textbooks and

many professional articles. As a new member of the Forum board, Buford hopes to encourage colleagues in management and related disciplines to broaden their perspective from dull academic journals and to include in their work material people might actually read.



RUTH BEAUMONT COOK is a Birmingham author and communication skills consultant returning to the Alabama Writers' Forum board after a three-year break. She also serves on the planning committee for the Writing Today conference at Birmingham-Southern College and is a past chairperson of that committee.

Ruth has written book reviews and articles for *First Draft*, numerous articles for Birmingham magazine and other publications, and four corporate histories of Birmingham institutions. Her Civil War narrative documentary, *North Across the River*, was published by Crane Hill in 1999 and issued in paperback in 2000. She is currently at work on a second book with a World War II setting in Alabama. "I look forward to renewing my association with the AWF board and hope to help promote more local and individual interest in the Forum and its wonderful opportunities for writers."

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ASCA Fellowship Award Winners 2004-05

by Mary Jo Woods



PRISCILLA HANCOCK COOPER

A woman. A strong woman. An even stronger woman after events in her life transpired that would knock most people flat on their faces, like a baseball unexpectedly hitting them in the back of the head. This woman, however, didn't let the curveballs knock her down. In fact, a piece she is working on tentatively called "Wounded Hearts Will Heal" deals with issues of loss.

Her name is Priscilla Hancock Cooper and she is a recipient of an Alabama State Council on the Arts fellowship. A Birmingham poet and dramatist, she endured trying times in the '90s. She went through a divorce, had people close to her die, and endured a house fire. "Even through a difficult, painful period, it also was a period of great growth for me," Cooper says. She calls up an old saying: what doesn't kill you only makes you stronger.

Cooper is a woman of many talents. She balances writing with community involvement and consulting work. "I have three different tracks," Cooper says. She is a writer, teaches in the Alabama Writers' Forum "Writing Our Stories" program, and is an educational consultant. She is the founder/director of the Nia Institute, Inc., a non-profit dedicated to educating youth, teachers, and parents about African-American history. She also works with Cooper and Associates, a firm specializing in African-American experience along with diversity issues. Since 1990, she has toured the region with her one-woman dramatic shows of "Ebony Legacy: The Oral Tradition in African-American Literature" and "Call Me Black Woman." In addition, she tours nationally with Dhana Bradley-Morton.

The inspiration for her poetry comes from her own life. "It tends to be more personal than political," she says.

Cooper began her love affair with poetry in elementary school. Both of the elementary schools she attended were named after black poets. In ninth grade, she worked for a weekly newspaper called the *Louisville Defender*. She earned degrees in journalism and history from Lincoln University and a master's degree in international communication from American University. During college she became interested in the performance side of poetry. "The black arts movement of the '60s and '70s was a good time to be a writer," Cooper says. "Lots of people were writing and reading." It was during this time she explored performance as an effective way to share poetry with an audience.

A constant conflict is finding time to do everything she wants to, including writing, performing, and educating black youth about their history. "I am very committed to young people and sharing African-American culture," Cooper says. People not understanding their history, she believes, causes violence among youth. As a parent of three children, Cooper was surprised at the lack of African-American studies present in her children's textbooks. She expected it to be a part of the curriculum. "But that wasn't the case," she says.

Cooper is grateful for her hardships and survived them with a deeper sense of strength. "There is a certain strength that comes from adversity," she says.

She will use the \$5,000 grant money to work on several writing projects. "It is going to free me to spend some time writing," Cooper says. "The most valuable thing an artist can have is time."



CHARLES ROSE

Charles Rose sat with terminally ill patients and listened. He visited with them and got a glimpse into their lives, their memories. He later remembered the experience he had while volunteering with Hospice and began to write down his thoughts.

These notes turned into a book, *In the Midst of Life*. This book is the first he's published, although this recent recipient of the Alabama State Council on the Arts fellowship has written numerous short stories and essays. The characters in his stories, he says, often come from his own life experiences.

"Almost everything in a short story in some way has a source in what I see experienced, people I know," says Rose, who taught English and writing courses at Auburn University for 34 years. "As I

write, it's like fitting pieces into a jigsaw puzzle."

Rose wasn't always a writer. He first discovered his love of fiction writing while a sophomore at Vanderbilt University studying under Donald Davidson, one of the Fugitive poets. "Back in the '20s, the Fugitives were a group of people in Nashville who got together and exchanged poems and put out a magazine called *The Fugitive*," Rose says. "What they were fugitives from was the old-fashioned genteel tradition in Southern poetry that they felt didn't really express what life in South was all about." Impressed by these poets, Rose began to find his own style of writing.

He went on to receive a master's degree with a creative thesis at the University of Florida. After serving in the army for three years, he returned and completed his Ph.D., and then realized he wanted to teach. He arrived in Auburn in 1960. During his 34-year teaching career, he taught several students who went on to become writers. He taught Marian Carcache, who has published many stories in literary journals and received a fellowship from the Alabama State Council on the Arts last year. Columnist Rheta Grimsley Johnson, another student, told Rose something he would never forget. "She told me that I was one of the best teachers she ever had and that I inspired her to write," Rose says. "She said I told her, 'Don't worry about the commas, or about grammar, just try to express yourself.'"

He says he didn't learn how to read great literature until he was at Vanderbilt, but he thinks reading is essential to writing well. "I would say young novelists today should read modernist classics – James Joyce, Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner – in order to help them crystallize what they're doing," Rose says.

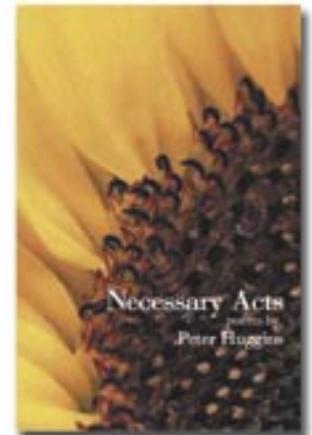
A typical day for Rose starts with swimming laps at the pool and moves to writing early in the afternoon. He usually writes a first draft from 2 p.m. until 4 or 5 p.m. Then he re-writes until 7 p.m. "I try to do that five days a week," Rose says. "You need to do it every day." He says a writer also has to be willing to take rejection. "Just go on, and if you really are compelled to write, keep on doing it," Rose says. He has several unfinished stories and books that are waiting for the right ending. The most important part of writing is finding your true voice. "If you are beginning to write you have to write what you know about," Rose says. "You have to find a way you can be true to your own experience and in doing so use language that has power."

A writer, he says, doesn't do it for the money. "I get a real feeling of pleasure and accomplishment when one of my stories comes out and is published," Rose says. "You realize it's out there for any reader to read and derive something from." There are drawbacks as well. Writer Andrew Lytle once told Rose that when writing a person has to risk things. "You can't really live like everybody else," Rose says. "You have to be able to live with your demons, and incorporate them into your writing."

Rose will use the \$5,000 he received from the fellowship to do research for a novel he is writing which he started six years ago. His goals for the future include continuing to write more stories. "Being well-known doesn't matter to me," Rose says. "I just want to continue doing what I am doing."

Mary Jo Woods is a freelance writer and a senior at Auburn University. She is also a staff writer at Auburn Magazine and the *Intrigue* Editor of *The Auburn Plainsman*.

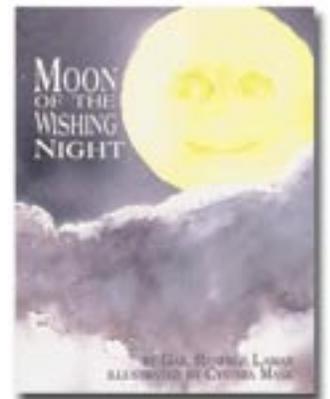
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The Ada Long Creative Writing Workshop

“Writing Lives!”

A group of young, energetic Alabama writers filled the Spencer Honors House at the University of Alabama at Birmingham this past summer for the first annual Ada Long Creative Writing Workshop. The event, named in honor of recently retired honors program director and professor of English Ada Long, introduces selected high school students to a variety of creative writing options such as poetry, fiction, memoir, playwriting, writing for children, and magazine production. The event lasts for three weeks, and is filled with reading, writing, and thinking activities that spark student-writers’ ideas for the page and beyond.

The first Ada Long Creative Writing Workshop was anchored financially by members of the UAB English Department Advisory Committee, which committed \$10,000 to the program. The workshop, which will be an annual offering, aims at encouraging aspiring writers to learn first hand about the strategies creative writers use and to experiment with a range of genres. Pedagogical approaches vary as widely as the material participants read and write, involving guided writing exercises, workshops centering on individual student work, and one-on-one conferences with instructors. Related enrichment activities are also a key component of the workshop experience, this year featuring

- trips to the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute, Culinary Institute, Birmingham Botanical Gardens, and Sloss Furnace;
- readings and presentations by the program’s faculty, including Tony Crunk, Daryl Brown, Rusty Rushton, Tina Harris, and Maria Morrison; UAB undergraduate and graduate student writers; and visiting writers and performers such as storyteller Carol Reese and poet/dramatist Priscilla Cooper;
- the exploration of publication opportunities in *Sanctuary*, the journal of the UAB Honors Program, an anthology of work exclusively by program students, and other publication forums;
- an opportunity for students to read publicly from their work during the workshop’s closing sessions.

The theme “Writing Lives!” is reinforced by the intertwined activities through which students discuss, create, and revise their work. For instance, on the group’s visit to the Culinary Institute, cooking was explored as a form of art not unlike that practiced by writers, painters, or musicians. “At the Culinary,” director of the Ada Long Creative Writing Workshop and Assistant Professor of English at UAB Tony Crunk shares, “students were introduced to the invention

Student responses to the first Ada Long Creative Writing Workshop were overwhelmingly positive:

“I think the workshop is an experience I will remember for a long time. I’ve learned so much about writing and about myself. ... I have ideas that will keep me writing for years.”

“This workshop has been one of the best things I have ever done. ...All of it was of value and rewarding. ...I will go back [to my school] and let everyone know about this wonderful program.”

“For the first time in a long time, I was excited about writing, and I’m very proud of the work I’ve done. Thanks to you all for bringing me out of the ‘little box’ I was in before the workshop.”



Participants in the Ada Long Creative Writing Workshop

(or idea-generating aspect) of new recipes, the revision of these recipes, and the work that goes into presenting them to an audience—in this case, the diner.” Through looking at the creative processes involved in a number of arts, from cooking to metal arts (as demonstrated at Sloss Furnace), students are able both to broaden their understanding of creativity and to define more specifically strategies through which to create workable pieces of writing.

Tony and other members of the program faculty now look ahead to the group of students that will attend the workshop next year. “We were extremely pleased [this year] by the diversity of the student body, the seriousness with which the students took their work, and the increased sophistication manifest in their writing even over such a short time,” Tony comments. Also impressive was the “sense of community and mutual support that emerged very quickly among the students... It seemed a rare experience for most of them to work with a group of peers who so intently



Tony Crunk

shared their own academic and artistic interests.”

Students interested in participating in the 2005 Ada Long Creative Writing Workshop may either self-apply or be nominated by a teacher who is aware of the student’s writing abilities. If you are interested in learning more about the Ada Long Creative Writing Workshop or making a contribution to benefit the workshop, please contact Jennifer Ellison in the UAB School of Arts and Humanities at (205) 934-2290 or send your gift to the Ada Long Creative Writing Workshop c/o UAB School of Arts and Humanities, HB 302, 1530 3rd Avenue South, Birmingham, Alabama 35294-1260. All gifts are tax-deductible and 100 percent of your gift will help provide scholarships to participating students.

Cynthia Ryan teaches English at the University of Alabama-Birmingham.

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LITERARY INFLUENCE

A Memrist Remembers

by Sherry Kughn

Author Norman McMillan remembers being poor as a child but understanding the riches of the written and the spoken word. As a child he would sit around the dining room table with his siblings and their college-age sister, Evelyn, would read her latest find.

“I heard the story *Why I Live at the PO* by Eudora Welty that way,” said McMillan. “Evelyn wanted to share what she loved with us.”

The “Evelyn” in McMillan’s memoir, *Distant Son*, was a beloved English professor who taught at Jacksonville State University during the 1970s and ’80s. She was the oldest of ten children born in the McMillan family and died in 1991 after her retirement.

McMillan spoke about his memoir earlier this year at the Public Library of Anniston-Calhoun County’s Accent on the Author luncheon. In *Distant Son*, he tells about growing up in the 1940s and ’50s in Mount Hermon and Greensboro. He includes in the telling the influence of Jacksonville State University on his family. In addition to his sister teaching here, his mother, Lucille, went to Jacksonville Normal School in the 1920s. She taught at a public school in Greensboro for a couple of years before she had her first child.

McMillan, who was the eighth child in the family, says he and his siblings were shaped by his mother’s emphasis on education.

“She very much prized even her high school education,” he said. “She liked to conjugate Latin and was mindful of grammar in the home. She assured us that education was tied to happiness and success.”

McMillan’s father, Albert, was an avid reader who would get up before dawn to read before heading to the fields to farm.

The emphasis paid off even though the family struggled through many financial reversals. McMillan wrote that his father’s fondness for alcohol caused him to make bad decisions about the family’s possessions. The economy in Hale County was tough even for smaller families. In spite of the hardships, several of McMillan’s siblings overcame the obstacles and

pursued advanced college degrees. McMillan, like Evelyn, excelled in high school. He earned his bachelor’s and master’s degrees in English from the University of Alabama. Then he earned his doctorate degree from the University of Michigan in 1971. He taught at both universities before taking what was to become his lifelong job—teaching English at the University of Montevallo. He retired from there in 2000.

McMillan began writing his memoir in 1997 during his involvement with the program of *Reading Our Lives: Southern Autobiography*, sponsored by the Auburn University Center for the Arts & Humanities. He enjoyed the feedback he got from other participants in the program and decided to take a sabbatical from the University of Montevallo. For months he wrote down everything he could remember about the first 18 years of his life.

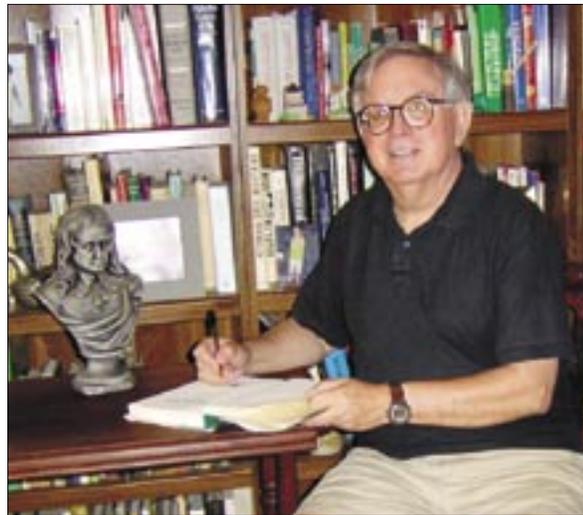
The project wasn’t McMillan’s first writing experience. Throughout the years he wrote articles and book reviews for educational publications, newspapers, and magazines. He wrote a one-person play about Flannery O’Connor that was performed in Montevallo and Birmingham,

and he tried his hand at a couple of short stories that were published. Since retirement he has written another one-person play—*Truman Capote: Against a Copper Sky*—which was performed in Monroeville and Montevallo. It was produced again this summer in Mobile.

McMillan also co-authored *Three Generations of Warriors: The Argonne Forest, The Flying Tigers, and the Skies of Vietnam* and served on the editorial board and edited the book *Alabama Bound: Contemporary Stories of a State* after the death of the editor.

McMillan, throughout the years, has visited Jacksonville State University for various functions, where he has many friends. He and his wife, Joan, often brought their son and daughter — now grown -- to visit their Aunt Evelyn.

“She’d take the children in the family on what she called ‘maypop walks,’” said McMillan. “She wouldn’t let us adults



Norman McMillan

go, but the walks involved making ballerinas out of maypop blossoms.”

McMillan says that looking back he realized his parents taught him the value of words, but Evelyn, too, molded him by her example and her generosity.

“Evelyn bought me a \$150 Plymouth when I was a junior in high school,” said

McMillan, “and lent me \$450 for a used Pontiac when I started to college. She never let me repay it. She was the most generous person I ever knew.”

Sherry Kughn works for the Anniston Star and is co-organizer of Accent on the Author at the Anniston-Calhoun Public Library.

Excerpt from *Distant Son*

A few weeks later a large black sedan, covered with a film of road dust, slowly entered the yard at Mount Hermon. Evelyn, dressed in overalls and her short hair uncombed, looked up from the chop block where she was splitting kindling. Two men emerged slowly from the car, looking around quickly at the unpainted house and the grassless yard. They were dressed identically in pinstriped suits and striped ties and had golden straw hats on their heads. One of the men, the taller one, straightened his tie a little and addressed Evelyn: “Is this the McMillan residence? We’re looking for a Miss Evelyn McMillan.”

Evelyn looked down at her bare feet for a minute, then said, “Just come up here and have a seat on the porch, please, and I’ll go get her for you.” She went inside the house and hurriedly slipped into her best blouse and skirt. She lightly applied some lipstick and ran a comb through her hair. Then she rummaged around in the corner for her loafers, scooted her feet into them, and went back out to the men, who were sitting side by side on the porch, their hats resting on their laps. They rose.

“Hello,” she said, extending her hand to one of the men and then the other. “I’m Evelyn McMillan. My brother said you wanted to see me.”

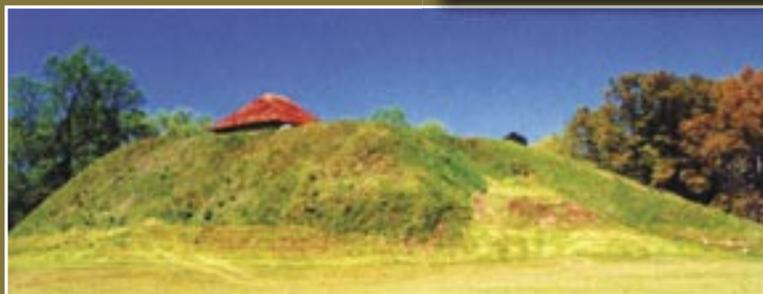
Scenic North Alabama

A Travel Guide to North Alabama’s Hidden Natural Treasures

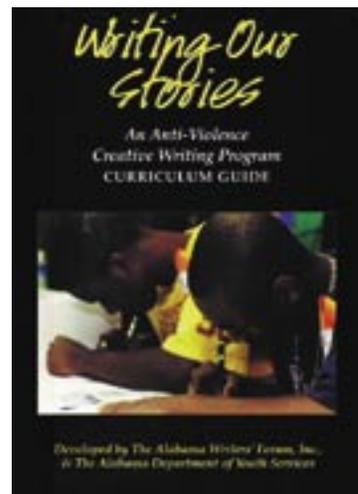
by Robert Schuffert

Robert Schuffert’s *Scenic North Alabama: A Travel Guide to North Alabama’s Hidden Natural Treasures* offers travel information on North Alabama’s most scenic locations and routes. Schuffert, a professional photographer, does justice to the beauty and variety of the region’s geography.

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Joy for the Asking

Alabama's Poet Laureate Speaks

President Moulton, Members of the Board of Trustees, my fellow colleagues whom I am honored to name as friends, and most important today's graduates, their families, and honored guests, it is a pleasure to speak with you today. It is a special honor because the University of South Alabama is my academic home; it is a place I speak from with pride and with love, and you will find that through the years you will increasingly revere the time you spent at USA. Memories, reverently, will bring you home again and again.

What I want to tell you today is that your life is a poem in progress, a long, narrative construct that you write every day of your life. A poem you may ask? Yes, for I believe that poetry resides in the deep stillness of our selves waiting for expression, for the clear, marvelous, miraculous words that touch the earth under our feet. You will take this rich red clay and shape it into who you are and what you will become in the days and months and years that lie before you.

This past weekend I heard Sonia Sanchez, another Alabama poet, say that poetics with crystal clarity brings us to the right thing, personally as well as politically. She said that she recently spoke to 2000 students in Washington, D.C., telling them about the possibility of making peace in their lives. "For just one week, don't say anything negative," she said. "In your dorm rooms, in offices, in homes, work places, don't say anything negative about anyone." Let me add that if anyone says anything negative to you, hand them a poem. Carry it in your pocket, carry it on the tip of your tongue, commit it to memory. Give it as a gift.

Sanchez said that she gave out her telephone number. "Call me if you feel you'll falter," she said. One girl did just that, phoned and said that the mission of not speaking ill was impossible. But then she called back to say that she had done it. She had not twisted her tongue against anyone. And she said that the room changed as well as the air around her. What if this could be the way to speak, to say, in our country, in our world?

Literary folk have long interrogated the meaning of joy. John Locke said that "joy is a delight of the mind." John Dryden said that "the roofs with joy resound," and John Keats said "A thing of beauty is a joy forever."

There is also the joy that is called hyperhedonia—a condition

Alabama Poet Laureate and University of South Alabama professor of English Sue Brannan Walker gave the spring 2004 commencement address at the University of South Alabama. First Draft is pleased to reprint her remarks.

in which heightened pleasure is derived from participation in activities that are sometimes tedious and sometimes uninteresting—like studying seemingly endless hours for final exams.

Joy is not always gladness, pleasure, delight, happiness, exultation, transport, felicity, fun, ecstasy, rapture, bliss, gaiety, mirth, merriment, festivity, and hilarity. It is also captured in the ability to overcome hardships and in the capacity to endure and is expressed in the story of Saint Francis, patron saint of the environment. Saint Francis and Brother Leo were out walking one cold winter morning when Francis told

Brother Leo that if every friar in every country were to possess integrity and great knowledge, perfect joy did not reside in this. As they continued their walk, St. Francis instructed Leo further. "Brother Leo," he said, "if a friar could make the blind see, the deaf hear, if he could cure all ills and make the lame walk, perfect joy is not in this."

Traveling further, Francis called to Leo again. "Brother Leo," he said, "if a friar could speak with the tongue of an angel, if he could chart the course of stars, know about plants and animals, the mysteries of the earth, its minerals, rocks and treasures, true joy does not lie in this."

Poor Leo had had enough. "Where, then, is joy?" he asked.

Francis replied that joy sometimes meant standing long hours in the cold and rain. It meant suffering hardships, being called a scoundrel when seeking refuge and being turned away hungry, tired, and weak without food or drink. "If you can still manage to keep love in your heart in spite of this, brother, you will have found joy."

Let me say that a poem is joy. It is a living thing, the spirit within you. I want to use that word as an aspect of commencement, as a gift—to give joy, to congratulate. Let me use it today as text and title, as a poem I have written for you. But first a tiny bit about poetics. The poem is free verse. It does not rhyme, and toward the end of it, embedded within the poem is an alphabet poem, called an abecedarius. The initial letters of each line, when read down, give the letters of the alphabet. I will raise my hand, and tell you when to listen for this. I chose this form because our education began simply with A,B,C. Your accomplishments extend from that beginning.

Where Joy Resides

(For Today's Graduates)

Think Joy, each day's joy-filled celebration,
the joy of song, the bell of joy ringing,
the lithe fingers and palm of joy,
the round world of joy on its axis turning.
Think of language as joy, the way
you bring words into being, the way
they gather on your tongue and are breath.
JOY JOY JOY JOY JOY oi oi oi oi oi,
reverberations sounding its sometimes inscrutable presence
in your life, sounding the iambic beat of your heart.

Joy is a lesson in living, an achievement, a college degree.
It is Frederick Schiller's ethics and philosophy,
his real and tangible "Ode to Joy,"
when he wrote:

Joy all creatures drink
At nature's bosom.
All good and all evil ones
Follow her rose-petaled path,

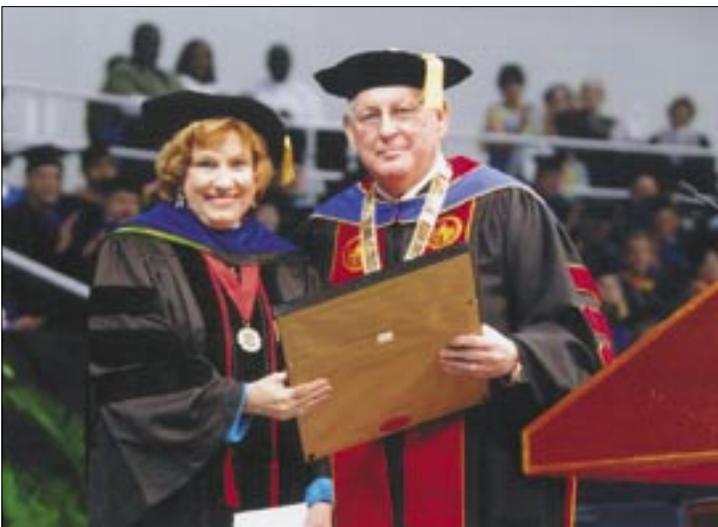
the path of Joy, that followed by Beethoven
when he set Schiller's words to music,
his fingers pressing ivory piano keys,
releasing sounds his deaf ears
would never hear, but affirming
the possibility of being, as Schiller said,
a friend's friend,
"across the firmament's splendid design."
Joy is a poetic commencing;
it is an alphabet,
a synthesis of all the letters that become words
that are shaped into meaning.

•••

Ask me if what you say is your life
Bodied forth in science and art,
Caritas, let it be laughter,
Dance and dream, each day of dawning,
Education, the happy result of being good,
Friendship, forgiveness,
Grace erasing greed, espousing
Hope, the heart's eternal lesson
Inviolable, invincible,
Just, jubilant, the word
Kindness, a lozenge sweet on your tongue.
Language is your obligation to use words well.
Make them into day miracles addressing
Need. Never forget that words wound, so
Open your mind and open your heart.
Praise when you can.
Question always if what you say may
Right wrongs. I am word-working my way from A to Z
Sharing the language, the letters, the symphony,
Tutta la forza, the whole power as loud as possible celebrating
USA, our country, the University of South Alabama, our
Voices speaking memory, loving this place even as you leave it.
Will you go forth, return, giving the gift of yourself,
Xenium, a gift ancient Greeks gave to strangers:
Your accomplishments, your graduation from USA,
Zest and zeal, exquisite Joy.

That's it: Joy from A to Z
Write your Ode to Joy,
the poem that is your life.

I am honored to have spoken to you today. Thank you for letting me share this moment, this joy, this special day in your life.



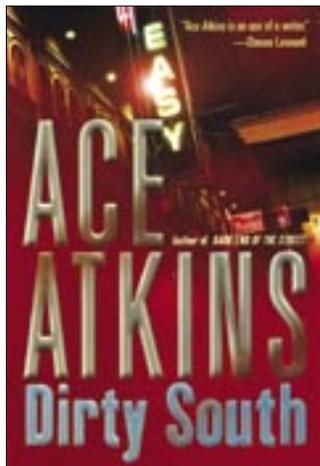
USA

Sue Brannan Walker with USA President Gordon Moulton

As Alabama Poet Laureate, Sue Brannan Walker supports and promotes writing and reading in myriad ways. Among her initiatives is acknowledging high school students who win literary awards. Walker hopes to recognize each winner with a certificate of merit. If you have information about high school writing contests and winners, or if you are a winner yourself, please let her know.

Walker is also interested in poems about Alabama. She hopes to create a database of contemporary and historical poems about the state. If you know of or have written a poem about Alabama, she would appreciate hearing from you.

To contact Walker, check her website at www.suebwalker.com.



Dirty South

by Ace Atkins

William Morrow, 2004

\$24.95, Cloth

Nick Travers, ex-New Orleans Saint football player turned blues historian, returns to action in Ace Atkins's fast-paced fourth novel, *Dirty South*.

Nick endangers his own life when he comes to the aid of Teddy Paris, former teammate and longtime friend, who receives a death threat from Cash, arch-rival music producer, if Teddy doesn't pay off an impossibly huge debt within twenty-four hours. After a bruising encounter with Cash and his thugs, Nick learns that the real issue between Teddy and Cash is not the money, but

control of a young, rising star on the New Orleans rap scene.

One rapper, Diabolique, the creator of the Dirty South sound, has already violently lost his life in mysterious circumstances. Fifteen-year-old Tavarius, whose label name is ALIAS, might be the next victim in this raging turf war unless Nick can get to the bottom of things quickly. The discovery of Malcolm, Teddy's likable but free-spending, hustling brother, swinging at the end of a rope from an oak tree beside the canal out on Bamboo Road could have been suicide, but Nick and the police suspect murder.

Hesitant at first, Nick's relationship with ALIAS, the rap star, and his music grows more affectionate. Unlettered and, at fifteen, still illiterate, Tavarius muses and recalls throughout the novel in a gifted dialect from which his lyrical rap poetry must spring.

Readers of earlier Ace Atkins novels encounter familiar landscapes and characters. Hooked on blues, Nick, accompanied by Polk Salad Annie, a gentle dog of dubious lineage, continues periodic forays into the Mississippi Delta, combining research trips to track down aging blues artists and to visit old buddies and his current squeeze.

JoJo and his fabulously talented blues-singing wife, Loretta, former proprietors of one of New Orleans most authentic blues bars and Nick's favorite hangout, now live near Clarksdale in the heart of Delta blues country. JoJo and Loretta do Nick a great favor when they agree to shelter an initially sullen ALIAS to keep him out of harm's way. JoJo unhesitatingly joins forces with unlikely allies to save Nick from certain death in the murky dawn waters of Bayou Sauvage on the edge of Lake Pontchartrain.

Nick, at his peril, trifles with the patience of his girlfriend Maggie, who parents a young boy, gardens, raises horses, and does photography, on a farm near Oxford, and whose romantic plans for Nick's birthday are spoiled by his decision to stay in New Orleans to help Teddy and to protect ALIAS. Maggie's patience wears thin, and, to his credit, Nick realizes how important it will be to spend a lot of time dotting on her once the matter of Teddy and ALIAS is resolved.

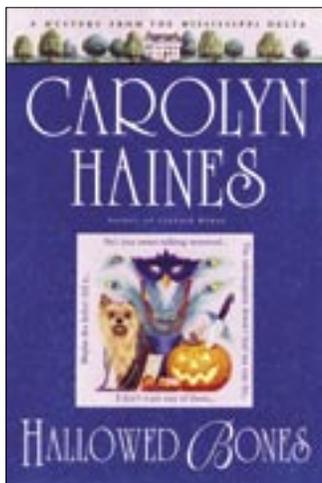
Dirty South mostly takes place in New Orleans and environs, including familiar spots in the French Quarter, the nearby Warehouse District where Nick and Polk Salad Annie live, and along St. Charles. Nick's adventures, however, take readers into parts of New Orleans where few tourists venture: seedy parts of Algiers on the West Bank, or Calliope, an African-American neighborhood that sprang up around a Depression-era housing project.

Nick's encyclopedic knowledge of blues, including obscure and rarely recorded artists, is a hallmark of Ace Atkins's novels. In *Dirty South*, Nick also shares his knowledge of authentic New Orleans foods. His preferences of eating establishments resemble a low-budget, but reputable, culinary guide to dining in the Crescent City: Zapp's Crawtaters for a snack or appetizer; Central Grocery on Decatur

for muffulettas; Johnnies on Perdido for po'boys; Port of Call on Esplanade Avenue for pizza; and Acme Oyster House for jambalaya and oysters. All accompanied by Dixie Beer or Barq's, not iced tea. If Teddy is picking up the tab, there is Antoine's—one of JoJo and Loretta's favorites where they once taught Nick which fork to use in classy restaurants—but which Nick now scornfully regards as one of the best places in New Orleans to watch toothpick-chomping tourists in golf shirts.

Dirty South is a haunting and often terrifying story about friendship, strength of character, misplaced loyalty and revenge. It is also a commentary on the music's beauty and the talented artists who produce it, as well as the corrosive powers of fame, wealth, manipulation, and control.

Historian Allen Cronenberg lives in Virginia.



Hallowed Bones

by Carolyn Haines

Delacorte Press, 2004
\$23.95, Hardcover

Carolyn Haines has created a memorable, humorous, distinctively Southern cast of characters in her “bones” mystery series.

In *Hallowed Bones*, Sarah Delaney Booth continues building up her detective agency, turning a master bedroom suite in the east wing of her beloved Dahlia

House into an office. While she can't afford a receptionist, she can afford an assistant, and her friend Tinkie Richmond is a quick study. Long-time friends and “Daddy's Girls,” they speak a language all their own and complement one another as business partners. When Doreen Mallory, the illegitimate daughter of a religious fanatic/crazy woman, is accused of killing her illegitimate girl infant the ladies are hired to find the real murderer.

Still pining for the unhappily married Sheriff Coleman Peters, Sarah Delaney finds herself “caught in a web of time.” Being part of Doreen's defense team provides her with a much needed change of scenery as well as a respite from the gossips of Zinnia, Mississippi.

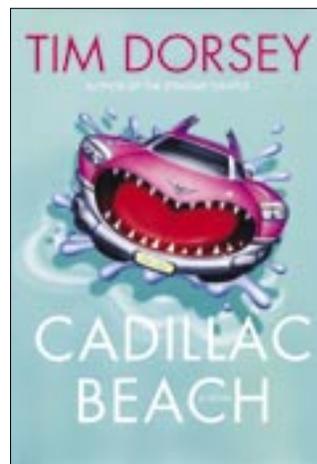
Like her mother, Lilith, Doreen Mallory has a keen interest in the religious life. Reared by nuns in a New Orleans convent, since childhood Doreen has been recognized as a healer with considerable gifts. Where her mother vehemently preached against sex, Doreen uses it as “a healing tool” for three powerful men. An uncannily accurate tarot reader capable of curing by the laying on of hands, Doreen has a large following around Jackson Square and has accumulated an immense amount of wealth in a short period of time. As the mother of an infant child with insurmountable birth defects, her credibility is certainly bound to be questioned by the

disbelievers, and her ability to support her staff is likely to be diminished. Sarah Delaney, whose only experience with spirituality is Jitty (the ghost who shares her childhood home), is skeptical enough to ask the right questions and tenacious enough to find the right answers.

Carolyn Haines uses a light touch to delve into the cultural norms of the South, dating rituals of women whose biological clocks are ticking more and more loudly, and the sisterhood between Southern women. More important, her “bones” books are great fun, blending a romantic sensibility with the pleasures of an English cozy.

Like her character, Sarah Delaney Booth, Carolyn Haines is a native of Mississippi. She currently lives on a farm in southern Alabama. Her earlier *Bones* mysteries include *Them Bones*, *Buried Bones*, *Splintered Bones*, and *Crossed Bones*. She's also the author of *Summer of the Redeemers* and *Touched*.

Pam Kingsbury teaches English and writes in Florence.



Cadillac Beach

A Novel

by Tim Dorsey

William Morrow, 2004
\$24.95, Cloth

Don your body armor and down a Zoloft®. Serge Storm, Tim Dorsey's zany antihero, is back in action. In *Cadillac Beach*, Dorsey's sixth novel, Serge confronts—and ultimately manipulates—Miami mobsters, the CIA, FBI, and anti-Castro exiles, not to mention a testy Miami Chamber of Commerce, in a quest to solve the mystery of his grandfather's death which might lead, not so disinterestedly, to the recovery of a cache of valuable stolen diamonds.

Perhaps the most hilariously trenchant commentator on contemporary Florida culture, Dorsey returned to the Sunshine State in 1987 as a reporter for the Tampa *Tribune*. His journalism career began at Auburn University where he edited the weekly student newspaper. Over the years, the Auburn University *Plainsman* produced many courageous, sometimes irreverent, editors. Tim Dorsey, without peer among them, still enjoys a certain campus notoriety. Buoyed by the success of his first raucous thriller, *Florida Roadkill*, Dorsey left the newspaper to embark on a career as novelist. Nowadays, he keeps a hand in journalism by writing a monthly column in *Tampa Bay Illustrated*.

In addition to the trademark frenzied hyperactivity—almost random chaos—that readers have come to expect from Dorsey, a surprisingly more restrained and rational Serge emerges in *Cadillac Beach*. One suspects Serge is taking his mood medications on the sly.

One suspects Serge is taking his mood medications on the sly.

When *Cadillac Beach* opens, Serge has been living with his friend, Lenny, in Pompano Beach following his escape from the Chattahoochee mental institution. Although he is 48, Lenny still lives with his protective, but delightfully clueless mother. Whereas Serge is restless and hyperactive, Lenny's dependencies cause his clock to tick a little slower.

Dorsey fans know that, despite Serge's many hyphenated disorders, he is a near polymath when it comes to esoteric, trivial mastery of Florida's cultural and political history. Jeb Bush should consider appointing Serge to an advisory board of Florida's historical commission.

When Serge and Lenny decide to go into business for themselves, what better way to capitalize on that encyclopedic knowledge than to establish a tour service, Serge and Lenny's Florida Experiences, catering to all the niche travel markets.

Misadventures begin unfolding when four drunk salesmen attending a condiment convention hire Serge and Lenny to help pull off a gag kidnapping of a friend who is arriving by private jet. The person inside the gunnysack snatched as he descends to the tarmac, however, turns out to be Tony Mariscano—heir apparent to south Florida's leading mobster—who flies into Miami to enter the FBI's witness protection program in exchange for incriminating testimony.

In the ensuing confusion, Tony Mariscano is shot dead with his own handgun. FBI agents on the airport's rooftops open fire, killing one of the conventioners, and give chase to the frantically fleeing limo. Serge, Lenny and the terrified band of salesmen careen from one episode to another staying one step ahead of the pursuing mobsters, FBI, and, later still, the CIA until Serge can figure out a way to save their necks.

The FBI suspect Serge of being a mobster himself. In a stakeout of the Palermo mob, agents had witnessed a dustup between Serge and Tony Mariscano at the funeral of Rico Spagliosi, the last surviving fence connected to Murph the Surf's daring 1964 jewelry heist from the American Museum of Natural History in New York. Although the Star of India, the world's biggest sapphire, and other famous gems in the stolen collection were recovered from a Miami bus locker, a dozen or so of the smaller diamonds never turned up. Serge believed that his grandfather, Sergio Gonzales, who was part of the Miami underworld in 1964, had been murdered in connection with the missing diamonds.

With the Palermo family and the FBI in hot pursuit following Mariscano's abduction and death, Serge begins tracking down his grandfather's old friends. Flashbacks to the 1960s flesh out the lives of young Serge and his grandfather, validating the ancient genetic adage about apples not falling far from their trees.

Although far fewer bodies seemingly litter *Cadillac Beach* than earlier Dorsey novels, he remains exquisitely inventive. Castro's agents are blamed for the death of Mr. Palermo, whose pacemaker is microwaved by Serge as the aged, wheelchair-bound mobster plays his weekly round of gin with equally frail buddies at the Fontainebleau Hotel. In an elaborate scheme worthy of James Bond, Serge engineers a plot to invade Cuba that succeeds, in one fell swoop, in

riding Florida of Castro's spies, prisoners from the 1980 Mariel boatlift, Miami's anti-Castro malcontents, along with the Palermo mobsters.

In *Cadillac Beach* Serge laments—a concern doubtless shared by countless high school English teachers—the demise of the art of expository writing in the contemporary world. Priding himself as a modern Abraham Lincoln, Serge composes masterpieces of muddle to George W. Bush, praising the president for his brilliant strategy of giving the impression to allies and foes alike that he doesn't think things through and acts impulsively; to Katie Couric, urging her to relocate the *Today Show* to Miami; and to the *Wall Street Journal*, complaining that it hasn't published his manifesto "Wake-Up Call to the Fat Cats."

Never mind terrorist threats or the pratfalls of raucous anti-Castro demonstrations, neither Republicans nor Democrats are going to be holding nominating conventions in Miami anytime soon as long as Serge and Lenny are on the loose in Florida.

Allen Cronenberg

A Right to Read

Segregation and Civil Rights in Alabama's Public Libraries, 1900-1965

by *Patterson Toby Graham*

University of Alabama Press, 2002

\$37.50, Hardcover

Many stories in Alabama's history reek with villains and thieves, murderers and thugs, damsels in distress. Many have wretched outcomes without winners, only losers sulking in corners to lick their wounds.

Now you might think any history of a library system would be as dull as mold growing on leather book covers, but then maybe you have not delved into the history of Alabama's battle over the right of some of its citizens to do one simple thing: read.

If you are in the younger generation, you are probably thinking that I have lost my mind because anybody can walk into a library, sit down on a comfy couch, flip through magazines or pull a book of poetry off the shelf and read. Yes, they can. Today. This was not the case a mere forty years ago.

Forty years ago, Alabama's library system was embroiled in "read-ins" and other protests to pressure segregationists to change how libraries conducted business.

Libraries were segregated like other institutions. Segregationist thieves were stealing intellectual freedoms from some of Alabama's citizens. Club-wielding thugs were attacking black library patrons. There were no separate but equal facilities. Libraries for white patrons were clean, well staffed, and stocked with a variety of references and books of literature. Poorly staffed and stocked branches were opened for black patrons.

Patterson Toby Graham, former head of Special Collections at the University of Mississippi and now director of the Digital Library of Georgia at the University of Georgia, explores the history of libraries in Alabama in his award-winning book, *A Right to Read*. He is recipient

of the ALISE-Eugene Garfield Dissertation Award and the Phyllis Dain Library History Dissertation Award. *A Right to Read* won the Alabama Library Association Award this year. In crisp, straightforward narration, Patterson chronicles the struggle by blacks and moderate whites to eliminate the dual library system that barely served African-Americans.

Whites in Alabama established a free library system in the early 1900s. It would take a decade before libraries were created for blacks. Another fifty years would pass before libraries were caught up in the struggle for equal rights. During the 1960s, efforts to desegregate white libraries began with "read-ins." Next came "sit-ins" by black patrons. One by one libraries opened their doors to black patrons. Mobile was the first to integrate, followed by Montgomery after Judge Frank M. Johnson issued the orders.

Librarians themselves were on the hot seat because they often were caught between their own professional ethics and a region's mores. Taking courageous stands in Alabama and throughout the South, librarians often took the lead to integrate their public library facilities.

In Selma, librarian Patricia Blalock managed to persuade the library board to integrate the Carnegie Library. The plan was for "vertical integration" where the races would stand together to use the library, but not sit together. Chairs were yanked up and removed. During May 1963 black patrons came in and began using the library. Over time the patrons quietly began to mix and mingle, drag out chairs to sit in and read, and request library cards. Integration took place.

This was not the case in Anniston, however. In September 1963 two African-American ministers were mobbed on the steps of the library. The ugly scene made national headlines. Civic leaders moved quickly to attempt to repair the damage done between the races.

In Tuskegee, persistent librarians pressured the Alabama Library Association to admit blacks, which they did in 1965.

Graham fills the book with interesting anecdotes like the controversy over the children's book, *The Rabbits' Wedding*. The picture book featured a black and a white rabbit getting married and some simple wording about the couple living happily ever after. Howls were heard over this as some library patrons sought to yank this book off the shelves for its "integrationist" message of promoting acceptance of interracial marriage.

State librarian Emily Reed fought against this censorship. Committed to intellectual freedom, Reed put her job on the line while the brouhaha played out in the state legislature and in the national press.

A Right to Read is a well-written account of an important page in Alabama's history. It contains an index, chapter notes, and a bibliographic essay that researchers and scholars will find useful. The book made me think of the important role that libraries play in our lives, and how access to knowledge and the right to read are precious rights for all.

Marianne M. Moates is the author of Truman Capote's Southern Years (UA Press). She is a case manager at Sylacauga Alliance for Family Enhancement where she works with the jobs program and adult literacy.

A Sunday in June

by Phyllis Alesia Perry

Hyperion, 2004

\$23.95, Cloth

Readers of Phyllis Alesia Perry's first novel, *Stigmata*, will remember that the protagonist, Lizzie, was considered insane, indeed suicidal, and was institutionalized because doctors believed she was mutilating herself on the wrists and ankles. Readers came to learn that Lizzie was in touch, in communion with, an ancestress, Ayo, who had been a slave in irons on a ship in the Middle Passage, and that Lizzie was manifesting in the 1980s and '90s what Ayo had endured in the 1850s.

In *A Sunday in June*, Perry has produced a prequel to *Stigmata*. This novel takes place again in Johnson Creek, Alabama, south of Union Springs, and chronicles the lives of the Mobley family from 1915 to 1963. Joy and Frank Mobley have three daughters, Grace, Mary Nell, and Eva. All three girls possess supernatural or spiritual powers. Born in 1900, Grace, like her granddaughter yet to come, Lizzie, is visited by the spirit of Ayo, her slave grandmother. This ghost sometimes inhabits Grace and even takes her back to pre-war times, when Ayo was being whipped, or farther back to when Ayo was in shackles on the slave ship, or even farther when Ayo was just a girl on the beach in Africa who saw something. "I thought at first it was a big bird. . . I'm lying there with my face in the sand and one eye closed and off in the distance these huge white fluttering things." The fluttering things are not a huge bird but the sails of a slave ship, and Ayo is taken.

Many will recognize in this ghost similarities to Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved*. The unhappy, restless dead do not always go into that good night gently—and sometimes not at all.

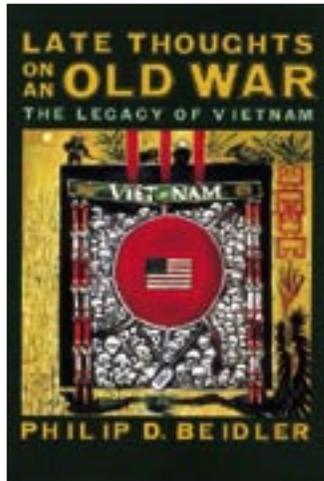
The other two girls, Mary Nell and Eva, have a different gift, or perhaps more accurately, burden. They are spiritually one. They can sometimes hear one another's thoughts, and one can often feel what the other is feeling even if they are apart.

Frank and Joy, their parents, hate and fear these gifts. They are respectable people, Christians, and have no use for the supernatural, herbalism, voodoo, or visions. To the Mobleys, this is all "against Jesus," and they fear the destructive power of gossip in the Johnson Creek community. But what is given to these girls cannot be taken away. Mary Nell marries Henry, a feckless lout, and on a second Sunday in June, the Sunday of the title, Henry rapes his 13-year-old sister-in-law Eva. Mary Nell knows, feels it even, and at the same time cannot know, cannot allow herself to know what she knows perfectly well. She cannot blame Henry, so she blames Eva. From that moment forward, life for the Mobley family can never be the same. Eva and Mary Nell will lose their bond. Grace will desert her husband and family, move to New York City, and, finally, die in a place called Montana.

This novel, besides its grip on the reader as pure story, has some attributes of African-American fiction that should be mentioned. The dialogue is flawless, suggested by phrasing and idiom, utterly convincing and never sinking into phonetic Uncle Remus spelling. The two novels taken together make a strong case for the existence of a useable, recoverable past for African-Americans. Perry provides a genealogical chart in the endpapers

of *Stigmata* as detailed as if the characters were Scottish aristocracy. This family is not cut off from its past. They are formed by it and burdened by it. They know their family history eight generations back, and, as surely as with Faulkner's Compson family, their past is not lost. For better or worse, it's not even past.

Don Noble is host of APT's Bookmark.



Late Thoughts on an Old War

The Legacy of Vietnam

by Philip D. Beidler

University of Georgia Press, 2004

\$29.95, Cloth

During 1969 and 1970 Philip Beidler was a lieutenant in the United States Army in Vietnam, an armored cavalry platoon leader in III Corps, often in combat in the Delta. After returning, physically unscathed, Beidler took

a Ph.D. in English, commenced his teaching career at the University of Alabama, and wrote often about American literature, both the fiction and nonfiction that had been written about Vietnam, and also about the literature of World War II.

There was no doubt about it: war was on his mind, but he did not often speak about Vietnam or write in the first person. Now he has, and this book, *Late Thoughts on an Old War*, is the finest work he has ever done, and the bravest. Beidler writes from the vantage point of thirty-five years of digesting, recovering, contemplating, taking in other people's accounts, in short, coming to terms with what he did, what happened to him there, and what it might mean for America today. The prose is smooth, as readable as a fine mystery novel, and it is important. He starts by teaching us, reminding us really, of "the language of the Nam." During wartime, the American population learns a lot of world geography, and some jargon. Those old enough to remember, whether in person or from the evening news, will suffer a *frisson* at VC, LZ, DMZ, dust-off, body bag, body count, ARVN, REMF, short time, Search and Destroy, Click, KIA, LRRPs and Seals, Five O'Clock Follies, and Gook. Beidler spends a few pages reminding us of how to speak the language and then tells us the story.

This is not a day-to-day memoir or a volume of military overview or strategy. Beidler has written a series of essays on more or less discrete topics, although, of course, each essay is a piece of the puzzle he is putting together for us, with the result being a picture of *his* war.

A fine essay of movie analysis, for example, explains why *Platoon*, directed by Oliver Stone, gets it all about right, while *Apocalypse Now* or *The Deer Hunter* doesn't. The devil and the deep truths are in the details. There is a heartbreaking essay on Solutium, the U.S. Army practice of giving Vietnam-

ese civilians a cash payment of \$35, or, in the case of a child under 15, \$14.40 for grief suffered from the accidental loss of a loved one. Apparently, it *is* possible to put a price tag of a sort on human life. Beidler observed this perverse awards ceremony and has obviously never gotten over it.

A pair of essays designed to vent and create outrage are perfectly successful, to my way of thinking. In "Just Like in the Movies," Beidler writes of President Nixon's obsession with the movie *Patton*, how he watched it and showed it to others over and over and, perhaps, in a bizarre misidentification with Patton, was inspired by it to invade Cambodia, thus enlarging the war, lengthening it and costing thousands more lives.

The other, "Sorry, Mr. McNamara," is a rant, a scream. Robert McNamara has now written that he and the others in the White House in the middle sixties *knew* the war could not be won, but just kept on and on, out of stupid pride. Beidler makes the connections to the present, but hardly needs to. It is here for all to see.

On the lighter side, Beidler writes of the all-pervasive music of the Nam and the Vietnam era, '65-'74, and, as with all such, it takes you back. It's just as they said in *The Big Chill*: "There *is* no music since sixties music." Think about it.

I hope this volume finds a wide readership. It deserves one. It is distressing, provocative. Why did we have to lose 58,000 Americans and kill approximately three million Asians? Bob McNamara doesn't know. Lt. William Calley certainly cannot tell us. No one seems now to know. All the more reason to strive, as Beidler does, to know and understand.

Don Noble

Degas Must Have Loved a Dancer

by Krista Madsen

Livingston Press, 2003

\$26, Paperback

The universal themes of Krista Madsen's first novel – love, lust, art, and creation – dominate the central characters, Adina and Zachary, in their narratives of obsession. Both appear as Americans displaced in the foreign atmosphere of Brussels. They are there to achieve artistic greatness: Adina is a recent college graduate searching for her creative identity while working as a nanny and an English-language teacher, while Zachary, freed from his mother's watch, has been summoned to jumpstart a distant cousin's gallery with his impressive, yet stalled, artistic abilities.

Madsen's protagonists seem to be wanton Generation Xers struggling against the Institution, looking for their soul mates, attempting to discover their greatness and establish their places in the creative world. Yet their plights demand empathy – after all, Adina's hair has mysteriously fallen out and the new growth is white, and Zachary (Z) is plagued by an overbearing mother, a father who committed suicide, and the visions of his birth and death. Their brief encounter, which begins their obsession, fuels their art, but one might

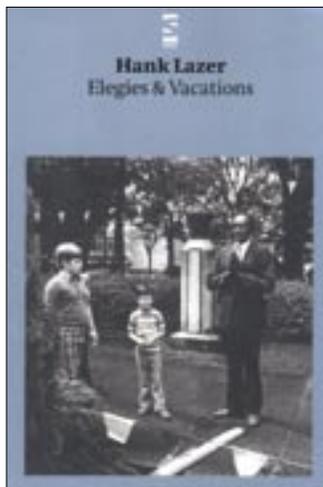
wonder: Why doesn't the author just let them meet again and end this torture?

Zachary presents Adina with a portrait he has drawn of her while on a bus back to Brussels, but she is reluctant to return the favor with a phone call. Her hesitancy appears to be an excuse for her to write about him, to help her with her dream of being a writer, but her poetry does not improve, and, in an escape from the unsatisfying life in her host family's house, she finds yet another unsatisfying shelter in a local bar, feeding her desires with beer, sugar, and casual sex with a bartender.

Zachary, on the other hand, turns his obsession into a prolific quantity of art, filling his cousin's apartment with portraits of Adina's face. His obsession is disturbing when he transfers his lust for her onto the inanimate pictures, destroys his cousin's expensive collection of world travel memorabilia, and becomes a recluse. And just as their torture seems to be ending, the artists are separated with one's death.

Madsen's own show of creativity is commendable. Written mostly in fragments, her passages resonate with a poetic voice, and the chapters, flipping between each character's narration of his or her obsession, illustrate her grasp of both Adina and Zachary's plights. The metaphor of Degas and his dancers is intuitive, but her creativity is not enough to explain why these characters cannot meet, why they cannot achieve art or love. While the Impressionist's ballerinas were illuminated by his art, the art of Adina and Zachary is obliterated by their obsessions.

Jessica Lueders is a graduate student in English at Auburn University.



Elegies and Vacations

by Hank Lazer

Salt Publishing, 2004
\$15.95, Paperback

there is a
O
R C
K
in the stream
around which
the water flows

"Each asks for reflection." If there needs to be a relationship between an elegy and a vacation, then, according to Lazer, that is it. And, upon reflection, the result is an altered and altering relationship.

In this asking book of poetry, his eleventh, Lazer examines the personal spiritual encounter, applying to the task his craft of the lyric, his bent for the experimental, and a range of disruptive styles. This second book of a trilogy—the first book

being *Days* (Lavender Ink, 2003) and the third being *The New Spirit—Elegies and Vacations* opens a new line of conversation with his deceased father, building on Lazer's deliberation of his father's life with leukemia. The central poem, "Deathwatch for My Father," which is also available as a chapbook from Chax Press, captures the hesitant halting of his father's life and lends a central gravity to the collection.

In 1993, on the occasion of the seventh anniversary of his father's death, Lazer read aloud the entirety of "Deathwatch" at his home in Tuscaloosa. The only reading thus far from this work, I partook not only in an observance but also in a pushing of the Experiment. Never having met his father, I only knew him through words I had read and that I was now hearing along with a few others. Outside a light rain fell. Inside, I remember the light as bright for a rainy day. As he read, sitting in a favorite chair, Lazer crossed a line, altering through elegy his perspective of his father as well as his practice of experimental writing. Traditionally, experimental writers hesitate to dither in sentiment. As an experimental writer, Lazer's turn toward emotion in the writing and reading of "Deathwatch" is a breaking of code. However, to allow the relationship with his deceased father to develop, Lazer required of this writing, and reading, the "innovative necessity" to dwell in a very personal space.

Lazer builds books, such as *Elegies and Vacations*, using serial heuristics: a particular place or form where he "lives" for a predetermined time. Ten (10) is the house that he has occupied since 1992 with the publication of INTER(IR)RUPTIONS, a series of ten collage poems, and that he occupies in *Days*, *Elegies and Vacations*, and *The New Spirit*. Much like the fantastic architecture of Arakawa and Gins, Lazer constructs through deeply personal experimentation, with passing regard for conventional forms.

Originally designed to present ten poems, *Elegies and Vacations* contains 11. The poem that disrupts the house is "This One," a poem written after Lazer completed the manuscript for *The New Spirit—as the dead return we listen to them*. Airy and abrupt, "This One" rekindles specific memories of the dead, his grandparents—*standing on green linoleum a single red teapot*.

Self-differing, as Lazer calls them, the poems of *Elegies and Vacations* spatially connect via exclusion, that is, what is common to them is separate from the whole of the parts—think Venn diagram. The first poem of the book, "to what are we ancestral," employs the uttering short line of George Oppen. The next poem, "Portrait," splashes itself across the page in the long, languid lines of John Ashberry. And so on throughout the book—a poetry of fluid disruption.

Which leads to, perhaps, an invigorating cause for the larger agenda of examining what poetry is, used to be, and might be—a path that Lazer treads heavily both as a critic and as a poet.

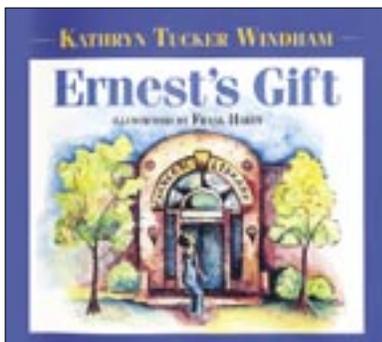
unaccustomed to / this genre & the people of it
("to what are we ancestral")
we've been / convinced we're / post- all that
("Portrait")

the flat the fizz / the carbonation of what is
 ("Every Now & Then")
in your exact nature
 ("For John Cage")
of sudden / of a sudden
 ("Deathwatch for My Father")
trust / above all others / the dead their / conversation
 ("that pantheon")
and feel simple lucid gratitude / for being alive
 ("The Abacos")
in transition in transit
 ("Work Ups")
small shop keepers marveling / in quiet defeat
 ("This One")
then dragged into / the equally true / amalgamation
 ("Diamond Head")
star / pollen / seed / sky
 ("Sunyata Sonata")

As expressed by Lazer in his recent *Boston Review* article entitled "The People's Poetry" (Apr/May 2004), we live in a time of writing that lacks a clear oppositional force to mainstream poetry. In the late 1970s and 1980s, Language poetry dominated the role of oppositional force. Having labored now in a post-Language setting for over a decade, this lack of an oppositional poetry has led to the undefining of a mainstream poetry. Perhaps the one identifier of mainstream poetry today is the effort toward refinement, an ongoing influence of the writing workshop and American plethora of monkey see-monkey do creative writing programs.

Both an elegy for and a vacation from official verse culture, Lazer's latest is an ongoing experiment in a time of poetic dispersion, a kind of celebration of the democratization of poetry. And if innovation is the spirit of the opposition, then Lazer continues to light the way with *Elegies and Vacations*.

Russell Helms is acquisitions editor for Menasha Ridge Press.



Ernest's Gift

by Kathryn Tucker Windham

Junebug Books, 2004
\$24.95, Hardcover

Ernest's Gift is the true account of a man's forgiveness of wrongs and of his generous donation so that others

may now have access to books once denied to him.

This picture book, which has a longer text than many others of the genre, might be thought of as "Kathryn's Gift," too, for it is written by Kathryn Tucker Windham, Alabama's well-known lady-of-letters. Her subject is Ernest Dawson, an African-African from Alabama who, as a boy, was told that books in the Selma Carnegie Library were only for white people.

During World War II, Dawson was in the Navy. Afterwards, he went on the GI Bill to both the American Television Institute in Chicago and City College in New York. He served as deacon in his Harlem church. And always he went to libraries. On his many travels, he collected books for the young children he taught to love stories as much as he did.

Ernest's Gift has been published as part of the Centennial Celebration of that very library to which Ernest was denied, which now is "Bringing People Closer Together..." And to help provide services for children, Ernest L. Dawson made the Selma Public Library one of his beneficiaries.

Storyteller Windham writes in straightforward style, dramatizing selected events with dialog. Nine color illustrations by Frank Hardy, focused on Ernest, accompany the text. This book is a fine addition to material about the civil rights movement, telling of man "with a gentle smile and laughing eyes" who overcame prejudice and benefited children of all races.

Joan Nist is Professor Emerita in Children's Literature at Auburn University.



Hard Times for Jake Smith

by Aileen Kilgore Henderson

Milkweed Editions, 2004
\$6.95, Paperback

MaryJack Wildsmith is twelve years old and heart-broken because Pa has sold the sow, cow, hens—and now her dog. Then she suffers the greatest shock: Ma and Pa leave her by the side of the road, directing her to go through the woods to "the rock house."

With this dramatic Hansel-and-Gretel setting, Aileen Kilgore Henderson begins *Hard Times for Jake Smith*. The place is Alabama; the time is the Great Depression, 1935. Throughout the story, the author deftly weaves in details to show the devastating poverty which then afflicted the United States. Henderson remembers some elements from her childhood and appends a brief factual statement about those "hard times" when some parents felt forced by hunger to abandon their children.

MaryJake is mistaken as being a boy by the old woman whose poor farm she finds. So she becomes Jake Smith and stays with Miz Bennett, helping with barnyard animals and eating simple but satisfying meals.

Henderson, true to the novel's rural background, writes of wildflowers, natural springs, chufas, and hardscrabble gardening, quilts, and ballads. Jake makes friends with Hannah, niece of the local bootlegger, and helps her go to a "tooth doctor" to stop Hannah's suffering from diseased teeth.

Other distinctive characters include Miss Celestine, an itinerant evangelist; Poe Blanton, the mysterious nighttime boy

with xeroderma pigmentosum (light disease); a worthless uncle Wildsmith; and even Culver the pig, Buck and Bennie the calves, Dink the old horse—and the noisy King and Queen of Sheba.

Some of Jake's adventures are hunting for liquor bottles with Hannah, dyeing herself tan in the oak stump water, and finding a meteorite (stars *have* fallen on Alabama).

Henderson has here written her fourth novel for young people. In addition, her accounts of her own life as a WAC during World War II and as a teacher in Texas Big Bend country have recently been published. She has stated that she always "wanted to be a writer of books," and *Hard Times for Jake Smith* is the most recent of her achievements.

Joan Nist

Margaretha's Trunk

A Genealogical Novel

by Louise Kreher Turner

Court Street Press, 2004

\$27.95, Hardback

Funny thing about historical novels. You can't critique their accuracy, unless you happen to be an expert on the particular time and subject they purport to cover. Or unless you're a time-traveler and can go back and check it out. In the process of reading, you can't stop now and then to wonder whether this could have happened or whether the author has embellished the experience. If you do, you'll ruin yourself a perfectly good read. Once you give yourself over to the story, you have a chance to enjoy it. It's kind of like falling in love with a pockmarked partner—eventually, the pocks disappear.

I suppose naming any historical novel "a genealogical novel" is a dangerous thing to do. It's a speed bump slowing the reader down, since genealogies tend to be dreadfully boring in the hands of amateurs. The good news is *Margaretha's Trunk* overcomes all the roadblocks it imposes upon itself and turns into a fascinating narrative.

The best way to read this book is to take paragraphs one and two (above) and scissor them out of this review. Just go read the book, and you'll have an experience that will leave you knowing that some really interesting people who lived in really interesting times have had their tale told with careful attention to the fact that they once existed, once lived and breathed, and found their way through life, much as thousands of generations before them have done, much as thousands of generations ahead of us will do.

Louise Kreher Turner takes us Back There and makes us see the importance of small, daily activities and kindnesses in a world that is exactly like our world once was—the world of our ancestors. These were people who, through the simple act of living, made it possible for future generations like ours to happen. We'll be lucky to have someone of Turner's scholarship and imagination record *our* lives some future day.

Jim Reed is editor of the Birmingham Arts Journal and owner of Jim Reed Books and the Museum of Fond Memories in Birmingham.

Redneck Riviera

Armadillos, Outlaws, and the Demise of an American Dream
by Dennis Covington

Counterpoint 2003

\$25, Hardcover

The Hunt Club in Polk County, Florida, stole Dennis Covington's inheritance—all two-and-a-half acres of it. This absurd yet captivating story serves as background in the Alabama native's newest memoir, *Redneck Riviera: Armadillos, Outlaws, and the Demise of an American Dream*. With the same strong authorial voice readers enjoyed in his first nonfiction book, the 1995 National Book Award finalist *Salvation on Sand Mountain*, Covington creates a world of swindlers and squatters, social clashes and tall tales, straddling two cultures as he confronts the ever-present, deeply American dream of land ownership.

Covington's talent for description—for completely capturing moments, places, and people—shines throughout the book. He writes with detail and precision, twining his authorial observations seamlessly into the story.

But the moment I left the thickets and trailers and junk piles behind me, the land opened up all around me, and a bald eagle soared overhead. The sun was coming from behind, casting a veneer of light across the field... There were no squatters shacks, no sign of human existence. It was exactly as I had imagined it—a vast palmetto plain, dotted with occasional pines... flat and beautiful in the way that only empty space itself is beautiful...

The author takes care, in these lyrical sections, to highlight his narrator's wholesome interactions with the "empty" wilderness. The narrator sees undeveloped land as something worth "imagining" and preserving—an attainable dream. In contrast, Covington highlights the invasive, non-environmentally concerned Hunt Club members: "...River Ranch was a landscape of beat-up tin shacks...junked appliances and swamp buggies loomed beneath the trees like the intact skeletons of steel dinosaurs...An oily sheen floated on the surface of the water in the potholes, and the air was foul with the smell of diesel and spent cordite." Covington selects these details carefully. Thus, his comment on differing cultural values between the narrator and the local characters—illustrated here through interaction with the landscape—comes through subtly, yet effectively.

In trying to inhabit both "insider" and "outsider" status, Covington relies on a potentially offensive stereotype of Southern hunting culture. He perpetuates misconceptions of limited vocabulary and barbaric behavior by writing of hunters "pissing" on their swamp buggy's tires, and characters with accents so thick that they distort pronunciation. Aware of this potential stereotyping flaw, Covington makes sure to indict himself as well; his speaker labels himself "white trash," the economic and social equal to the redneck hunters with whom he deals. These attempts at inclusion might work in a given scene, but in a larger context they ring false. In attempting to identify with the Hunt Club rednecks, the "educated"

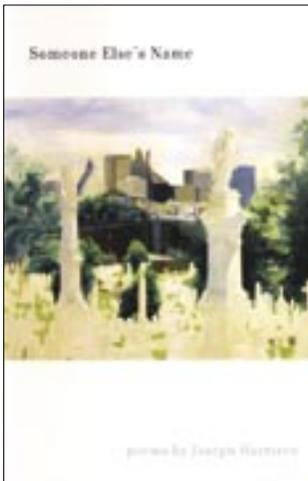
narrator reveals his transparency; he clearly wants to dissociate himself from the gun-toting, swamp-buggy driving locals. Repeated references to college teaching and visiting professorships, as well as the lyricism and quality of Covington's writing, clearly place both author and narrator in a different class than that of the Polk County residents he describes. Covington's financial resources—which he invests in used trucks, hand-sewn canvas camp houses, and tracts of Idaho wilderness—also undermine his claim to “poor white” status.

Nonetheless, the speaker successfully paints himself throughout the book as the underdog pitted against unreasonable ne'er-do-wells. Members of the Hunt Club set fire to his secondhand Jeep, leaving dead armadillos as vandalism calling cards. Covington's narrator reports these events evenly, without exaggeration. Through his level accounts, he convinces readers, even native ones, to cheer for him; ultimately, we see him as the middle-aged, middle-class hero.

We enjoy this unlikely hero's tale, until we encounter the meta-narrative. In “The Good Part,” the book's seventh chapter, the author drags us away from his compelling struggle against the Hunt Club and into a “writerly” discussion of story. Covington chooses, for the remainder of the book, to interrupt the narrative by repeatedly asking the reader, “*Are you at the good part yet?*” Covington struggles in this departure from the familiar first-person narrative to a self-reflexive one, and the cohesiveness of his story dissolves across the book's remaining seven chapters.

Despite these issues, Covington's manipulation of stereotypes and his willingness to probe his own narrative style give this book a unique edge. More than a story about outlandish characters and impossible predicaments, *Redneck Riviera* follows one man through a thoroughly human, laugh-out-loud struggle to straddle two cultures for the sake of saving one dream.

Robin Lee Mozer is an MFA student (Creative Non-fiction) at Pennsylvania State.



Someone Else's Name

by Joseph Harrison
Introduction by
Anthony Hecht

The Waywiser Press (UK),
2003

Zoo Press, 2004

\$14.95, Paperback

“The Times They Are A-
Changin’,” as the poet saith,
but some things persist.

In his first book, *Someone
Else's Name*, Joseph Harrison
highlights this idea when
he juxtaposes the persistent

values of history against contemporary interests. As Anthony Hecht writes in the book's introduction, Harrison “is not only, or not exclusively, himself. He speaks, to some degree, with

inherited undertones, and through him we hear ancestral voices that color and refresh his own.”

As a case in point, a reader might assume from the titles alone that the poems “Dante in Erebus” and “Dante Lost” refer exclusively to Dante Alighieri and his most famous work, the *Divina Commedia*; the poems, however, are situated much in the present.

The epigraph of “Dante in Erebus” reads: “Robot to Enter Active Volcano in Antarctica: A walking robot named Dante is to make an unprecedented descent next month into an active Antarctic volcano.”

The robot is a metaphor for the poet, “caught halfway down the steep infernal stair,” tied to the world behind him while searching for something new, forced to be capable of reviving “once upon a time, “one day,” and “one fine morning” so that it can be reexperienced.

In the poem “Dante Lost,” the robot is abandoned on his second descent, “left to rust, and crack, and topple, bit by bit. . . . Till all that's left is someone else's name.”

The robot, like the poet when he alludes to history, briefly takes for himself the fame of former times, of Shakespeare, or Tennyson, or Wyatt, but, as is often the case, the average poet, “the average Joe” is forgotten, and the reader is left only with a surprise or two from the still undead past.

Harrison plays with this same theme in a *corona* or sequence of twenty-two sonnets entitled *As If* in which a mysterious lover is immortalized. It is a dated trope (the lover immortalized through verse) performed by countless masters and amateurs that today seems futile. What poet, today, could with a straight face write as Edmund Spencer putatively did of Elizabeth Boyle “My verse your virtues rare shall eternize”?

Harrison is aware of this unfortunate state of affairs and writes “As If” history did not exist; however the poem's title and the movement of the poem itself acknowledge the past. These themes of immortal love and history's persistence are combined in stanza 6:

One scene with you is all I'd ask to play:
I'd ham it up, I'd play it to the hilt
And make it run forever and a day.
I'd praise your virtue, and thus tweak your guilt.
I'd trot out all the clever toys I've built
For you alone, I'd sing, I'd stop the show
And all the profs from Yale to Vanderbilt
Would write us up as classics: all would know
Us as the real McCoy; each cameo
You make in the long sequence would be hailed
A stellar turn (“too bad the guy's named joe”);
They'd marvel my contraptions never failed.
One last plea brings the house down. I discover
You in the wings with Astrophel, your lover.

The last line alludes to Sir Phillip Sidney's *Astrophel and Stella* and to Edmund Spencer's dirge written upon Sidney's death. The past is recycled in the new; new lover, old name, *Someone Else's Name*.

Although some of the lines are plain or expected such as “A

tree fell, but nobody noticed it" (stanza 8), in the context of the poem such lines work because they are redeemed by playfulness, humor, metrical adroitness, and the poet's own shrewd qualifications as when Harrison writes in Stanza 1: "O let me start, as if the mind were free / Of all those pretty rooms and polished turns / That flip their figures so predictably...."

These "figures" are like predictable figures of speech.

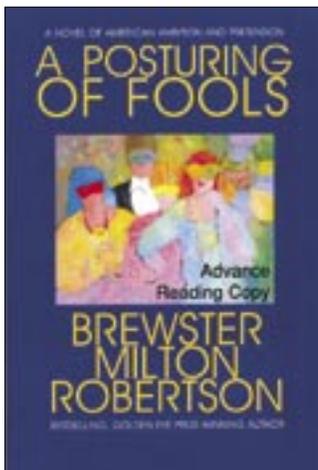
Again, in regards to the banality of some of the lines, Harrison writes in stanza 8: "Since these lines clearly won't serve other ends / You'll know my dumb devotion is not feigned."

The seeming simplicity of the lines is a move back to the dumb honesty of child's play. Forget the critic's declaration that we are bound by history, that words such as "love," "courage" or "beauty" are forever lost to poets.

As first books go, most readers should be satisfied with this one's scope and fullness. Structurally, the book is divided into three major sections: The first section of the book, echoing Donne, is called "Songs and Sonnets." The second is called "Stories." This section contains the Dante poems and similar ones taken from the daily news.

The final section "Signs and Figures," ends with tributes to the poet's precursors. Frost, Burns, Spenser, Keats, and Donne act as foils against Harrison, the minor poet, who does not possess a "name" and whose lines will only be read by his "private friends" as he concludes in stanza 8 of *As If*. Ironically, and fortunately, with the publication of this excellent first book, this is no longer the case.

Bruce Alford is an associate professor at the University of South Alabama in Mobile where he teaches creative writing. His most recent poetry appeared in the Fall/Winter 2003 edition of Louisiana Literature.



A Posturing of Fools

by Brewster Milton Robertson
River City Publishing, 2004
\$27.95, Hardback

Brewster Milton Robertson's latest novel, *A Posturing of Fools*, is a "class" act that explores representations of class as opposed to snobbism. In the words of Russell Lynes, which Robertson quotes, "The true snob never rests...there are always...more and more people to look down upon."

Robertson seamlessly examines the Greenbrier "smart set," those who possess power and wealth, or want to, those who define themselves in terms of their associates, and those who are the beautiful and potentially damned. Logan Baird explains to his friend John Silver upon receiving orders to ship home to the States after serving in Bosnia, "John Paul, ol' buddy, did I ever tell you about the Greenbrier? It's the spa to end all spas. It's the most elegant place in the whole...

universe. The *crème de la crème*," and John Paul replies, "Touch of class, Logan...real touch of class." A touch of class in its own right, Robertson's novel is an incredible read. There is intrigue, mystery, and romance. What does the unopened letter that Baird's wife, Rose, hands him as he leaves for the Greenbrier contain? How will it alter his life? Readers who groove on golf, who love the game and heroes like "Slammin' Sammy Snead," will find the game on his home course irresistible. Baird says that he took his six-year-old son "to marvel at this remarkable man—now the Greenbrier's Golf Professional Emeritus"—who at eighty could still score in the low seventies. Autographing Baird's press pass for the child, Snead said, "Tell yo' poppa to write something nice about me," and Robertson has done just that, put Slammin' Sammy on the links again with the thrill that comes with the game.

Robertson, once a pharmaceutical rep himself, writes with authority on the West Virginia State Medical Association's annual meeting that takes place at the Greenbrier in the Allegheny Mountains of White Sulphur Springs. He shows just what it means to be involved in the release of a mega-billion-dollar drug, to live life in a fast lane, in a push to achieve status, to move up to a better job, and to acquire a new home and more creature comforts. But does it offer a better life and a more fulfilling marital relationship? Baird wonders if "the system—or most aptly the non-system we variously call quality or worth or style or good taste" is class at all. "Like jazz, true class is an abstraction." He asks himself what Louis "Satchmo" Armstrong, the famous jazz trumpeter, would say about class, about a posturing fool of a boss who equates success with having a Rolex watch, luggage with Hartmann inscribed on it, and owning proper shirts with impressive logos. "Ah man," he imagines Satch saying, "Class ain't got nuthin' to do with money. You either got it or you ain't."

Well, Brewster Milton Robertson knows about "class," indeed is class. He is an artist who knows, to borrow Jeanette Winterson's words from her essay "Imagination and Reality" that "the reality of art is the reality of the imagination." She might well have been describing Robertson when she said of nature that it is, in essence, "one's birth, characteristics, and condition, one's nativity, astrology, biology, physiognomy, geography, cartography, spirituality, sexuality, mentality, corporeal, intellectual, emotional, and imaginative self." It is the artist's self, "every self and the Self of the world," that of the Greenbrier, Robertson's astute and masterful creation.

Sue Walker is chair/professor of English at the University of South Alabama and the state of Alabama's Poet Laureate.

Seven Laurels

by Linda Busby Parker

Southeast Missouri Press, 2004
\$35, Cloth/\$19, Paper

"BEAUTIFUL," Professor Rimes whispers in response to the piano performance of his protege, Albert Laurel McAtee. This, and the words in which Brewster, the boy's father, says

that his son's playing of the third movement of a Beethoven sonata is about "love, bigger than a man's own heart, and the purity of that love...expressing truth so deep it was holy truth...form an apt description of Linda Busby Parker's powerfully rendered novel, *Seven Laurels*.

It is not surprising that this novel, earlier called *The Sums of August*, won the prestigious James Jones First Novel Fellowship, her manuscript chosen out of 665 submissions to the contest. Describing the book, Professor Michael Lennon of Wilkes University, said that it "was one of the most moving stories seen in the ten years of the Jones Fellowship competition."

To speak of the South is to speak of the power of owning property, of owning land. This ownership is as important as characterization, especially in *Seven Laurels*, for it is the quest for land that leads to the death of Laurel McAtee. The novel begins with the lines:

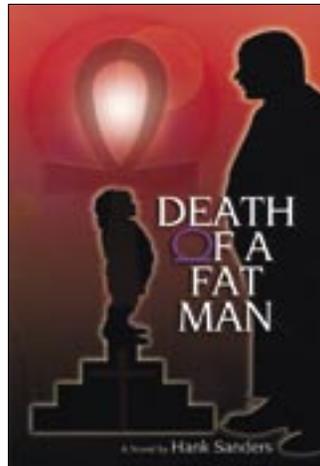
A boy becomes a man when he has his own house—leased or paying notes doesn't matter: the tangible property anchors one corner of manhood. Even heaven is defined by property—in my father's house are many mansions. When he was a boy, his father Tom took Brewster's small hand in his own and forced it to rub the old wound, thick as molten plastic. "This house cost me," he said ...

The novel, in short, is what this owning cost. Yet, one has only to read the struggle of African-American Brewster McAtee to realize that the novel has every ingredient that makes for superb fiction. The characterization is strong and sure, the writing itself forceful and musical. Perhaps there is no author who can make music with words, make it come alive, verberate and reverberate the soulful South better than Linda Parker. One passage that aptly delineates Brewster McAtee and conjoins music and characterization is the piano piece played by Brewster's son, Laurel:

It had big sounds, big chords, and Laurel used his upper body to create the storm raging in the ocean outside the tiny lighthouse that stood on narrow legs in the tumultuous waves. To Brewster, this piece was the story of a lone man who survived a potent storm in the dark of night, a great-hearted man who held on through the wind and the darkness.

The music and the characterization become one: the potent storm that rages outside and the ability of a black man to survive. The novel skillfully reflects the time when the Civil Rights movement was creating unrest in Alabama and Mississippi. It takes place in 1956, the year following the murder of 14-year-old Emmett Till and the arrest of Rosa Parks, who refused to give up her seat on a Montgomery bus. One of the many strengths of Parker's novel is her ability to deftly render violence, indeed murder, with a grace that transcends horror. Her book is an important cultural study that reaffirms the complexities of a South that is more than merely myth but a South that struggles to redeem the facts of its profound and wrenching change through faith and abiding love.

Sue Brannan Walker



Death of a Fat Man

by Hank Sanders

Imani Way Enterprises, 2004

Author Hank Sanders is an Alabama state senator representing a large part of the Alabama Black Belt. For those who know him it is difficult to separate the novelist and protagonist from the real life role.

By his own acknowledgment, Hank Sanders is a creature of struggle. In his

first novel, *Death of a Fat Man*, he draws on his experiences to present an intimate exposure of struggle as a matter of life and death.

Sanders captures the reader immediately in the prologue, which sets the tone as a letter from granddad, John Peter James, to granddaughter, NiDi. John Peter James sets out to help his granddaughter avoid harmful choices as a young child that can set her on a painful course for the rest of her life and can even shorten that young life. Obesity is the physical struggle of James but perhaps not his most challenging struggle. Choosing life and seeking healthier choices for living thrust James in the throes of death more often than he can seemingly bear. And he sees his granddaughter already headed down that dangerous obesity track.

Sanders is an enthralling storyteller, and what better approach to secure the attention of an energetic four-year-old than to mesmerize her with tales of adventure and intrigue filled with granddad's lessons learned the old fashion way—through painful experience.

NiDi may be older when she reads this letter for herself, but scores of readers have already enjoyed the privilege and reaped the benefits.

The protagonist, John Peter James, draws from the treasured wisdom of his elders as he relates generational stories of overcoming odds, the power of a made-up mind and spirit, listening to your being (body, mind, spirit, and soul) as a process for change, accepting that one is never helpless or powerless, and that we always need other people. These are samples of NiDi's lessons to learn.

James's greatest fears are fat and death, his nemesis. The character of the Crazy Man taunts James constantly with chants that the fat man is going to die. As the conscience of the protagonist, the Crazy Man is that inner voice, that truth-proclaiming voice that James tries to suppress, characteristic of us all.

The gem of this book is that it is everyone's journey through struggle. The reader is taken into all the hardships experienced by John Peter James—the near fatal accidents, the efforts to perform what ought to be ordinary tasks, dealing with body odors and the ordeal of body functions, the feelings of loneliness and inadequacy. The author's frank

approach to facing up to one's life is startling and refreshing. John Peter James confronts his own life through a nakedness that initially embarrasses but eventually provides direction.

Sanders' first novel, which he adamantly proclaims is fiction, is nonetheless a love story. We witness John Peter James' extraordinary love for his granddaughter, a love that leads him to expose his faults, fears, and obsessions.

He lifts NiDi even as he presents the raw truths she must face. Sanders' prologue presents a culmination of a grandfather's struggles in overcoming odds not solely for himself but to reach, touch, and guide others.

The book is easily readable with its intentional large print and universal message. I recommend it for all who recognize they are in struggle and especially for all who think they aren't.

Carol Prejean Zippert is director of a community-based cultural arts organization, The Society of Folk Arts & Culture, which produces the annual Black Belt Folk Roots Festival. She is also co-publisher of the Greene County Democrat, Greene County's weekly paper of record, a board member of the Alabama State Council on the Arts, and a poet

The Spirit in Washington Square

by Mary Kay Remick

Pen Oak Press, 2003
\$14, Paperback

Mary Kay Remick's books are always a hoot. I don't think there's a better word for it. Her personality bursts forth on every page, and her characters take over and live within the stories she writes and, more important, they tend to live *outside* the books as well. You just find yourself assuming these people are *real*.

Maybe they are.

Most fiction writers, on a really good day when the words are flowing faster than the imagination, know what it's like to have the story begin to write itself, the people in the story taking over and telling it *their own damned way*, if you please! That's the feeling you get in *The Spirit in Washington Square*. These folks have taken over and, by the time the story is finished, you get the feeling that even Remick is surprised by the ending. Another thing this book makes you feel is that the book *is not the end of the story*.

I once read a fifth grade student's handmade novel, while she stood before me, obediently waiting to hear what the "famous" visiting author would say about her work. I completed my reading and said exactly what popped into my mouth: "Have you started the sequel?" She batted her eyes once, focused directly on mine, and asked, "What's a sequel?" I said, "Well, what happened the next day?" A light snapped on in her eyes. "Oh, I know what happened! I'll start writing that!" She had never expected an adult to be so interested in her tale and her characters that *what happened the next day* would be an important thing to know. She left beaming, clutching her

book to her chest. I felt like somebody in an audience had actually *heard* me.

This is the special gift that Mary Kay Remick has given the reader of this book. I just gotta know what happens next!

Jim Reed

Chicken Dreaming Corn

by Roy Hoffman

University of Georgia Press, 2004
\$24.95, Cloth

From the epics of the ancient world to the contemporary novel, the story of immigrants in search of a better life is one of literature's most moving archetypes. Roy Hoffman's *Chicken Dreaming Corn* is a distinctively Southern and Jewish (or Southern-Jewish) addition to the great American stories of assimilation.

After moving from Brooklyn, Morris and Miriam Kleinman, Romanian Jews, have settled into an apartment above their shop on Dauphin Street in Mobile. Like their neighbors, other small merchants who have moved to the deep South from Poland, Greece, and Lebanon, the Kleinmans understand that while their Southern customers accept their wares, it's likely to take longer to accept *them*.

Set in the years between 1916 and 1946, the novel opens with Confederate veterans preparing for their annual Confederate Memorial Day parade. The implications, though subtle, aren't lost on the shopkeepers who are hoping for a busy, profitable day. Separated by custom, language, and religion, the store owners are seeking a place in society and trying to build better lives for themselves and their children. Within the immigrant community, there's a hierarchy. Morris only feels a kinship with Pablo Pastor, with whom he shares Cuban cigars and evening chats in English, Spanish, and Yiddish.

Morris Kleinman, who sells everything from shoes to sofas, is separated from his fellow merchants by his Jewish heritage. His family worships on the Sabbath rather than Sunday, they speak Yiddish amongst themselves, and they attend synagogue rather than church. On bad days, Miriam reminds Morris, "Chicken dreaming corn."

Miriam and Morris maintain the family connection to the relatives in Romania and Brooklyn with letters and occasional visits. Their four children grow up in a household connected to the old European ways, and go out into a world being changed by the Armistice, the Great Depression, and World War II. They want—even, on occasion, demand—the freedom, vacations, and college educations their parents never had.

At its heart, *Chicken Dreaming Corn* questions the sacrifices necessary for making a place home. Blending Jewish and Southern customs, Yiddish and Spanish colloquialisms, family folklore, and good storytelling, Roy Hoffman has created a memorable assimilation novel.

A native of Mobile, Hoffman worked in New York for more than twenty years as a journalist, editor, and teacher before moving back to Alabama as a staff writer for the *Mobile Register*.

His previous novel, *Almost Family*, winner of the Lillian Smith Award for fiction, is available as a part of the University of Alabama's Deep South Series. His non-fiction has been collected in *Back Home*. Hoffman teaches in the brief-residency MFA program at Spalding University in Kentucky.

Pam Kingsbury

The Actual Moon, The Actual Stars

by Chris Forhan

Introduction by Robert Cording

Northeastern University Press, 2003

\$14.95, Paperback

The spirit of Wallace Stevens haunts Chris Forhan's *The Actual Moon, The Actual Stars*, winner of the 2003 Morse Poetry Prize. In his second collection of poetry, Forhan partly pays homage to Stevens through rich alliterative poetry, but mostly does so by deepening Steven's ideas about the nature of language and reality.

For an epigraph to his book, Forhan has chosen lines from "Ghosts as Cocoons," which can be found in Stevens' first book, *Ideas of Order*. These lines provide readers with the overarching theme:

This mangled, smutted semi-world hacked out

Of dirt... It is not possible for the moon
To blot this with its dove-winged blendings.

Words are hard, like rocks, like granite, and as architects use their bricks so do poets build with words, constructing their forms from raw emotion into something *better* than the real or the actual. The poet makes artifice out of the "mangled, smutted semi-world." But imagination's "dove-winged blendings" can never completely cover it. Forhan examines this tension between art and reality.

Taking up this theme, the first poem "No Comment" is a commentary on nature's "incoherent" naturalness. The poet quietly steals up closely to see "...the leaf's veins and midrib / the mushroom's gill..." and notes their lack of irony, but irony comes in the naming of these things and then through asking the question "...What is one to do / on a night like this, bright almost..."

as day, when the lavender moon,
burdened with light,

is near enough to brush
the trees and power lines, when this fern

rooted at the road's edge
casts the shadow of an infant's ribs?

Nature and nature's inhabitants are lifted above ordinary existence to hallowed space. The poem, thus, follows in the

tradition of nature poetry. Historically, in such poems the speaker is awed by nature and lacking words to describe it, laments his plight but goes on to give form to space and shapes a worthy thing.

Forhan, through his use of nature imagery, plays lightly with romanticism. The risk is worthwhile. He undercuts any supposed romantic pathos and should convince readers that he is aware that "Night," "Moon," and "Sun" are frequently used poetic images. In "Late Meditation," for example, the speaker states that he is "not impressed" with night:

... Once I felt obliged.
invulnerable night, I said. *Love's rustling curtain...*
It took a long time to discover night
is a slate one writes on with the chalk
of desire...

In "Crepuscular" the speaker watches the rising moon and does not think "it an assertion" about himself. Again, in the poem "Beside Myself," Forhan resumes the motif:

I am going to sit in the dark
and not take the dark as a symbol.

I am going to let a cloud crawl over the moon...

I will be a kind of sleep. It will mean
giving back the names of things.

These poems imply an unstated question: how does a poet avoid romanticizing, inventing, exaggerating? Is it possible for a poet to base any *thing* in fact?

The pastoral (from *pastor*; Latin for "shepherd"), referring to a literary work dealing with shepherds and rustic life, is akin to nature or romantic poetry. By including the poem "Pastoral," Forhan further demonstrates his awareness that language is history-heavy. Here, the poet tips his "hat of dandelions" to that idealized poetry but departs from the conventionalized form by placing the scene around a junked car. The speaker maintains his conventional longing for simplicity, but he doesn't long for green pastures; instead the speaker longs to live inside the trunk of the junked car. The poem invites the audience to a meditation on the illusory nature of idyllic life, on what constitutes "nature," and on the connection between language and truth.

The tension between language and truth might prompt some to wonder whether life and art can be reconciled. Wallace Stevens saw reality as something to be expunged, but Forhan explores a third way in "Before," the poem that begins Section II of the book.

"Before" is a creation story similar to that found in Genesis 3, which chronicles man's fall from a perfect state in which no one makes value judgments. Things simply are. Forhan writes:

The air hummed with light. The sky
was a flat, unchanging white, the white

of the sea. The practice of women
was to pin a sprig of berries in their hair
and of men to loop a blade of grass
around their wrists. But not for luck, not for beauty.
Luck was not then. Beauty was not then.
We did not choose between the weed and the rose.

A “before” implies an “after,” and Forhan lays out this part as well, revealing the necessity for the fall. Without falling (from oblivion, from bliss) we could never truly “know” life. We could only know it as an animal knows it, but because we are human, we are able to shape worth out of the “dark and chill.” Language becomes available to us, and through language, the possibility of understanding both things and each other.

If Forhan “fails” in mirroring life or in expunging harsh reality, he succeeds in providing a mirror for our feelings. As the critic Helen Vendler once stated, metaphor, not mimesis is the poet’s native realm.

In *The Actual Moon, The Actual Stars*, Forhan focuses on nothing less than reality itself, approaching it now as artifice, now as tantalizing illusion, and now with existential awe. Written with honesty and clarity, these poems reveal, paradoxically, the power and inability of language to relay existence.

Bruce Alford

The Soulbane Illusion

by Norman Jetmundsen

O Books, 2003
\$12.95, Paperback

Norman Jetmundsen returns to lawyer Cade Bryson and his plight against the Devil in *The Soulbane Illusion*, the sequel to his first novel, *The Soulbane Strategem*. Perhaps drawing from his own experience as a southern lawyer and a Christian, Jetmundsen has combined characters conflicted by career, family, and faith with plots of evil and catastrophe to create a novel that appeals to readers who desire a conspiracy story based in faith rather than history and the Opus Dei in Dan Brown’s *The Da Vinci Code*. He draws on C.S. Lewis’s classic *The Screwtape Letters*, exploring further the possibilities of what might happen if letters from the Devil were found.

While this novel presents the universal theme of good versus evil, the plot grows as Jetmundsen shows his reader Cade’s vulnerability and imperfections. As this protagonist struggles to build his law career, neglecting his family and faith, Cade is unwillingly drawn back to a promise he made years ago – to publish “reports from a junior devil named Soulbane to his superior, Foulheart, on a plot to destroy the western world and the church” that he mysteriously found in the library stacks while studying at Oxford. These reports haunt him as he encounters Soulbane and the devil’s cohorts in a meeting with their plans to ruin the Christian religion. Traveling from the corporate world in Atlanta and Washington, D.C., to Mardi Gras in Mobile, Alabama, to the academic

landscape of Oxford and Magdalen College in England, Cade searches for a way to thwart Soulbane’s plot, all the while reviving his marriage and faith, realizing that he is more committed to those entities than a successful, profitable career as a lawyer.

Although Jetmundsen’s writing falters in style at times, this sequel is an enjoyable read. The story of Cade and his plight, complemented by endearing characters, like his wife and Dr. Lauren St. John, who also struggle to maintain and build relationships with God and family, and complicated by corruption in business and blackmail is fast-paced, making it engaging for those who want a good adventure against the Devil.

Jessica Lueders

Fierce

A Memoir

by Barbara Robinette Moss

Scribner, 2004
\$24, Hardback

Once again, Annistonian Barbara Moss has written a memoir from a place in her heart where pain balances hope. The book *Fierce* begins where her first book, *Change Me into Zeus’ Daughter*, a childhood memoir, leaves off. At the beginning of *Fierce*, she faces adulthood with a heart full of pain from being raised by an alcoholic father.

Moss opens her story as a young bride living on base at Fort McClellan. She tolerates for a while her first husband’s controlling behavior, which includes him deadbolting her into the house daily as he leaves for work. She comes and goes from the bedroom window until her pregnancy makes the drop to the roof of a friend’s car too dangerous. Her husband’s violent behavior and her desire to visit family and pursue her interest in art help her decide to return to her parent’s home.

Moss’ father had not changed, though, and she stays just long enough to get on her feet. After a few years of struggling financially and enduring another disastrous marriage, she is accepted into the Ringling School of Art & Design in Sarasota, Fla. She eventually moves to Iowa City, Iowa, to obtain her master’s degree in art and repeats twice more an “addiction” to relationships that mingle pain and love. As she takes the reader through the turmoil of how she gains emotional sobriety, the reader can feel the bruising blows from the hands of her lovers, the soothing contact with her mother, and the healing she finds from drawing and painting away the pain in her soul. Along the way she discovers that writing, too, is a form of healing.

The story culminates with an anecdote about a fierce stray cat that she tamed. She saw in the cat her own spirit. “I know now that when I have to, I can stand up to anything that might appear in my future and anything that might slither out of my past.”

Her siblings’ situations seem a little tedious during a couple of passages in the book, but Moss has a gift for extracting from horrible situations the universal truths from which all readers can learn. She has a simple, smooth style of writing

and creates phrases such as “the catchable light of fireflies” and “the rubber band tumbled down my arm like the faintest breath on my skin.”

Moss lives in Iowa City where she paints and writes from her home. She also spends time in New York City on projects related to both. Her writing awards include the Gold Medal for Personal Essay in the William Faulkner Creative Writing Contest, the Iowa Authors Award, and the Alabama Authors Award.

Sherry Kughn is executive secretary at the Anniston Star.

The Wreck of the Twilight Limited

by Joe Formichella

MacAdam/Cage, 2004

\$23, Hardback

When the *Sunset Limited* ended up in Bayou Canot, Mobile, Alabama, on September 22, 1993, 47 people were killed, most of them drowned, making it the worst train wreck in Amtrak’s history to date. Joe Formichella’s *The Wreck of the Twilight Limited* is a story inspired by the true events that led up to the disaster of the *Sunset Limited*, its passengers, and rescuers.

The Wreck of the Twilight Limited is two parallel stories. One is the story of those on the train in 1993; the other is the story of three men in 1998, trying to make sense of the wreck and their lives after the fact. Formichella tells the two stories in a series of flashbacks that churn into one another from beginning to end, creating a constant sense of motion.

On the train, we meet Christine, a wide-eyed, 20-something whose hobbies are riding trains and quietly analyzing her fellow passengers, through which we come to know most of those aboard the *Twilight Limited*. We also meet Douglas, a recent medical school graduate, who, along the trip from California to Alabama transforms from a sophomore-fraternity-boy type into a man of his own and a hero. Along with these two main characters, there are hosts of other characters that show up sporadically, much like they would on an actual train ride.

Five years after the crash, in 1998, we meet William Clayton “W.C.” Odell, the one named responsible for knocking the train tracks out of alignment just before the train raced across the bridge. There is also Michael, a truant officer with the Mobile Board of Education, and Tommy, an ex-firefighter assigned to recover those who perished in the cars submerged under 25 feet of water and mud. These men, on a journey parallel to their memories of 1993, are desperately trying to come to terms with the fact that everything about their lives changed the moment the *Twilight Limited* crashed into the banks of Mobile.

Formichella’s novel is full of images that are at once terrible and beautiful. The images from outside the train’s window are majestic and romantic while those from under the water are ghostly and horrifying. The contrasting images and stories carry out through the entire book, causing the reader

to hope that, somehow, everyone in the story will end up okay. However, you know the train will crash, in defiance of all your hoping, and that some of the people you have come to know will die and some will survive.

The Wreck of the Twilight Limited is wonderful book that is not so much a pleasure to read, but important to read, if for no other reason than to find a way to put together the questions and the answers to the “whys” of terrible events.

Jill M. Deaver is a graduate from the University of Montevallo. She works at Simmons Middle School in Hoover.

Herod’s Wife

by Madison Jones

The University of Alabama Press, 2003

\$17.95 Paperback

Built upon the framework of the story of John the Baptist, Madison Jones’ eleventh novel takes readers through a fast-paced turn of events. *Herod’s Wife* is compelling and heartbreaking, and while it is short in length, it is not a light read. Addressing the issues of divorce, abortion, and scandal in the Catholic Church, this novel is contemporary while still remaining close to its biblical underpinnings.

Set in a progressive southern town, the story begins with Nora and Hugh in bed after a perfunctory romantic encounter. Grappling with issues of faith and public perception, Hugh can only accept Nora’s assertion that his personal conflicts are coming between them. Her hatred of the Catholic faith is evident from the beginning of the story and is only fueled by the actions of the local priest.

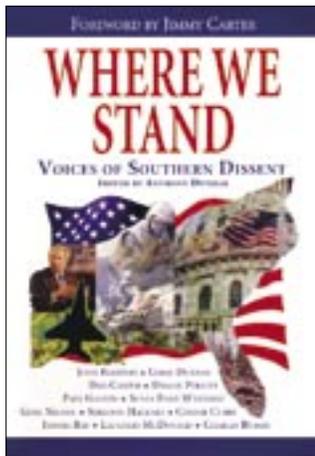
Father John Riley, who throughout the story is struggling to find solidarity with his ever-dwindling congregation, expresses to Hugh his dissatisfaction with the marriage to Nora, who is recently divorced from Hugh’s brother, Wilbur. This act on the part of Father Riley angers Nora to the extent that she aims to destroy him. Involving her daughter, Jean, from her first marriage, Nora initiates a tragic chain of events. All the while, Hugh attempts to negotiate his renouncement of the Catholic faith and tries to remain civil with the priest, whom he once considered a friend.

Jones’ character development is strong in this novel. Readers can witness the growth of his characters not only in the dialogue, but also through his description of their actions when there is no exchange of words. This is evident in the numerous occasions that readers can find Father Riley by himself in the church. Also, the glimpses of intimate moments between the mother and daughter and Jean’s frustration that ensues are made very real by the author. Although the storyline is solid and few ends are left untied, this novel does leave readers wondering a little. However, this does not necessarily work against the story; the readers are allowed some room for imagination.

Herod’s Wife is rich in depth of both characters and plot, and Jones’ writing style brings the story to life with ease and grace. I found this to be a very enjoyable novel—but one that

addresses rather heavy issues and asks difficult questions about faith and loyalty.

Julie Zorn is a graduate teaching assistant in English at Auburn University.



Where We Stand

Voices of Southern Dissent
edited by Anthony Dunbar

NewSouth Books, 2004
\$24.95, Hardback

If you had to name the most important book published in the South in the past ten years, this small, but hard-hitting volume of essays might well be it. The subject matter alone—the terrible dangers taking shape in George Bush’s America—is

enough to elevate the collection. But it is the essays themselves, with their eloquent, apocalyptic unease, that lift the book to its place of literary prominence.

The political impact remains to be seen. In this television age, with demagoguery running loose in the land, the passionate reason of these written words may prove to be a pitiful antidote at best. But these fine writers have given it a shot. Editor Anthony Dunbar has assembled an all-star cast from the ranks of southern liberals—historian Dan Carter, journalist John Egerton, former U.S. President Jimmy Carter—and these visionary rebels, with a handful of others a little less famous, have issued a warning to the people of America that is only a few steps this side of desperate.

Whether they see the world through the lens of politics, religion, or economics, they share in common the notion that everything is coming unglued. I don’t mean to say that theirs is an exercise in hysteria. It is not. On the contrary, these are optimistic people at heart. They are old enough, or most of them are, to have lived through the cataclysmic quest for civil rights, and so they understand deep in their bones that even in the darkest, most uncertain times, it is possible, in fact, to build a better world.

But they also believe that time is running out.

Dan Carter, the decorated author of *The Politics of Rage*, is speaking for all of his colleagues when he writes: “...we are well on our way to replacing our two-hundred-year-old republic with an aggressive militaristic empire....”

Whatever their particular slant on the subject, these writers see a government of the wealthy, for the wealthy in which the corporate giants reap a whirlwind of profits from Iraq and other places, while our environment is threatened, our legacy of civil liberty is imperiled at home, and the economic safety net for the poor is deliberately, relentlessly ripped into shreds.

All of this is fueled by fear, and aided by the pervasive malfeasance of the media—lap dogs at best, co-conspirators

at worst—who have failed in a massive, unprecedented way to keep the American people informed. In a summary such as this, the message may sound extreme. But as Jimmy Carter writes in the book’s foreword, these are “wide-ranging and incisive essays. Some are inspiring; some are disturbing. I am sure that readers will be provoked by them and will learn from them, as I have.”

We need to hope that Carter’s faith is well-placed, for the elegant writers in *Where We Stand* are not alone in the view that America now stands at a moment of decision, and the things that happen in the next several months may well determine exactly what kind of country we become. In the book’s final essay, after a lyrical description of the nation’s new tendency to mimic the worst in southern politics, John Egerton ends on a note of stubborn optimism, however thin.

“We’ve seldom shown a knack for spotting the rainmakers and false prophets in our midst,” he writes. “Still, a frail hope is better than no hope at all. It ain’t over ‘til it’s over.”

Frye Gaillard’s most recent book is Cradle of Freedom: Alabama and the Movement that Changed America.

Just Beneath My Skin

Autobiography and Self-Discovery
by Patricia Foster

University of Georgia Press, October 2004
\$39.95, Cloth

Buckle up and settle in for the journey when you pick up Patricia Foster’s *Just Beneath My Skin*, a collection of autobiographical essays, spanning nearly the last 30 years. An associate professor in the M.F.A. Program in Non-Fiction at the University of Iowa, the Alabama native merges the personal and professional, faithfully rendering her life’s work: reconciling whether she allows herself to be decidedly *of* the Place rather than simply *from* the Place—the Place being her South, with its “class-driven, race-haunted culture tied to the false legitimacy of a lost aristocracy” (“A Place at the Table”). She sets about—and we get to watch her—making sense of the ambivalence. Just as truthfully as she exposes the necessarily uneven, yet deliberate, evolution of her Self, Foster lauds the genre as a congruent vehicle, despite a colleague’s criticism that autobiography is just so much narcissism: “Who cares about the *I*?” he asks. In “The Intelligent Heart,” Foster, unbowed, answers, “I do.” She tells us, as she in so many words told him: “I refuse to be dead.”

I marvel at Foster’s ability to sweep the external landscape of family, culture and race, yet keenly capture her internal nuances. “In the Girls’ Room,” one of the volume’s three sections, she wrestles with cultural and familial expectations of Southern womanhood. In her twenties, following marriage and divorce (which also did nothing to help her understand who to become, she says), the author begins to realize the inner conflict as “not wanting to be me.” In “Outside the Hive,” she realizes her need for a “solitary perspective” to help her slowly “unknot” her Self, since she is unable to embody the

opposing messages that her physician-sister seemed to more easily bridge—the injunction to “compete, compete,” voiced by her physician-father, all the while remaining a “polite, pretty, and accommodating girl.” A crisis often provided a door into the conscious Self for nice girls in the South during the 1950s and 1960s. In “Goody, Goody Girls,” this crisis sometimes was marked by an emotional “breakdown,” whispered in the common vernacular, “she just *went off*.” Foster documents first a high school classmate, then a college professor, and finally herself—all suffering the fallout of carrying too many secrets, essentially not feeling what they feel or saying what they think. In short, committed to being a “good girl” at the expense of being real. “By offending no one, I became nothing,” Foster writes.

In the “Inside the Writing Room” segment, the author legitimizes autobiographic writing, though she does not have to work to convert me. Autobiography is not about exposing or “going after” one’s family or culture for their faults for the sake of “skewering them.” In “When the House Began to Tremble,” the issues are much more complex and important—more about acknowledging familial expectations, personal feelings on each side, learning to let each family member be who he or she is, like it or not—and having the courage and grace to live freely in one’s own skin, regardless. She calls this work “self-surgery,” in “My Savage Mind,” “the story of a mind, “exposing consciousness at its core.” Foster’s energy—her “fury and love”—fuels the discovery process. “A Place at the Table” shows this emotional torque: something deep inside her, “like a painful thorn” that must be exorcised, sets balanced against the deep love of place and ways of Southerners, despite their imperfections and her shame. Fleeing to L.A. as a 20-something to remake herself did nothing to remove these tensions. Instead, full circle, and in the middle of often messy and confusing pain, she finds her most valuable answers, the “Truth of her Self.”

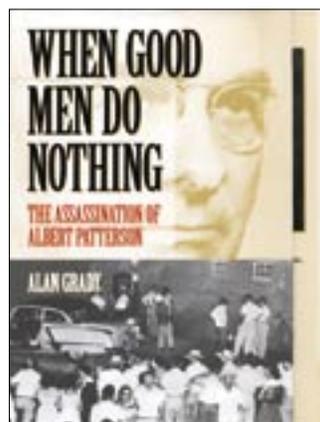
In the “Inside My Skin” segment, Foster remains committed to her life’s work, having accepted that she can and wants to come home—and write about it. With poignant memories of her beloved birthplace, Fairhope, Foster reminisces about Mamma Dot. The music teacher is as authentic and relaxed in her skin as anyone we meet, inviting 11-year-old Foster to dance atop the piano—even when the girl feared there was no room. There was room. Foster’s Fairhope, identified now regrettably in the hands of “men with big money” and “women in \$500 short sets,” is unchanged inside her, as the place where she was “taught to live by the heat of her nerves.”

She returns to visit the family’s former housemaid, Ora, and observes how race separated the destiny of Ora and her mother—women with essentially the same hopes and desires. For not calling immediately to apologize for a missed second visit to Ora’s, Foster wonders if she is as liberated from her past as she has spent her life working to be: “behind rudeness, there is always hierarchy.” In this vein, the 53-year-old Foster, challenged by her adult group of writing students at the Tuskegee Public Library, takes on her own writing assignment. And in several ways, her students teach her a thing or two about “a moment of emotional closeness with a person of a different race.”

This essay, “Skin,” closes with Foster sitting with Louisa, one of these same students, at the African-Methodist-Episcopal Church in Tuskegee. During the service, as they observe the baptism of a young girl, Louisa and Foster reach for the hand of the other, in one simple and sacred moment. Foster shares: “there is something in that pure sound, that lowering of a girlish body in a pool of cool water, that opens me. I feel a sudden spill of tears, and for once I don’t try to tidy my emotions but let them leak across my face.”

Jungian analyst Clarissa Pinkola Estes writes about resurrection of the female Soul/Self as moving from the naïve woman who has made an internal pact of “not knowing” to a woman who can stand what she sees and not look away—and in doing so, stops the bleeding Self. Whew. Patricia Foster’s work of self-discovery shows us. I stand amazed.

Writer and therapist Julie F. Kaetz lives in Auburn.



When Good Men Do Nothing

The Assassination of Albert Patterson

by Alan Grady

The University of Alabama Press, 2003

\$29.95, Hardback

On June 18, 1954, Albert Patterson, the Democratic nominee for Alabama state attorney general, met his fate in an alley next to his

law office in Phenix City, long known as Sin City. The ensuing murder investigation fractured the ruling crime bosses, dismantled the political machine that permitted them to operate, and saw murder indictments handed down against Russell County’s chief deputy sheriff, its circuit solicitor, and Alabama’s attorney general.

In 1994 Alan Grady became the first person granted absolute access to the case files of the Albert Patterson murder, previously sealed in the state archives. His subsequent research resulted in *When Good Men Do Nothing: The Assassination of Albert Patterson*.

Grady writes a lively narrative beginning with a brief history of what would become Russell County and Phenix City. As early as 1832 the small southeast Alabama town had earned the nickname Sodom. By the turn of the twentieth century, Russell County distilleries shipped whisky throughout the area and as far north as New York and Boston. By 1954, gambling, prostitution, and bootleg liquor fueled Phenix City’s economy. Crime bosses, crooked cops, and corrupt politicians worked together to ensure the prosperous future of this economy and themselves.

Albert Patterson, who once defended the local godfathers in court, ran as a reformer in the 1954 Democratic primary. His nomination for attorney general practically assured his

win in the virtual one-party state. Patterson's platform and his close association with and endorsement by the Russell Betterment Association directly threatened the livelihood of the local criminal element.

When Good Men Do Nothing reads more like a political novel than the well researched, heavily documented historical record that it actually is. The book offers a meticulous plot, crisp dialogue, and vivid characters.

After offering exposition on the town's history and the election of 1954, Grady introduces readers to the principals. Depending on whom readers believe, Patterson is either a sainted reformer, born again after representing many of the men he intends to prosecute, or "an unscrupulous, arrogant, and lecherous politician who got what was coming to him." Then one by one readers meet the accused—Si Garrett, Alabama's attorney general who flees to various psychiatric hospitals whenever the investigation focuses on him; Arch Ferrell, the Russell County circuit solicitor who mutters incoherently in the initial stages of the investigation and washes his inaudible words down with copious amounts of bourbon; and Albert Fuller, the Russell County chief deputy sheriff who controls the prostitution racket and arrives at the murder scene with an empty holster.

Grady offers extensive biographies on these characters and briefer biographies on other players. Readers will meet so many characters here that they may feel the need for a flow chart simply to keep up with them. Anticipating this reader confusion, Grady offers a thirteen page biographical addendum of all his characters.

Readers unfamiliar with the circumstances of Patterson's death will leave *When Good Men Do Nothing* with a firm education in the political, criminal, and sexual intrigue that led to conviction and acquittal. Grady spent ten years researching this case, and he writes a historical narrative as good as any fiction out there today.

Danny Gamble is a teaching writer with the "Writing Our Stories" program.

In the Midst of Life

by Charles Rose

NewSouth, 2004
\$17.95, Paperback

Charles Rose, longtime spirit of Auburn and author of many stories impossible to confuse with anyone else's, has written a wonderful book. *In the Midst of Life* describes his two-year experience in the late nineties as a hospice volunteer visiting terminally ill patients. Though nonfiction (names changed), the book avails itself of many of the techniques of narrative fiction, and though it deals with a serious subject, it retains the deft and distinctive touch familiar to readers of his stories. At one point Rose modestly tells us "I wouldn't call myself a writer," but he certainly is one, and this is a writer's book. I don't mean to imply that Rose deflects our atten-

tion from the compassionate vision at the heart of the book with verbal flourish—only that the telling of these stories transcends the merely functional, and along with its acute description provides insight into the subjects, their situation, and the author himself. The result is that two themes emerge: the central one, of course, a meditation on death and life, and the way the reality of the first shapes the meaning of the second; but also the question of how to absorb the completeness of an experience. In both cases Rose has the wisdom to be guided by his own sense of humanity and, in doing so, to create an eloquent appeal to the reader's. The truth is, though he came to the experience with reluctance and misgivings, once he committed himself, he found himself in a mother lode of material and from there just followed his instincts as a writer. Presenting keen portraits of his memorable subjects, and sparing us any trace of sentiment, self-flagellation, sermonizing, or blinding revelations, he simply says: here is what I experienced.

As a hospice volunteer Rose evidently had some freedom in choosing when to visit the patients and what to do when he got there. He read, talked, drew sketches, or simply offered his presence. We get accounts of four different experiences, all of which ended in the same inevitable way: a 76-year-old black man, Lonnie Simmons; an "elderly" white World War II veteran, Howard Carr; a 54-year-old-white chemistry professor, Larry Beckwith; and the 93-year-old black matriarch Cassie Binton—all with some form of terminal cancer. Since the patients were not always alert or responsive, we often learn as much about the people around them as we do about them—particularly in the case of Cassie Binton's vividly rendered niece Eileen with whom Rose shared a number of opinionated conversations until, with the death of Cassie, the context for them, and along with it the communion that made it possible, passed away.

The visits weren't usually long, and Rose's attempts to read to the patients met with varying degrees of success. What to read in such a situation? We get detailed accounts of two of the author's choices—*Huck Finn* with Howard Carr, and *The Hobbit* with Larry Beckwith. Like the retired English professor that he is, Rose shares some insights about the works themselves along the way. Once, leaving Howard and Huck, Rose caught sight of a memorable yard ornament:

Driving back on Lee 355, about to pass two trailers off to my left occupying the same broad swath of acreage, I had to slow down to take it all in—cane pole and bobber, floppy straw hat, patched overalls, nut brown face, another Huck Finn, fishing out of a brick bordered pool not much larger than a bathtub (I couldn't tell whether there was water in it). Was this Jungian synchronicity or some kind of post-modernist mockery, archetype degraded to shoddy gimcrack? No, this black Huck Finn had a down-to-earth charm, he belonged here with the two trailers, even though, here in East Alabama today, there was no territory for him to light out for.

Circumstances eventually made it impossible for Rose to

continue his hospice work, and though, as with *Huck Finn*, we're better off not hunting a moral or plot, still Rose does not leave us without some final reflections on what he has experienced. At one point in the book a supervisor remarks that the dying seem "to know something we don't," and that suggestion lingers through the various stories. Leaving a session one afternoon with Howard Carr, Rose observes, "I felt we had come away with something we might not have thought of for a while," a modest and profound realization perhaps given a fuller expression at the end:

These three men and this woman...in their last days they have borne home to me the incommensurable distance between this world and what lies beyond. And in memory they still have a face, a voice, as one might say of a departed loved one. Their caregivers, those close to them, Mary Wagner, Helen Carr, Katherine Beckwith, Eileen Foote, I can envision, even converse with them as they were when I was with them. I can say I was of some help to them, as I believe I was from time to time. Certainly, they were of help to me. But that was transitory, what we said and did. Beyond what I have gotten down in this book, there was a shimmering in the air evocative of something ineffable, tentative yet palpable, elusive yet real.

In the Midst of Life is, above all, a series of reflections on the value of human life, but it is also a story about the discovery of that value and the self-definition inherent in that process.

Most writers' books are for other writers. This one is for everybody. Highly recommended.

John M. Williams's novel, Lake Moon, was published by Mercer in 2002.

Where Will We Be When We Get Where We're Going?

by Toby Warren

AuthorHouse, 2004
\$14.95, Paperback

In *Where Will We Be When We Get Where We're Going?*, Toby Warren shares the experiences, wisdom, and humor of Dr. D. B. Mayberry, Dean Emeritus of Agriculture and Home Economics at Tuskegee University. During his 92 years Dr. Mayberry has been both observer and participant in an American journey that began when the last of the people born into slavery were in their early forties and continues still today. He doesn't really tell us where we will be when the journey ends but does seem to suggest that we will know when we get there.

The paradigm of education, hard work, and entrepreneurship as the pathway to realizing the American Dream was adapted for African-Americans in Tuskegee, Alabama, by Booker T. Washington and George Washington Carver during the early part of the 20th century. It was actually a separate but equal version of the dream where the word "separate" meant

what it said; however, the white power structure, which made the rules, maintained a two-tiered system of equality. By the 1950s African-Americans began to express dissatisfaction with the social order, and some suggested that possibly the rights guaranteed by the U.S. Constitution applied to them as well. Nobody paid much attention until Rosa Parks was arrested in Montgomery for refusing to move to the back of a city bus. The incident led to the famous Montgomery Bus Boycott and is seen as the beginning of the Civil Rights movement, a political, legal, and social struggle that led to federal legislation and court decisions designed to achieve racial equality; or, as Mayberry puts it, gain a "seat at the table." Whether it is a good seat or even at the right table is a matter of debate; however, the conventional wisdom is that African-Americans don't get justice because they earn it or deserve it; rather they have to demand it and fight for it. The activist minister has replaced the businessman as the role model and leader in the black community.

One of eleven children born in Tallassee, Alabama, to a family of modest means, Mayberry became a student and protégé of George Washington Carver and subsequently earned his doctorate in horticulture. In the years between the world wars he was a close, but rarely acknowledged confidant of the rich and powerful and later held a post of professor at Michigan State University before returning to Tuskegee where he retired in 19???. Mayberry has seen it all, but his perceptions are not what one might expect. He does not suggest a return to the old paradigm but does remind us that education, hard work, and entrepreneurship still work, probably even better now than under conditions of second-class citizenship. He understands what was accomplished by of the civil rights movement and is an admirer of Dr. Martin Luther King and his commitment to peaceful change in the United States and the world. But he also holds General Colin Powell in high esteem and saw it as a "great day" in 1966 when he stood on a Navy pier in Norfolk, Virginia, and participated in the christening of the *U.S.S. George Washington Carver*, a ballistic missile submarine. He deplores racism but has misgivings about affirmative action. He believes America would be better off with more people who give a damn.

There is much more to learn about Mayberry's life and times, including a few surprises and the discovery of a connection with the author. Mayberry understands better than anyone that the African-American Journey has some distance left to cover, and each of his observations and opinions are very compelling but when they are taken together and presented with sensitivity and elegance, the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. Toby Warren has done this for us, his fortunate readers, but it would not have been possible without the mutual trust that came about at their first meeting when Mayberry posed a question that became the title of the book. The answer he got was, "Dr. Mayberry, I am not sure where we will be when we get where we are going, but if I have anything to do with it we will get there together."

Jim Buford's most recent collection of essays, Pie in the Sky: A Few More Clues to the Meaning of Life, was published in 2003.

Children of the Movement

The Sons and Daughters of Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, Elijah Muhammad, George Wallace, Andrew Young, Julian Bond, Stokely Carmichael, Bob Moses, James Chaney, Elaine Brown, and Others Reveal How the Civil Rights Movement Tested and Transformed Their Families.

by *John Blake*

Lawrence Hill Books, 2004

\$24.95, Hardback

In this truly fascinating book, John Blake has compiled a portrait of what it meant to be a family member of one of the main actors of the civil rights movement. For his subjects, he has chosen both the sons and daughters of the movement's protagonists as well as some of their most notable antagonists. The picture that emerges is not always a pretty one, but it is moving and gripping; sometimes it is all too painfully real. In the end, the reader comes away with a much fuller understanding of the price social activism exacts upon the prime actors in historical movements—and those closest to them in terms of both physical and emotional proximity. The book lets us know, sometimes in the harshest terms, that being a “great” person in the historical sense—even on the right side of history—does not necessarily entail greatness in other, more intimate and personal aspects of human existence. But in sum readers interested in the movement, social protest, family history, or plain old-fashioned human interest will find much of value and even poignancy in this volume.

The reactions of these children, all grown to adulthood now, ranges from the ridiculous to the sublime—as do the actions of their famous and infamous parents as related through the close lens of their own memories. It is inspiring to read of the diametrically opposite life segregationist Mississippi governor Ross Barnett's daughter has made for herself. It is equally painful to read of the mess Ralph David Abernathy III has made of his. It is sad to weigh the unreconstructed views of Selma mayor Joe Smitherman's son, Stephen. And it is downright tragic to read of the annihilation of the close relationship that once existed between Julian Bond and John Lewis. It is disconcerting to read the common refrain (from James Forman Sr. and Abernathy, for example) that they coveted Nobel Peace Prizes all these years and remuneration for their parts in the struggle. It is beautiful to read that Maisha Moses considers her tranquil yet legendary father to be an even better parent than he was an activist.

We learn that a good number of them, even a disproportionately high number, do not have especially close relationships with their parents; still shelter real pain from parental neglect, emotional and otherwise; and feel their parents did not leave enough over for parental adequacy, much less achievement, once it was subtracted from their all-consuming roles in the movement. It is perfectly horrible to read the memoirs of Chevara Orrin and Bacardi Jackson—the adult daughters of the Rev. James Bevel, one of Martin Luther King's most notable tacticians. We feel real pain as we read

of Bevel preaching against white people as maggots and claiming that the only good uses for white women are as sex pets or slaves—all the while staring from the pulpit at Chevara, the personification of his union with a white Jewish woman. We grieve as we learn that the two sisters estimate their father had seventeen children by many different wives, and remember not receiving any financial help even as they struggled through a childhood filled with homelessness and welfare. “He doesn't know my favorite food. . . . He doesn't know where I went to high school. He doesn't know what my college degree is in. He doesn't even know when I was born,” Chevara confesses. Bacardi used to address letters to Bevel, not affectionately, as “Daddy Dearest,” and confided to him in a shattering display of honesty that “I . . . have no illusions that as much as I long to have a real father, a million lies would never transform you into one.” Much is explained when we learn that Bevel habitually compared himself to Jesus and Zeus, on those rare occasions when he did talk to his daughters, allegedly declared himself a prophet and demanded that young followers drink his urine, and refused to ever apologize for his fatherly neglect. Perhaps the saddest part of the memoir is reading that today Bevel responds to his daughter's criticisms by comparing them to Bull Connor and by teaching—apparently without a trace of hypocrisy or shame—a class on effective parenting.

Nor is the pain a one-way street. Mary Brown did not learn of her father's heroic role in the movement until she was sixteen—and then from a high-school history text rather than her dad. But her revelation about James Zwerg, the inhuman beating he took as a white “freedom rider” at the hands of a Montgomery mob, his inspiring hospital-bed resolve to carry on—and the utter disapproval he received for it all from his own parents—leads to a rapprochement of sorts after so many years of distress. Zwerg, feeling himself dispossessed by the two people he loved most in the world, fell into a black hole of despair after the “Rides” that included guilt, depression, hard drinking, emotional aloofness, and even the contemplation of self-destruction. Yet the reader's impulse to damn his parents without a full trial is tempered when we learn that they were themselves so shocked and worried by the front-page picture of the results of his horrible assault that his father had a heart attack and his mother a nervous breakdown.

We also learn, to perhaps our profound dismay, but also a kind of relief, that being a “bad” parent or spouse was in no way correlated to being for or against the civil rights movement. It is striking to see the affection, even reverence, with which the children of George Wallace, Bob Moses, and Malcolm X still hold them. It is touching to read the somewhat defensive and myopic rationales of Wallace's behavior by his adult daughter. And it is touching too, if kind of embarrassing, to hear the practical resentments of Andy Young's son that others—white people—got rich off the movement and his father did not. It is painful to struggle through the bitter reminiscences of James Bevel's daughters. But it is moving to read of the heartache that Martin Luther King III and Michael Julian Bond experienced as young boys for their often-absent fathers—Bond's so intense that he would miss the scent of

his father and, to remember it, open his downstairs closet to smell his clothes. Those of us who are fortunate enough to be parents can only smile when we read that the adult Ilyasah Shabazz still has an overwhelming affinity for cookies and drifts off to sleep with the television on. One of her only memories of her father, Malcolm X, martyred when she was just two, was staying up late with him to eat oatmeal cookies and watch the news. And there is so much more in this book.

In a serious way, Blake's book is a strike against what has become the commercialization of the movement, its over-sentimentalization, its reduction to a stark moral dichotomy, and even the romanticization and deification of its participants.

It is a protest against their ritual objectification now as safe, public, somewhat inhuman and wax heroes every February—even by politicians who stand for the most conservative values that are, and were, anathema to the values for which they stood. These were human beings after all. Extraordinary in some aspects of their lives—no question. But as limited, vulnerable, and ultimately as complicated and fallible, as we all are. This book—in turns touching, infuriating, amusing, but always enlightening—is a fitting tribute to them and to their families.

Glenn Feldman is an associate professor at the University of Alabama at Birmingham's Center for Labor Education and Research.



The Alabama Writers' Forum, a statewide literary organization promoting writers and writing, wishes to thank its generous partners and friends.

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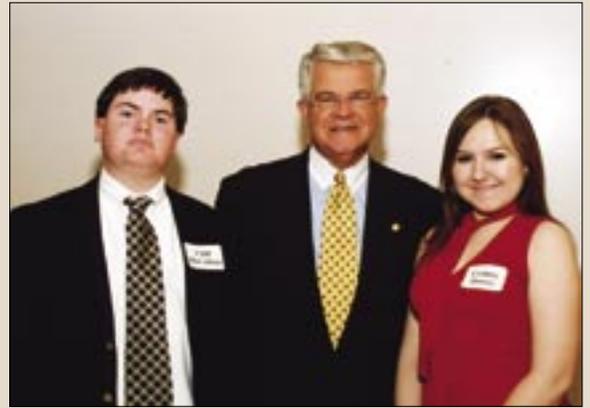
Thank you!

2004 HIGH SCHOOL LITERARY ARTS AWARDS

Seventy-eight awards were made to young writers in creative nonfiction, drama, fiction, poetry, and senior portfolio at twenty-six Alabama high schools from Florence to Foley and from Selma to Opelika in Alabama Writers' Forum 2004 High School Literary Arts Awards. For a complete listing of the winners and their schools, or to request the 2005 guidelines, please contact the Forum office at 334 242 4076, ext. 233 or awfl@arts.state.al.us.

The Alabama Writers' Forum deeply appreciates the time that several Alabama legislators gave to attend the High School Literary Arts Awards this year and congratulate their young constituent winning writers.

The 2004 High School Literary Arts Awards were made possible by generous funding from the Alabama "Support the Arts" Car Tag and the Alabama State Council on the Arts.



Senator Ted Little (D-Auburn) honors Opelika High School students Cliff McCollum and Cydney Dorsey on "exceptional design of a literary magazine" as editors of Perspectives.



Alabama Writers' Forum Assistant Director Tess Ware congratulates former AWF interns Erin Young and Miranda Dennis of Booker T. Washington Magnet Arts High School. Young placed in poetry and Dennis was one of five senior portfolio scholarship recipients.



AWF President Bettye Forbus and AWF Board Member Derryn Moten stand with fiction winners (front row, L-R): Forbus and Bob Jones High School winner Melissa West (back row, L-R): Lorianne Watts (Wellborn High School), Lauren English (Decatur High School), Cedric Rudolph (Alabama School of Fine Arts), Moten, and Sarah Campbell (Alabama School of Fine Arts).



Rep. Ray Garner (R-Huntsville) commends Bob Jones High School winners Melissa West and Gustave Von Hahn-Powell for their success in fiction and drama, respectively.



Rep. Billy Beasley (D-Clayton) congratulates Eufaula High School winners Alysia Bone, Amy White, Jay Lockwood & Brian Bowman on a job well done.



Linda Henry Dean, AWF president-elect, congratulates drama winner Miriam Smith (Mountain Brook High School).

Literary News



Alabama Voices in Florence

The Alabama Writers' Forum, the Alabama Center for the Book, the Florence-Lauderdale Public Library, and the Friends of the Library will host a reading and book signing by **Patricia Foster** on Tuesday evening, November 9th, at 7 p.m. in the library's conference room. Patricia Foster's appearance is funded by

Alabama Voices, a program of the Alabama Center for the Book and AWF.

Patricia Foster's memoirs include: *Just Beneath My Skin* and *All the Lost Girls*. She's also the co-editor of three anthologies.

For more information, please call Pam Kingsbury at 765-4890 or Anita Garner at 765-4889.



Cedric Rudolph

(Alabama School of Fine Arts '04) was recognized by A.R.T.S. (Arts Recognition Talent Search) in Miami, Florida, this spring. Rudolph was also a finalist for a Presidential Scholarship, a national nomination made possible through A.R.T.S., the largest scholastic arts organization in the country. The Alabama Writers' Forum congratulates Rudolph for his many accomplishments as an Alabama young writer.

The acclaimed and often honored poet **Donald Justice** died August 6th in Iowa City. He was 78 and lived in Iowa City. His fourteenth volume of poetry, *Collected Poems*, was due to be issued by Knopf on August 18.

Ted Kooser has been named the next U.S. Poet Laureate. The author of ten books of poetry, Kooser is a native of Nebraska and the recipient of two National Endowment for the Arts fellowships and the Pushcart Prize. He follows Billy Collins as poet laureate.

Kelly Cherry at AWF Associates Meeting in Florence



The Alabama Writers' Forum, the Florence-Lauderdale Public Library, and the Friends of the Library will host a meeting of AWF associates on Thursday evening, September 23rd, at 7 p.m. in the library's conference room. The public is invited.

Kelly Cherry, author of over twenty books of fiction, poetry, and memoir will be the featured reader. Eminent Scholar in the Humanities at UAH for fall 2004, Cherry has been an active supporter of the literary arts community in the state, and will be reading "in honor of the AWF" as part of the Alabama Voices Series.

Her fiction includes *We Can Still Be Friends*, *My Life and Dr. Joyce Brothers*, and *The Society of Friends*. Her most recent collection of poetry, *Rising Venus*, was a *ForeWord* Award Winner.

For more information, please call Pam Kingsbury at 765-4890 or Anita Garner at 765-4889.



Anniston's Accent on the Author

Accent on the Author in Anniston will feature three leading Alabama authors in its fall program. **Dr. Wayne Flynt** will speak at noon on Oct. 5 at the Public Library of Anniston-Calhoun County. **Barbara Moss** will speak at noon on Oct. 28, and **Dr. Patricia Foster** will speak at noon on Nov. 10. All three are showcasing new books. Patricia Foster's program is supported by AWF/Alabama Center for the Book's Alabama Voices.

Mark your calendar now for the eighth annual

ALABAMA WRITERS SYMPOSIUM

Alabama Wild

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Monroeville, Alabama

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Plan to spend May 5-7, 2005, in Monroeville for the 2005 Alabama Writers Symposium. Members of our state's rich contemporary literary family will gather at Alabama Southern Community College for a weekend of readings by Alabama writers, with the thoughtful guidance of some of our best literary scholars.

2005 Featured Writers and Scholars include Philip Beidler, Diann Blakely, Loretta Cobb, John Cottle, Kirk Curnutt, Charles Gaines, Shirley Ann Grau, Wayne Greenhaw, Anthony Grooms, Roy Hoffman, Harvey H. Jackson III, Inman Majors, Barbara Robinette Moss, Linda Busby Parker, Doug Phillips, and Sue Walker

Thursday, May 5 – Opening Banquet Speaker
Edward O. Wilson

Friday, May 6 – Luncheon Presentation
Harper Lee Award for Alabama's Distinguished Writer 2005 and Eugene Current-Garcia Award for Alabama's Distinguished Literary Scholar 2005

Saturday, May 7 – Luncheon Speaker
Mystery guest to be revealed soon

The symposium is a project of the
Alabama Center for Literary Arts and is
sponsored by Alabama Southern Community College.

For more information call Donna Reed,
(251) 575-3156, ext. 223 or email dreed@ascc.edu



The on Low-Residency MFA Programs

by Linda Busby Parker

When a writer gets serious—*really serious*—she or he may want to learn more about the craft of writing. When this desire to learn comes full focus into the mind and heart of a writer, education is the obvious solution. An MFA in writing may very well fill the bill.

But many writers are older, have full-time careers, and have family responsibilities. They cannot move to a college town, change careers, and uproot the children. For these writers a low-residency MFA program may be the educational opportunity of a lifetime. My low-residency MFA at Spalding University in Louisville, Kentucky, was just that—the single greatest educational experience of my life.

The previous sentence takes on greater significance with the understanding that I am an education junkie. I have a B.A. in English and creative writing from the University of South Alabama in Mobile, and an M.A. and Ph.D. in media studies from the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. I have served on university faculties at Eastern Michigan University, Iowa State University, and the University of South Alabama. In short, I have been an extensive traveler up and down the education highways, and my low-residency MFA was *the single greatest educational experience in my life*. I earned my MFA degree in October 2003.

Low-residency MFA programs are not for everyone. I know some writers who have tried them and have not been satisfied. But I can honestly say that the number of writers who have flourished in low-residency MFA programs greatly exceeds the number who have withered.

To understand low-residency programs, a few words need to be written about the students. Most of the students are not your young, fresh-out-of-college, barely-old-enough-to-drink variety. While some students are in their twenties, the majority of students are in their thirties and forties with an ample sprinkling of students in their fifties, sixties, and seventies. Occasionally, a student may be beyond the seventies. In my graduation class the youngest student was in her early twenties and the oldest was in her early eighties.

One other observation about the students: most of them are professionals and many have made major sacrifices to be in the program. One student in my class was an attorney, another was an information technology specialist, several were university professors or social workers, and two were in medical fields. The students had down-sized their jobs in order to earn the MFA, and many had made extraordinary arrangements to meet obligations at home while they attended residencies.

Here's how the programs work. At the beginning of a se-

mester, low-residency students arrive on campus for ten days of intensive study. This time is called *the residency*. The students live together in assigned housing. For most low-residency programs the students are housed in dormitories. Because Spalding University is an urban campus (in downtown Louisville), students are housed in one of two historical and multi-starred hotels—the Seelbach or The Brown. Dormitory housing is also available at Spalding, but most students opt for the more gracious hotel accommodations.

Being housed in the same hotel for ten days engenders considerable camaraderie and empathy amongst the students. Most nights, after all the official residency activities, groups gather in various watering holes—the hotel lobby, the bar, or sitting rooms on hotel floors—to exchange workshop war stories, and to discuss the splendor and the devastation of the writing life. Bonding between students is strong.

The residency opens with a mixer of some variety, usually a reception and dinner followed by an evening program such as a reading or discussion by one of the author/mentors. The following morning begins with a rush of activities.

Every student is assigned a workshop in his or her designated area of concentration. At Spalding the areas include fiction, non-fiction, poetry, writing for children, playwriting, and screenwriting. When selecting an MFA program, a prospective student must be certain the program offers his or her desired area of study. Some programs do not offer non-fiction or writing for children; other programs do not offer script writing. Most of the programs offer fiction writing and poetry.

The workshop is a cornerstone of the low-residency experience. Approximately ten students are grouped with two mentors for daily meetings to discuss each student's work. Student manuscripts have been assembled, bound, and distributed to the workshop members prior to arrival. (The page limit per student is generally twenty to thirty pages depending on the MFA program.)

Writing workshops are not for the faint of heart. As a workshop participant, a student should never assume that she has submitted *the perfect manuscript*. Be advised that plenty of fellow writers around the table will poke holes through every manuscript. The process can be like undergoing surgery without anesthesia. But writing workshops can also be a marvelous learning experience. A writer hears the language of the writing craft and sees craft techniques applied to each individual's work. A workshop survival tool is *distance*. A writer should distance herself from her own work while the group dissects it. Listen and observe with objectivity.

In addition to workshops at residencies, there are lectures on craft. While at Spalding I heard lectures on the building blocks of fiction, poetry, and non-fiction; on creating a rich interiority for characters; on writing discursive passages; on research for writing; on the unity of short story cycles, and much, much more. The lectures are recorded and the students can purchase them to take home and listen to again and again.

Readings are also cornerstones of residencies. Each faculty mentor has an opportunity to read from published works or from works in process. In addition to faculty readings, one or more guest writers visit the residency each semester. In my tenure at Spalding, I had the opportunity to hear fiction writers Ernest Gaines and Michael Ondaatje, and poets Yusef Komunyakaa and Naomi Shihab Nye. I also heard children's writer Donna Jo Napoli and non-fiction writer Terry Tempest Williams. These visiting writers stay on campus a couple of days and visit with students in various venues—public readings, small question-and-answer sessions, and occasionally in workshops.

Panels are part of the residency experience too. In my two years at Spalding, I heard panels comprising New York agents and editors and panels on the process of revision. Other panelists discussed the publication process and literary journals. There were cross-genre exercises where fiction writers wrote poetry and poets wrote short stories; the real kicker was when everyone was required to write the text for a children's picture book. Utilizing sixty-five to seventy words to tell an entire story is a challenge for any writer!

Because Spalding is an urban campus located in a city with myriad cultural opportunities, arts other than writing were also included in our residency experience. Over the course of our two-year program, we attended a Broadway musical, the opera, an exhibition at the Speed Museum of Art, a jazz luncheon, the theater, and early one morning we saw the ponies train at Churchill Downs. We rode busses to another campus to hear U.S. Poet Laureate Billy Collins, and in our final residency we enjoyed a lovely trip to Midway, Kentucky, to celebrate our success with a luncheon.

The super serious part of the residency is the pairing of the student with a mentor for the remainder of the semester. Students listen to mentor readings and lectures and have an opportunity to question mentors about their philosophies on teaching and mentoring. The students then complete a mentor request form, listing mentors in order of preference. The day the mentor/student pairings are posted is similar to the day the parts are posted for the high school play. The hallway is clogged where everyone gathers in front of the lists and for the remainder of the day nearly all discussion centers on who will work with whom. Mentors are assigned five students for the semester and before leaving the residency each student has met with his or her mentor and agreed on which manuscripts will be developed or revised that semester and what books will be read. Each one of the five semester packets the student submits to the mentor must contain two or three essays based on reading assignments mutually agreed upon by student and faculty/mentor.

When the student leaves residency, the semester's work has

just begun. Each packet that the student sends to the mentor consists of between 35 and 45 pages (fewer pages if the genre is poetry or writing for children). Some of the pages are used for the short essays, but the majority of each packet is creative writing. In one semester, a student may submit nearly two hundred manuscript pages. This is work completed under the close scrutiny of the student's chosen mentor. While at Spalding, I completed a novel that was in process when I began the program and I worked on a series of short stories.

In the third semester, each student writes a major critical paper. Some of the critical essays written by Spalding students have earned their way into national publications. Several have been accepted by *The Writer's Chronicle*, a couple have been accepted by smaller national publications, and at least one was accepted by a popular publication in Great Britain. In the fourth semester every student prepares a brief lecture on craft and assembles the creative thesis. A minimum of 75 pages of fiction or non-fiction is required for the creative thesis (page requirements for other genres vary). At the final residency, the fifth residency, every graduating student delivers the craft lecture to an audience of peers and has a public reading of a sample of work from the creative thesis. The final reading is a time

Continued on page 37



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Check our website for the 2005 program:
www.writingtoday.org

Writing Today is supported by a grant from The Alabama Humanities Foundation, a state program of The National Endowment for the Humanities, and Southern Progress Corporation.

for celebration. Never will a writer find a more supportive audience, an audience open to the student's work, an audience ready to eat, drink and be merry when the reading is over!

Thus far, graduation at Spalding has been a formal and much hailed affair. I have been told that this formality and heraldry at graduation are not necessarily practiced at other MFA programs. To date, the Spalding students have voted to wear caps and gowns. They proceed down the aisle following the president of the university and the MFA faculty. The stage is splendidly bedecked with bouquets of flowers and the audience comprises admiring friends and family of the graduates. A champagne reception follows the ceremony and a dinner follows the reception. It is indeed a big event!

What do students do after completing the MFA? A number of students secure positions teaching writing at colleges and universities. Many more continue to write full time. Some students attribute their career and writing successes in large part to their training in the MFA programs. Others see the MFA program as only an enrichment in the writing life. Along the way, craft techniques were mastered, friends were secured for a lifetime, and the writing life was made a little sweeter.

Linda Busby Parker's first novel, Seven Laurels, was published in May 2004 from SEMO Press (Southeast Missouri State University Press). Seven Laurels was the 2002 winner of the James Jones First Novel Award.

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IN THE THICK OF IT

Launching an Online Journal of Alabama Literature

by Jake Adam York

Much to my regret, I don't live in Alabama these days. But I feel the tug of home's gravity every day, and not a month goes by in which I don't meet someone else who feels the same pull. Somehow, Alabamians find each other everywhere, seeing something familiar and comforting, even when what's shared isn't always good. We know what it's like to be the butt of a joke or the sudden representative of a state often in the news for all the wrong reasons. We see each other, and we know that we've been taxed with an ignorance, with what others don't know about Alabama, how beautiful and rich it is, how much we would like to return.

I imagined *Thicket*—the new on-line journal that seeks to celebrate our state's literary heritage as well as its present literary riches and abundant future—as a way to return home and as a way to create the testimony to our state's treasures I need others to see. I discussed the idea with Jason Sanford—the founding editor of *storySouth*, with whom I've worked for several years—with the good folks I've known at the Alabama Writer's Forum and the Alabama Center for the Book, all of whom were very enthusiastic.

And I discussed the idea with the folks at the Alabama Center for Literary Arts, particularly with Dr. John Johnson, who was more invested in the concept than I could imagine. What I described was the kind of project he'd been trying to launch for years, even as early as 2000, when Jason Sanford and I launched *storySouth*. Being of one mind that

we should have a journal dedicated to Alabama writing and to Alabama writers, we agreed to work together to create *Thicket*, the meeting of the technical and editorial expertise Jason and I developed at *storySouth* and Dr. Johnson's community-building work through the Alabama Writers Symposium and the Center for Literacy Arts.

What you will see, if you visit the site at www.athicket.com, are the first steps of a project that can fulfill many of the promises of the internet. In the mid-1990s, when internet browsers were becoming more advanced, many analysts began discussing new kinds of books, magazines, journals, anthologies, some describing what they called a "subject village," a combination of book, journal, and anthology. For the most part, such a creature has yet to arrive as it should. But *Thicket* should prove this promise as it becomes a home for Alabama's literature—past, present, and future.

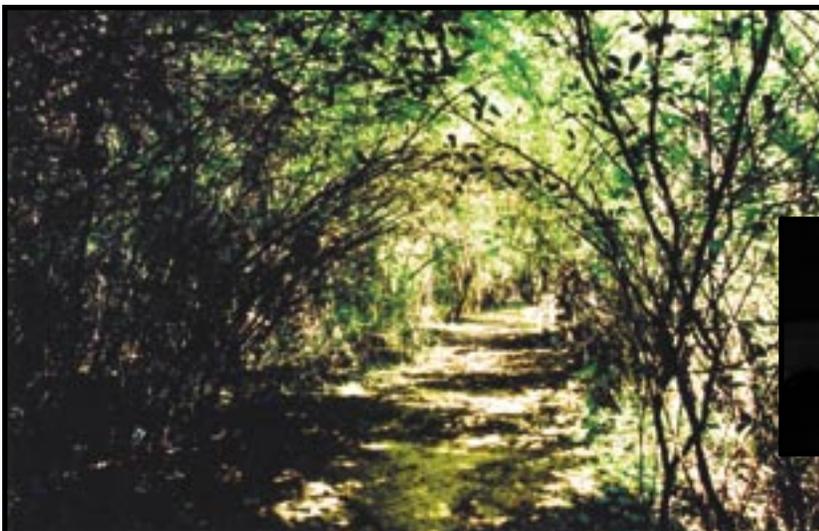
Thicket is not simply a journal. Like a journal, its content will be updated periodically, with significant updates arriving at regular intervals. But, unlike a journal, each issue comes with all the back issues. *Thicket* grows like its namesake: more thickly branched each month, connected in its roots to growths that once seemed separate. As a website should, *Thicket* brings its own content, but also reaches out to other journals and sites to bind the separate flowers of our literature.

Thicket's deepest root, of course, lies in the etymology of the word "Alabama." According to William A. Read, in his *Indian Place Names in Alabama*, the word means "the thicket clearers," an idea echoed in the volume *Clearings in the Thicket*, edited by Jerry E. Brown some years ago. In *Thicket* we seek to cut our own thicket away from all the growths of adjacent states so we may be seen at last not as a lesser Mississippi or Georgia-wanna-be, to clarify what is ours, what needs to be

cultivated, not clear-cut, the stories of ourselves we tell each other that, in the end, really define what "Alabama" means.

Jake Adam York is editor of *Thicket*. Go to www.athicket.com to view the journal and access submission guidelines.

JAKE ADAM YORK



Old Cahawba,

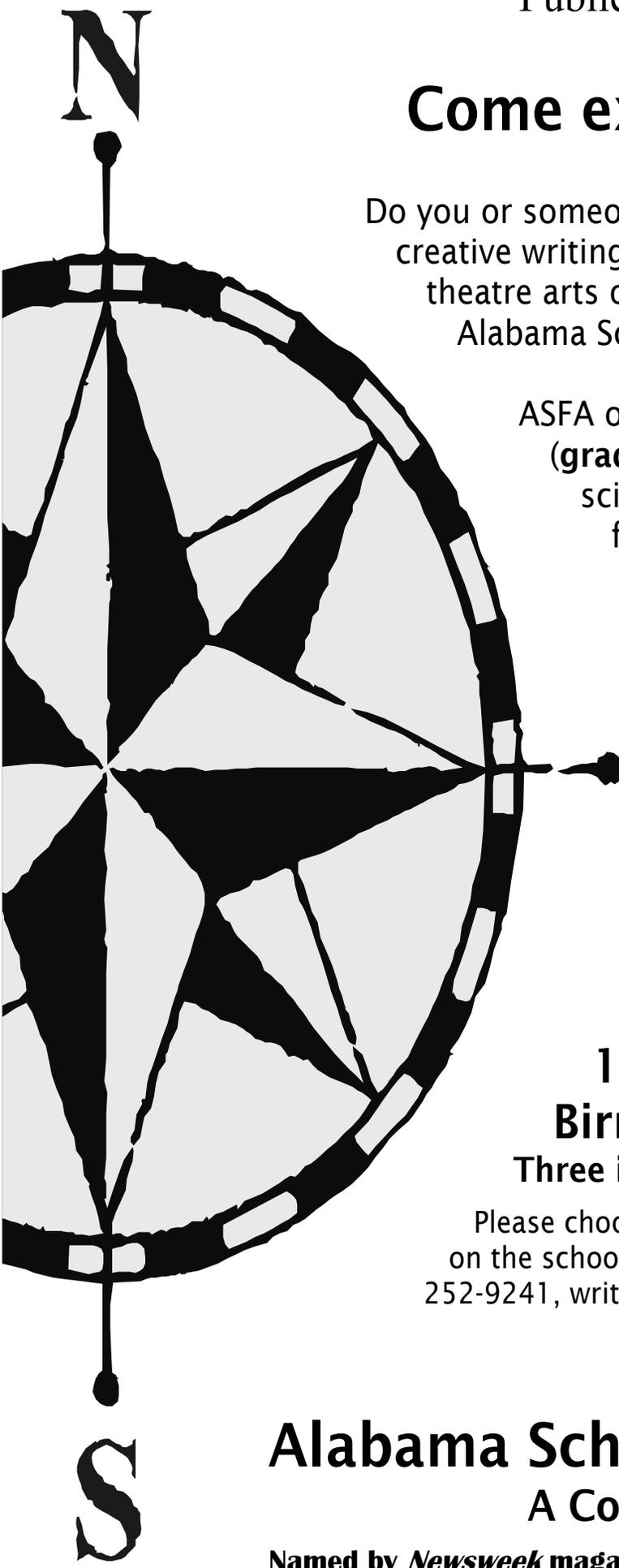


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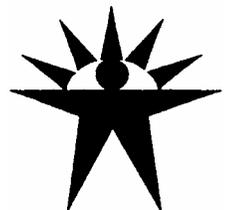
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A TEACHER'S GUIDE TO GROWING YOUNG AUTHORS

by Barbara Murphy



How many times have you sat down to read a student's paper and the first line is so boring you almost fall asleep trying to get through it? As an English teacher, it is my job to give students the necessary background to add a little zest to their papers, to generate excitement and add interest by introducing them to the basic elements of writing such as conflict, setting, and point of view. The first step in doing this involves getting the students interested in writing and creating a desire to carry through.

Two years ago, on Institute Day, I was sitting in the Van Braun Civic Center along with 2000 other teachers. I thought to myself, "It's too early to start school and it's too hot to be in the classroom." At that moment, Erin Grunwell, a former teacher, took the stage and related how 150 teens changed themselves and the world around them by publishing their own writings.

I remember thinking, "Why can't I do that with my eighth graders? I require them to keep a journal. Why not try and get their journals published?" Journal writing has been an incredibly flexible instructional tool, useful across the entire curriculum. It gives the students an opportunity to speculate about their ideas, observations, and emotions.

Together my students and I read *The Freedom Writers' Diary*, the collected writings of Ms. Grunwell's students. My students were not overly excited about doing this project, but they did not shy away from the challenge. They worked hard and tested their limits. They chose to be better than they thought they could be.

The creation of their book, *Reality Street*, took the entire school year. At times I thought it would never be accomplished, and I am sure my students felt the same way. As the second semester of school passed, they looked at what they had written and a spark of enthusiasm began to burn.

There were many legal angles to cover. Permission was needed from the parents for the students to participate in this project. A lawyer was needed for the paper work to set up a non-profit corporation.

Briefly, the project scope was this: As a group, the students picked the topics they wanted to write about. These included family, love/hate, neighborhood, friends, school, and several others. Our school is in a working-class area of Huntsville. About half of the students come from single-parent homes. Many have financial difficulty, and their neighborhoods and family lives aren't always peaceful. Some of the students wrote about gang fights and gunshots at night. Others wrote about their own problems, including trips to the local detention home.

Several times a week they would work in the computer lab writing down their thoughts, typing them out, revising, retyping, editing, and typing them again. They critiqued their own and their classmates' work. Some students caught up in the wave of creativity added poetry. After we completed the final draft, we were fortunate to have Teledyne Brown Engineering provide the first printing and Computer

Top photo: Working in computer lab with our principal Mrs. Givens and assistant principal Ms. Hargett Middle photo: Homer Hickam with several of the Reality Street Writers Bottom photo: Reality Street Writers

Systems Corporation do the second printing—both gratis.

Once the book was ready for sale, two book stores had signing parties. The first was the most exciting as it was done at a locally owned store with newspaper and TV coverage. The students, parents, families, friends, teachers, and strangers crowded into the store with fourteen young authors sitting at a long table signing their names in an assembly-line fashion. The second signing was at Barnes & Noble with the students individually speaking about their part in the book.

The next step was to send the authors out to speak about the book and offer it for sale – the proceeds of which go into a trust fund for their college education. Over the course of the year since the book first came out, the students have spoken to groups ranging from 25 to more than 2,000 in size. The local publicity has been overwhelming. Every TV station, several radio stations, and two local papers have featured the story.

The old African saying that “It takes a village to raise a child” has proved true in the case of this book and the city of Huntsville. Doctors donated money, our lawyer did the legal work *pro bono*, John Stallworth wrote the introduction, Homer Hickam (author of *October Sky*) acted as the students’ mentor and wrote the forward, our mayor purchased copies to hand out to visiting dignitaries, and two large defense contractor companies did the printing. Our local library purchased copies for all of its branches. Parents, families and friend have helped out. Parental involvement average 99 percent, something rarely seen in a Title I school. All of this help was not lined up, just waiting to be asked. It took many phone calls, visits, and a large dose of tenacity.

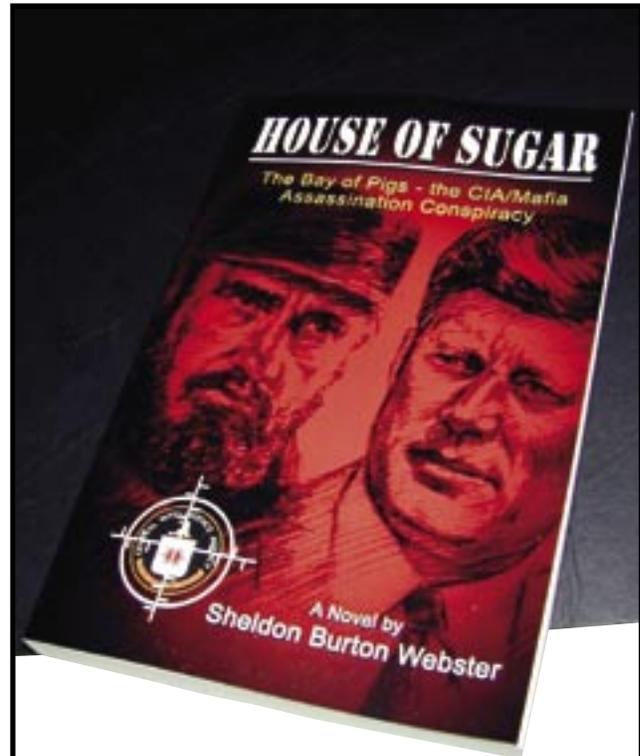
Last spring, donations enabled three of the students to fly to Washington, D.C., to present a copy of the book to Secretary of Education Rod Paige, Congressman Bud Kramer, and to the Holocaust Museum. This project has opened doors for the students they never knew existed.

Despite the problems some of the students face in their everyday lives, they are still young teens with the same problems as any of their peers, no matter where they live. They struggle to understand how they fit into the world, who they can trust, and how to make decisions. They are in their first year of high school now and from all reports doing well. To quote one father, “When the book was finally finished, I felt the sense of pride that every parent feels when their child accomplishes something extraordinary. Among learning what it takes to put a book together from start to finish, my daughter learned how to effectively work with other people, both adults and her peers.”

On one visit to the class, Homer Hickam told the students, “Millions of people want to write and be published. Only a few can. You are among those few and this can never be taken away from you.”

Over the next few years, until their graduation from high school, the students will continue writing in their journals. I hope that we can compile these writings and have a third edition of the book. The project has enabled me to reach my students and help them grow beyond the limitations they think they have.

Barbara Murphy teaches at Stone Middle School in Huntsville. For information about Reality Street: www.huntsvillecitykids.com.



“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.

**To order *House of Sugar* from
Author House, call 888-519-5121 or visit
www.authorhouse.com.**

ISBN 0-7596-8573-8

PRESERVING AND PROTECTING OUR CULTURAL ASSETS

Writers' Forum announces the Campaign for Sustainability

*AWF Revenue
Committee Chair
Philip Shirley believes
the arts can be a
catalyst for change.*

Writers' Forum has been successful in diversifying its funding sources and has weathered recent governmental funding cutbacks. This month the Forum is launching a three-year Campaign for Sustainability, and preliminary work has found a receptive audience for its goal.

The Forum board aspired to a lofty objective of demonstrating how an arts group can reduce its reliance on governmental funding – still critically important – by telling its story broadly to a diverse audience. People who understand how the arts help build stronger communities, improve educational results, contribute to a balanced economy, preserve our heritage, and enhance the quality of life have shown a great willingness to give their time, talents and money to support this worthy effort.

How did our arts organizations reach such difficult times? We may call it the economy, blame it on changing governmental priorities amidst massive budget shortfalls, find fault with our busy family schedules that now include soccer, swim club, softball and 40 other weekly activities to go with the piano lessons or dance class for which we once found time. The factors are numerous and complicated, but the reality is that our arts groups nationwide are too often living hand-to-mouth.

A quick survey of cities around the United States will find symphonies, ballet companies, community theatres, opera, museums and other arts organizations struggling. Many have disappeared. The local banks and utilities, often the only entities standing between the new arts season and a closed door for some local arts groups, have begun saying they simply can't bail out these organizations yet again. The thriving arts groups have become the exception. Alabama is no different, and your Alabama Writers' Forum shares the difficulty of stable funding sources. But we have a plan to attack this issue head-on.

This three-year funding campaign has been created to provide a strong foundation for the Forum by creating financial

While some wring their hands because arts funding has reached a crisis turning point in America, there is hope and promise for the arts group that can tell its story well and find audiences who understand its mission. The Alabama

stability and sustainability. The Forum's board has shown its support for the Campaign through 100 percent board participation in donations and long-term pledges.

For the past year our Revenue Committee has been working creatively and collaboratively in three areas: Membership Development (chaired by Julie Friedman), Grants and Contracts (chaired by James Dupree), and Donations and Sponsorships (chaired by Sheldon Burton Webster). Each committee has an ambitious plan of action, all part of a larger, inter-locking plan to insure that the Alabama Writers' Forum can meet a modest goal of raising funds over three years to create an endowment covering at least five percent of the annual operating budget.

In addition, key programs of the Forum, such as the High School Literary Awards, will be permanently funded. Pre-campaign donations and pledges have already raised over 10 percent of the goal. Another goal is to broaden the membership and more than triple paying members to 2,000 readers and writers who believe in this important vision for Alabama.

The Alabama State Council on the Arts (ASCA) continues its generous support of the Forum as one of its lead partnership programs, but the time has come to renew our efforts to make the organization stronger. We must confirm that ASCA is correct in supporting this program for the people of Alabama. The Forum is a cornerstone of the arts in Alabama as it promotes Alabama writers, educates young writers, and cultivates Alabama's literary arts. Contracts with the Alabama Department of Youth Services to teach writing to incarcerated young people continue to be renewed. The membership continues to give generously.

Through this campaign, the Forum hopes to become a role model for other arts groups focused on strengthening the social fabric of Alabama and the nation. We can be a catalyst for change.



Philip Shirley is president of Godwin Group of Jackson, Mississippi, and a native Alabamian who is currently publishing his second novel.

Call for nominations for
Alabama's most prestigious award in literary arts

HARPER LEE AWARD FOR THE DISTINGUISHED ALABAMA WRITER 2005

The Alabama Writers' Forum invites nominations for the Harper Lee Award for the Distinguished Alabama Writer of 2005. The award will be made to a living, nationally recognized Alabama writer who has made a significant, life-long contribution to Alabama letters. The award carries a \$5,000 stipend and an original Frank Fleming bronze of the Monroeville Courthouse Clock Tower. The Harper Lee Award for 2005 will be presented with its sister award, the Eugene Current-Garcia Award for the Distinguished Alabama Scholar for 2005, at the "Writers' Symposium" in Monroeville, Alabama on May 6, 2005.

Nominations must be received by November 15, 2004. All nominations and all deliberations of the awards committee are confidential and final. Call the Forum office at 334-242-4076, ext. 233, for complete nomination guides or to inquire about the nomination process. Email: awf1@arts.state.al.us.

The annual Harper Lee Award for Alabama's Distinguished Writer and the annual Eugene Current-Garcia Award for the Distinguished Alabama Scholar are made possible through a generous grant from George and Eva Landegger. The Alabama Writers' Forum deeply honors the Landegger family's dedication to the literary arts and scholarship in Alabama.

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1998: Albert Murray

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2002: Mary Ward Brown

2003: Rodney Jones

2004: Sonia Sanchez

A Very Mysterious Weekend

The last weekend of every September is always an exciting time for the **Alabama Center for the Book** (ACFTB), but never before has it been quite this mysterious. Each year ACFTB celebrates writers, readers, and Alabama's literary culture with an author dinner held in conjunction with the **Telling Alabama's Stories** storytelling festival. This year's dinner, appropriately called **An Evening of Mystery**, will feature critically acclaimed Alabama mystery writers **Ace Atkins**, **Tim Dorsey**, and **Carolyn Haines**.

Currently in its third year, the annual dinner has been a tremendous success. Past honorees have included well-known authors Fannie Flagg and Homer Hickam. This year's event will highlight the dynamic work of At-

kins, Dorsey, and Haines. Their lives and careers, tied into the complex characters they create, will join under one roof for a night of suspense, intrigue, and drama. Also included in the program will be discussions on the authors' most recently published works, *Dirty South* (Atkins), *Cadillac Beach* (Dorsey), and *Hallowed Bones* (Haines). Don Noble will host the program.

An Evening of Mystery will begin with a cocktail reception followed by dinner at 7:00 P.M. The evening will take place at Whitley Hall on the campus of Troy University Montgomery.*

On Saturday at 10:00 A.M. the weekend continues with Telling Alabama's Stories, a spoken-word festival that promotes family, literacy, books, and reading. Featuring more

than a dozen tellers from across the state, the festival will focus on mysteries and legends native to Alabama. Tellers will perform under two tents in Kiwanis Park at Old Alabama Town, following a book signing and reception with Atkins, Dorsey, and Haines to start off the day.

Telling Alabama's Stories will also include children's activities, art, food, and games.

Our very mysterious weekend is sponsored by the Alabama Public Library Service, the Alabama State Council on the Arts, Capitol Book and News, The Alabama Writers' Forum, and donations to the ACFTB.

***Tickets for An Evening of Mystery can be purchased through the Alabama Center for the book at 334-844-4946.**

Writers and artists are natural ambassadors

This was Nice, France, in a wonderful gallery right across the street from the Mediterranean, in the heart of the Cote d'Azur. I was standing by politely, being introduced as part of the Alabama contingent, when suddenly I found myself hauled up to the podium at the insistence of the representative of the Mayor of Nice.

Very familiar with art openings, very familiar with speaking to writers groups, but completely unfamiliar with addressing a group of French arts aficionados, I did my best. In English I said to the 300 or so guests, "I bring you greetings from the writers and artists of Alabama. We are proud of our Alabama artist, Nall, and we hope to have more exchanges between our two regions—between Nice and Alabama—soon!" They applauded in a friendly way, and I moved aside. Later I learned they had introduced me as a minister of culture from Alabama—a title I will gladly claim only if every other writer and artist from Alabama traveling abroad also agrees to be identified this way.

Why is it important for us to talk about ourselves as writers when we would rather blend into the woodwork, or just stand back and do what writers do best, *watch*, when we have the chance to represent our state? Because we have the chance to make a difference.

In my case, I had agreed to take part in a multi-level project with Nall and Frederick Altman, a photographer, writer, and museum director in Carros, France. At Nall's invitation I had also written text for the catalogue of his show, "Nall Paysages" that was opening on this day in Nice, at the Galerie de la Marine. At the same time, Altman was opening two expositions of his black and white photographs taken in what he calls "Nall's Alabama," in 2002, at two small galleries in Nice's art district, the Galerie du Château and Galerie Jean-Renoir.

Other Alabamians who contributed to the "Nall Paysages" catalogue are Mark Johnson, director of the Montgomery Museum of Fine Art, and Georgine Clarke, director of the Alabama Artists Gallery at the Alabama State Council on the Arts. My contribution had to do with Nall's *southernness*, and how his reading of writers like Flannery O'Connor, Truman Capote, and James Baldwin influenced his art. This journey took me back into short stories and novels I had not read in

years. Although I was writing about visual art, I was enriched as a writer throughout the entire assignment.

Earlier on this day I had had an opportunity to lunch with regional arts representatives who blessedly spoke some English. They expressed great interest in writer exchanges between Nice and Alabama, and promised to send the Forum some contemporary Nicoise poets' books. (Later I learned that the Nice Festival of the Book had been taking place that same week.)

What this writing assignment and the subsequent trip to France to see the show—a soulful rendering of landscapes from Alabama to Turkey to India to Italy—reminded me was that once we put our words out into the world, we are part of that world. Simple being there gave me the opportunity to talk with arts administrators about possibilities for exchanges.

This year I hope that our Alabama arts community will investigate this and other viable international exchanges for our writers and artists. During a time when our friends around the world are baffled by America's actions, to paraphrase President Jimmy Carter, we have an opportunity to speak, person to person, to our international brothers and sisters – as artists, as writers, in the landscapes that present themselves and through the doors which open for us.

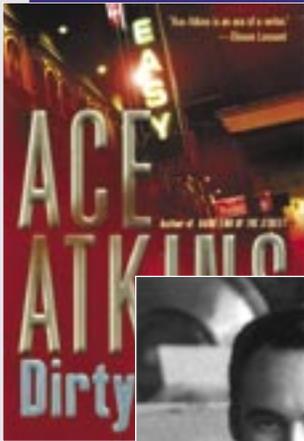
International relations is not such a daunting concept for writers and artists for we are natural ambassadors, and our work tells the human story. As the 2004 Olympic opening ceremony in Athens suggested, we all spring from the same source, and we are all participants in history. Let our words be shared, and exchanged, even if we must navigate new terrain, moving out of ourselves into a new, unfamiliar world.

—Jeanie Thompson



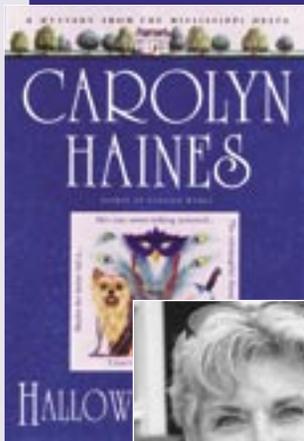
CHARLOTTE OTTO-BRUC

AWF Executive Director Jeanie Thompson told guests at "Nall Paysages" at the Galerie de la Marine in Nice, France, on June 23, "I bring you greetings from the writers and artists of Alabama."



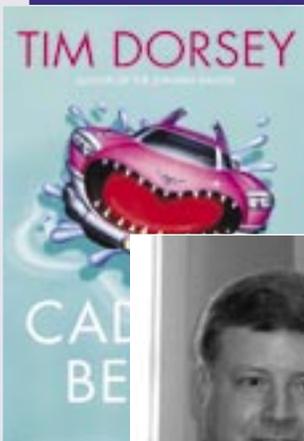
ACE ATKINS
Dirty South

"Ace Atkins is an ace of a writer."
—Elmore Leonard



CAROLYN HAINES
Hallowed Bones

"...couldn't be more Southern if it were packaged with grits."
—Kirkus Review



TIM DORSEY
Cadillac Beach

"Dorsey crafts a kaleidoscopic puzzle of implausible parts and pulls it together in a dazzlingly clever finish."
—Tampa Tribune



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