

The Journal of the Alabama Writers' Forum

FIRST DRAFT

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VALERIE GRIBBEN
Alabama Young Writer

FY 04

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Editor's Note



Jay Lamar

Dear Readers,

This issue inaugurates a new year of *First Draft*. Now in its tenth year of publication, *First Draft* has changed and changed again over the years, often in response to your interests and input. From a one-color slightly-larger-than-a-newsletter format to its current four-color forty-eight page form, *First Draft* has expanded its content and its readership.

Some changes are dictated by forces outside our control, and this year budget issues loom large. In responding to this force, *First Draft* will be, for the foreseeable future, a twice annual publication. Losing two issues a year is not a decision we would make, left to our own devices, and we hope that the reduction in issues is a temporary state.

But in the meantime, we will continue to do the best job we can of covering news, publications, and events. Since the publication schedule limits the time-sensitive announcements we can include, we hope you will check the Forum's website—www.writersforum.org--for information on readings, conferences, and book signings. Please post your calendar items there.

Feature articles, profiles, and longer reviews will be a focus of this new incarnation of *First Draft*. Elizabeth Via Brown's article on books on tape, and Charles Ghigna's "I Hate Poetry" essay are examples.

We'd love to know what you're interested in reading and writing about. *First Draft* is a publication for Alabama writers, and our fondest wish is that it also be a place to read Alabama writers. Don't hang back. We need you.

One last change: AWF Executive Director Jeanie Thompson's regular column will now be the Back Page. Don't miss her comments.

All best,
Jay Lamar
Editor

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

In This Issue

AWF Board Member Departs



Aileen Kilgore Henderson

As author, advocate, and Alabama Writers' Forum board member, Aileen Kilgore Henderson has been a vital contributor to our literary world in many contexts. As she leaves the AWF board, we want to thank her for her years of hard work and steady support of the Forum.

Henderson's first book for young readers, *The Summer of the Bonepile Monster*, won the Milkweed Prize for Children's Literature and the Alabama Library Association Award. Her second book for young readers, *The Monkey Thief*, was selected for the New York Public Library's list of 1998 Books for the Teen Age. Her third book, *The Treasure of Panther Creek* made the Sunshine State Young Readers List. Kilgore also has two books of letters. The first, *Stateside Soldier: Life in the Women's Army Corps, 1944-45*, is based on letters she wrote and received while serving as a WAC during World War II. The second, *Tenderfoot Teacher: Letters from the Big Bend, 1952-54*, includes letters she wrote as a teacher in the Big Bend region of Texas.

With a new novel for middle-grade readers, *Hard Times for Jake Smith*, due out in April from Milkweed, Kilgore will continue to be busy. The Alabama Writers' Forum owes a debt of gratitude for her many contributions to Alabama's literary world, as well as for the pleasure of her good company. Very best of luck, Aileen, with *Hard Times for Jake Smith* and the many books still to come.

AWF Board Member Named to Prestigious Shakespeare Society



Linda Henry Dean

Linda Henry Dean, director of education for the Alabama Shakespeare Festival in Montgomery, has been named an officer of the Shakespeare Theatre Association of America. STAA provides a forum for the artistic and managerial leadership of theatres

whose central activity is the production of Shakespeare's plays and is a clearinghouse for issues and methods of work, resources, and information. STAA also acts as an advocate for Shakespearean productions and training in North America. STAA membership includes seventy-four theatres, representing diverse types (indoor, outdoor, year-round, seasonal, university-affiliated), with wide-ranging budgets (\$25,000 to \$27,250,000) and Equity as well as non-Equity companies

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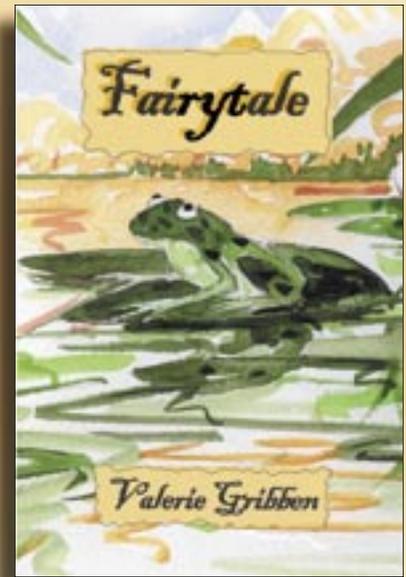
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Interview With A Young Writer

VALERIE GRIBBEN is the precocious author of *Fairytale* (June Bug Books/NewSouth, 2003), a novel written in the summer before her junior year of high school and published during her senior year.



In the eleventh grade, she met Harper Lee after placing second in a *To Kill a Mockingbird* essay contest sponsored by the University of Alabama. Other writing honors have included first-place prizes in fiction awarded by the Alabama Writers' Forum, Huntingdon College, and the F. Scott & Zelda Fitzgerald Museum. Valerie's academic honors are also extensive: Salutatorian of LAMP Magnet High school, National Merit Semifinalist, AP Scholar, and selection for the Sewanee Award for Excellence in Writing from the University of the South.

Valerie's father, Dr. Alan Gribben, a nationally recognized Mark Twain scholar, department head of English at Auburn University Montgomery, where he has taught American literature since 1991. We asked him to interview his daughter Valerie about her writing life.

Alan: I remember seeing you going over your book manuscript again and again each night after you had finished your schoolwork. All in all, how many times would you say that you reread, revised, and polished the manuscript of *Fairytale*, before and after its acceptance?

Valerie: Honestly, I lost count. There were at least ten or twelve stages of revision, I would say.

Alan: What are some of your favorite literary classics at this stage in your education?

Valerie: This question has been on my mind a lot because of all those college admission essays. Right now, I'm partial to Shakespeare since my English class is memorizing Hamlet's soliloquy. [Valerie begins to recite; I clear my throat.] In years past, I've read Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Scarlet Letter*, Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*, and Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*. F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* will probably remain my all-time favorite novel.

Alan: Your book has the air of the Grimm Brothers' fairy tales—set in a timeless, unspecified, heavily forested place populated by trolls and elves, princes and princesses, wizards and fairies, and ruled by magical spells and supernatural curses. How important were these stories in your imagination as you grew up?

Valerie: While being read fairy tales as a young child, and eventually when reading the Grimm stories myself, I wondered exactly how an independent girl with a modern outlook might function in situations where virtually anything could instantly either entrap or enrich her.

Alan: Did the publisher have any misgivings about accepting the manuscript of someone who had written it at the ripe age of sixteen, before she had even earned her driver license?

Valerie: Oh, it certainly gave them pause. But the publishers said they responded to the submitted manuscript itself, and tried to focus on whether it had the necessary elements to attract booksellers and buyers. My mother took a picture of me leaping for joy outside the publisher's office on Court Street with a publishing contract clutched in my hand.

Alan: You surprised me by dedicating your first book to me. Why did you choose me for this honor?

Valerie: When you put me to sleep every night during my childhood and early teens with stories—especially those by the Grimm Brothers, but also the ones drawn from dozens of anthologies whose contents ranged from Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's clever plots to Guy de Maupassant's bizarre twists and O. Henry's patented endings—and followed up these with the travel writings of Paul Theroux and Bill Bryson, you helped me hear the intonations of hundreds of voices and visit the scenes of marvelous happenings. You read me a library. When I considered a dedication page, I

couldn't think of anyone else who had done more for my creative imagination.

Alan: Have the schools you attended—Montgomery Academy, Baldwin Junior High School, LAMP Academic Magnet High School—influenced your writing in significant ways? For example, who are some of the teachers who helped shape your prose style?

Valerie: Every one of my wonderful English teachers has had an influence on my prose as well as my appetite for good literature, but I have to single out Dr. Renee Ferguson, whose tenth-grade English class suddenly awakened all of my literary impulses and gave me confidence in my ability to forge appropriate “voices” for various writing tasks. Before her class I was primarily interested in drawing and painting, but after her class I felt more strongly “called” to express myself with words.

I finished my novel before I began writing for literary prizes. Mrs. Diann Frucci, my junior English teacher, kept a bulletin board full of literary contests, and I spent time looking for topics that interested me.

Alan: Why didn't you illustrate the cover yourself, since you draw and paint in your spare time?

Valerie: For some strange reason I found that I couldn't get the perspective I wanted when I tried to paint my own book cover, so I turned to my Baldwin Junior High School art instructor, Jim Gunter. Maybe when you have already described things in words it is difficult to realize them again in another medium. I showed him my awkward sketches. He asked, “Is there going to be anything special about this frog in your story?” I said, “Well...he talks.” When I saw Mr. Gunter's painting of Prince, I was thrilled. Prince had exactly the right expression.

Alan: Why did you make the brother-sister relationship in *Fairytale* so filled with tensions and tumultuous emotions? Is this really the way you perceive sibling situations?

Valerie (laughing): You reared Walter and me. Shouldn't you know by now? Some readers have told me that I should have given a more idealized portrait of sibling relationships, but girls who actually have brothers tell me that my repartee pretty much hits the mark. My

own brother and I have always been friends and allies, but there are moments of conflict and anger as well as resolution and bonding in every such relationship. We are only human. But remember, in this case the characters Marianne and Robin did not grow up together. In fact, they scarcely knew one another. So it seemed natural that there would be some bumps in their road to mutual understanding.

Alan: You scared me a little with your initial portrayal of Marianne's cruel, insensitive parents in the opening chapters. Thank you for getting Irene and me off the hook in the latter part of the book so that readers won't think that we were your models for those hardhearted tyrants, Neville and Beatrice!

Valerie: Who says? No, no, just kidding, I promise.

Alan: Have you done many readings and book-signings, or does your school homework preclude this?

Valerie: You're being a little disingenuous here, since you were the one who has accompanied me to most of these. I'll never forget the excitement of the huge SEBA (Southeast Booksellers Association) convention last September. Although Mom went with me to the WTSU-FM National Public Radio fund-raising interview in Troy, where signed copies of *Fai-*

rytale were donated as prizes for telephoned pledges, you took me to sign books at the Little Professor Bookstore in Birmingham. Both of you were at book signings at the Barnes & Noble and Capitol Book & News in Montgomery before Christmas. Other than that, I have had to turn down most invitations and requests. The senior year at LAMP pretty much takes up all my evenings and weekends. plus I am serving as Student Body President, which means that I need to attend lots of meetings and events. I am looking forward to participating in Alabama Bound! at the Birmingham Public Library this April. It's a book fair celebrating Alabama authors and publishers.

Alan: Final question: Why did you seem to conclude the *Fairytale* with loose ends? Is there a sequel in the works?

Valerie: There is, if my homework would ever let up for a few days. It looks like I will have to wait until this summer after my senior year before resuming work on the sequel, which is about twenty per cent along.



Alan and Valerie Gribben

I'm addicted to books-on-tape. It's a luxury to be read to aloud and is almost as decadent as a whole chocolate bar or as indulgent as a day at a spa. Hmm...what if those treats were combined?

Just by plugging my ears with headphones, I can be in the action of Patricia Cornwell's latest murder case or root for the heroines as they prove their independence and snag the men they love in novels by Nora Roberts or Barbara Taylor Bradford. When I need a boost in my mental health, I drop in a tape by life coach Cheryl Richardson, align my chakras with Caroline Myss, or appreciate my simple abundance with Sarah Ban Breathnach.

AUDIO BOOKS

by Elizabeth Via Brown

A friend, to whom reading is so pleasurable that she puts it before everything else on her to-do list, introduced me to audio books. When I said I was too busy to read non-required material, she said, "So, read audio books when you drive." A simple solution, to be sure, but even as expert as I am at doing more than one thing at once, I had doubts as to whether I could concentrate on driving and reading at the same time. But, a wondrous thing happened – not only did my driving improve, so did my attitude, and rush hour traffic no longer was a time to fume over cars following too closely or drag racers zipping in and out of lanes, but a time to catch up on my reading. If it worked in my car, could it also be an anti-stress technique at home? Soon, I was walking around with a player strapped to my belt and earphones dangling from my ears and books became my companion on my walks through the neighborhood.

When I first discovered audio books at the Montgomery City-County Public Library, where I am now a member of the board of trustees, I only borrowed abridged productions; I had a fear of committing to more than four or five tapes. Now, I head straight to the full-length versions, and the more numerous the tapes, the better I like the book. Almost always, I check out the five-book limit and, on the way home, I decide which to read first by listening to snippets from each set of tapes.

Before I agree to listen to the entire book, the reader has to meet my high standards of narration; there can be no hint of a whine, a squeak, or irritating tick. Bless her heart, Katherine Graham died the same week I was listening to her read her autobiography, and I felt duty bound to finish the recording, but the click that could have been false teeth or a dry mouth nearly drove me crazy. I remember nothing else about her book.

For me, a Southern saga can only be read in an authentic drawl. If Ireland is the setting, the accent should have a musical lilt. Cajun spice should be sprinkled into a book about Louisiana, and a book about Maine must be

read with a New Englander's propensity for hard vowels. My favorites are the books that include music or are read by more than one narrator.

"Well, it's the hardest thing I've ever done," said Jill Conner Browne, talking about narrating her own books, *The Sweet Potato Queen's Book of Love*, and its sequels, *God Save the Sweet Potato Queens* and *The Sweet Potato Queens' Big-Ass Cookbook (and Financial Planner)*.

"They plop you down in a tiny booth that's not air-conditioned," she said, "and there's this guy on the other side of a window who tells you when to start and stop reading. You can't pop your p's and if your stomach growls, you have to start all over."

The microphone, said Browne, picks up every little sound—the air-conditioner compressor, blinks in fluorescent lights, even clicks in your throat when you need a drink of water. While most books are recorded in big city studios, Browne considers herself fortunate to have had a producer from Random House come to her at home in Jackson, MS. Reading page by page, it took her two 10-hour days in a borrowed local studio to record each of her books.

Before the reading began, Browne explained, the production team transcribed her books into large print on white paper in double-spaced lines. At the beginning of each session, she placed six pages in front of her on the table and read from one to another in an easy, continuous manner. She can read between 25 to 30 pages an hour, she said with pride, which is more than the record held by the Redgrave sisters—Lynn and Vanessa. For her excellence in narration, Browne has received an award from *Publisher's Weekly*.



Jill Conner Browne (left) and Daniel Wallace (above).

"I write as I talk," she said, "and with a public speaking background and experience, I read as I speak."

One must first have talent to be a successful narrator, said Bill West, the audio production specialist with the National Library Service for the Blind and Physically Handicapped, a division of the Library of Congress in Washington, D. C. A hands-on producer, West manages every aspect of audio recordings from the design of the studio, to the type of equipment used and the selection of narrators.

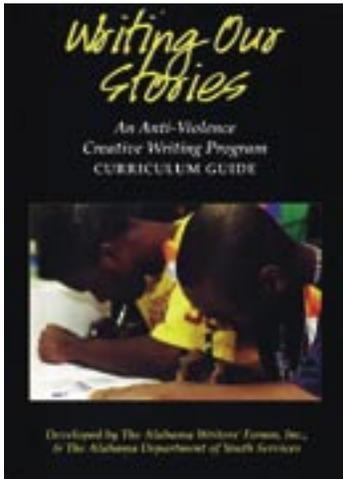
"Narrating a book is an exhausting task," said West. "A natural talent for reading aloud is a God-given gift; if you weren't born with it, you can't get it at a school or college."

Voice, speech, language and skill are the four basic factors used to select the narrators who record books and magazines for the Library of Congress. It's important for a narrator to enhance the listener's imagination without replacing it, said West. The voice is an instrument, and it can be trained and perfected to produce recorded books, but a successful reader must have a natural sensitivity to the meanings of words and phrases and the ability to recognize nuances in the written word.

Narrators who can accurately pronounce words and phrases are the key to attracting and keeping avid audio book users, said Claudia Howard, executive producer of Recorded Books, Inc. Located in Manhattan, her company has seven studios where more than 700 books are recorded annually, using almost universally professionally trained speakers and actors familiar with the technique of speaking dialogue. The staff of the research department provides correct pronunciations of proper names, foreign words and phrases appropriate to the style and period of the text, said Howard, then post-production often takes at least twice as long to proof, edit and polish the final master recording.

Rarely do authors read their own works, said Howard. Occasionally, self-help and inspiration books, autobiographies and humorous, first-person accounts, like Browne's queenly how-to guide, are read by their authors, she said. Many readers like to hear these subjects in the author's own voice.

**TEACH
CREATIVE WRITING
THAT TOUCHES THE
HEARTS OF YOUNG
PEOPLE**



The Alabama Writers' Forum offers the "Writing Our Stories" *curriculum guide* for teachers interested in following the highly successful path of Alabama's outstanding juvenile justice and the arts partnership.

Collected from five years of practice at three campuses of the Alabama Department of Youth Services School System, these **thirty-one lessons in poetry, prose and personal narrative** are designed for **grades 7-12** in a teacher-friendly format. Based on samples from leading writers, the lessons are presented step-by-step. Student writing examples are given, and an extensive bibliography and other resources are included. \$35, plus \$5 s/h.

To order, contact
The Alabama Writers' Forum at
awf1@arts.state.al.us
or call 334 242 4076, ext. 233.

Daniel Wallace, author of *Big Fish* on which the movie of the same name is based, auditioned to narrate his own book, but the job went to Tom Stechschulte, whose large, booming voice matches the bigness of Wallace's story of tall tales. Not being selected didn't bruise his feelings, he said; he is just glad to get people to read books—his and other's—anyway possible. Although he approved of the adaptation, he has not listened to *Big Fish* on audio.

"I don't watch myself on television, and I have no interest in hearing my book read out loud," said Wallace.

In the 25 years Recorded Books has been in business, said Howard, the interest in audio books has "exploded." Seeing-impaired people were the primary customers back then, she said, but now people who read books-on-tape transcend all social, cultural and economic lines. A wide assortment of mystery, romance, inspirational, self-help, business and fiction is included in titles the company sells and rents through its catalogs and website. Recorded Books, like other large audio book suppliers, has special purchase plans for libraries.

"The audio industry mirrors what's being read in print, with best sellers and murder mysteries leading the pack," said Howard. "It takes skill to know which books to purchase for audio."

In the 10 years she has been with the Montgomery City/Country Public Library, interest in audio books has tripled, said Gertie Scott, supervisor of the media department. Expanding from a few rolling carts of books-on-

tape parked in a corner of the lobby, the audio department is housed in a small room of floor-to-ceiling shelves crammed with audio books. Until recently, when a few more carts were secured, the overflow of titles was stacked on the floor.

Readers of audio books range in ages and races and include truck drivers borrowing books for their long haul trips, to professional men catching up on the latest business strategy women reading best-sellers or looking for inspirational and personal achievement advice, said Scott. Audio books appeal to young readers, too, as well as to students preparing for school reports.

In an age when multi-tasking is necessary, listening to a book leaves hands free for an activity or repetitive task, like crafting, said Howard. Books-on-tape appeal to avid readers, said Howard, who don't have time for traditional reading.

"When I get home at night," said Gordon Martin, vice president of Alabama Power Company in Montgomery and the father of four young children, "I read Dr. Seuss or other kids' books."

With so little time for his own pleasure reading, he got hooked on audio books while driving to and from the home office in Birmingham. Although he names James Lee Burke as his favorite author, Martin is adhering to his New Year's resolution of broadening his reading horizons. Recently, he finished a biography of Abraham Lincoln before tackling Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*.

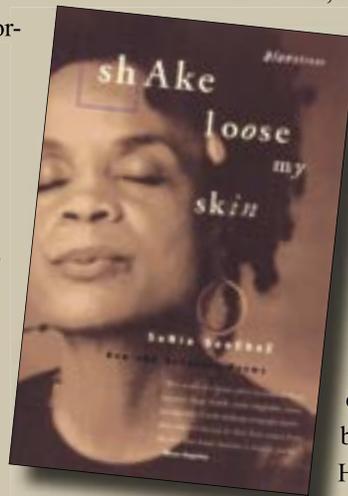
Elizabeth Via Brown is a freelance writer living in Montgomery.

A Southern Sister Comes Home

by Jacqueline Wood

How can such power, such gripping words erupt from such a tiny figure? It's a question, I'm sure, that I am not alone in asking. I had already read the poetry of Sonia Sanchez long before the hearing of it, but even the emotive experience on the page could not equal hearing her read her own works. Or rather perform them. Rhythmic, tumbling words and sounds come forth as almost mesmerizing drama when Sonia Sanchez reads her work; this is one of many reasons why she is honored and awarded throughout the world. And for the first time, she is being recognized by her own. The Alabama Writers' Forum has chosen Sanchez as its 2004 recipient of the Harper Lee Distinguished Writer's Award. According to Sanchez, this is her first-ever formal recognition as an Alabama writer.

Her selection is well deserved. Professor Sanchez is an acclaimed poet/dramatist and civil rights activist who has received numerous national awards and has international visibility. Known most widely for her poetry, Sanchez has published more than sixteen books of poetry, including *Home Coming* (Broadside Press 1969); *We a BaddDDD People* (Broadside Press 1970); *Blues Book for Blue Black Magical Women* (Broadside Press 1974); *Under a Soprano Sky* (Africa World Press 1987); *Wounded in the House of a Friend* (Beacon Press 1995); *Does Your House Have Lions?* (Beacon 1997); and *Shake Loose My Skin: New and Selected Poems* (Beacon Press 1999). She has also written six plays, and several pieces of fiction. In 1985 she received the American Book Award for her poetry collection, *Homegirls and Handgrenades* (Thunder's Mouth Press 1984). Recently, at the annual Harlem Book Fair, *The Quarterly Black Review* honored her with the impressive Phyllis Wheatley Award at The Schomburg Center in New



York City. She has also received the prestigious Robert A. Frost Award, the Lindback Award for Distinguished Teaching, and the Patricia Lucretia Mott Award, all of which acknowledge her contributions to African American literature and activism. She has lectured at more than 500 venues around the world.

Born and raised for much of her early life in Birmingham, Sanchez remains committed to her southern roots. Several of her family members, including her aunt and her mother, are buried in Birmingham, and she makes pilgrimages to the city whenever she can. In a recent interview, Ms. Sanchez described herself as “a voice from the South.... Since I have come out of the South, I have memories that inform my work...all of those memories I use as I write.”

Sanchez's important connection with the South, in particular Alabama, has compelled her to incorporate the role of the South in her drama especially. She, in fact, has written part one of a dramatic trilogy investigating the impact of the New South on returning migratory blacks.

In addition, Sanchez has formally acknowledged the significance Alabama and Birmingham have played in her creative life by recently agreeing to donate all of her papers to the University of Alabama at Birmingham's Mervyn H. Sterne Library. Her interest is in seeing that her work may be accessible to the community from which she began her

life journey.

Sanchez's accomplishments remind us of the enduring value of committed writers as members and treasured voices of our communities. This homegrown southern sister-poet merits our praise and our welcome. And we give it freely.

Jacqueline Wood is an assistant professor of English at the University of Alabama at Birmingham.

i HATE POETRY

by Charles Ghigna

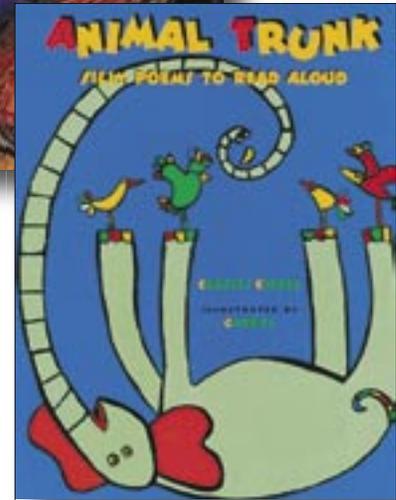
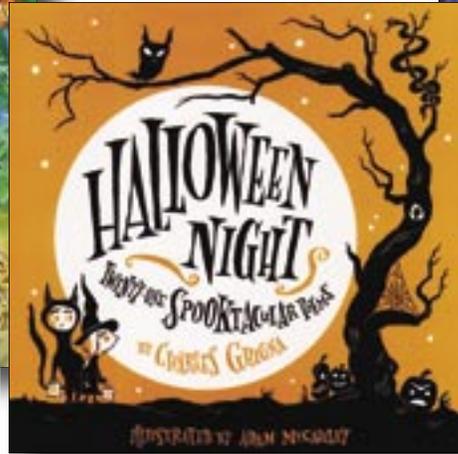
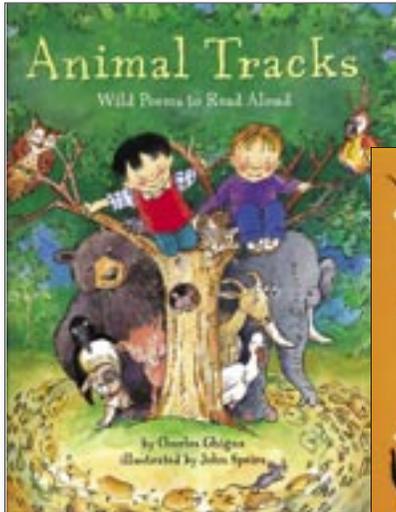


Charles Ghigna's path has been a circle of sorts: from writing poems as a child to writing poems for children. The Birmingham resident's work has appeared in *Highlights*, *Cricket*, and *Ranger Rick*, as well as *The New York Times*, *Rolling Stone*, and *The Wall Street Journal*. Ghigna is also the author of more than thirty books. His books for adults include *Speaking in Tongues: New & Selected Poems* (University of West Alabama/Livingston Press, 1994) and *Haiku* (River City Press, 2001).

Without question, Ghigna's most prolific outpouring has been for young readers. Last year alone saw the publication of *Halloween Night* (Running Press), *A Fury of Motion: Poems for Boys* (Boyd's Mill Press), and *My Country: Children Talk About America* (Crane Hill).



From *Animal Tracks* by Charles Ghigna, illustrated by John Speirs.



This year, Ghigna will publish *If You Were My Valentine* (Simon & Schuster) and *Animal Tracks: Wild Poems to Read Aloud* (Abrams). Excerpts from *Animal Tracks*, illustrated by the acclaimed artist John Speirs, appear with the following essay. “I Hate Poetry” is about opening the door to the magic of poetry. The essay first appeared on Booksense.Com, and we are grateful for the author’s permission to reprint it here.

“I hate poetry.” I’ve heard that a million times. I used to say it myself.

As a teenager, I thought poetry was for sissies and grandmothers. I didn’t want any part of it. I was only interested in cars, sports, and girls—not necessarily in that order. I thought poetry was something I had to agonizingly memorize and embarrassingly recite in front of the class. Something we had to study, analyze, and write essays about. Something we had to take tests on. Something whose meanings only teachers and poets understood. I thought poetry had no place in my life. I was wrong.

“Show, don’t tell.” I learned that from a teacher. “A poem should not mean, but be.” I learned that from Archibald McLeish. I learned that just like a good poem, the meaning cannot be told, it must be shown.

I was in high school when a teacher finally showed me the truth about poetry. He invited us to write poems from the inside out. When we read poems from our textbooks, he did not tell us the meaning, he invited us to

tell him what the poem meant to us. Poems are like that. They invite us in, show us around, hope we enjoyed the visit.

We always left his class with that joy, with a new sense of discovery, of seeing the world and ourselves from new points of view, of wanting to express ourselves freely on paper in new ways.

I always try to remember that feeling whenever I write my poems and whenever I talk about poetry with young people and teachers.

Teachers often ask, “How do you get ‘em hooked on poetry when they say they ‘hate it?’” I had that same question in mind when I was a teacher. I always wished I had a book of poems that I could whip out and hand to my students who avoided poetry like the plague.

If we writers, educators, and parents cannot interest our children in the reading and writing of poetry during their teen years, we have probably lost them to the joy and wonder of poetry for the rest of their lives.

Poet John Ciardi once said that he wished he had written a book of poems for boys who hate poetry. My poet-friend X. J. Kennedy reminded me of Ciardi’s wish. My 14-year-old son, Chip, reminded me of it as well. I knew I had to face that challenge, that reward. I knew I had to write that book for the boy I once was, for the son I now have, for the kids who still say, “I hate poetry.”

HUIE INSPIRES SNEAD CONFERENCE



The annual William Bradford Huie/Alabama Collection event on April 18-20 at Snead State Community College focuses on Alabama literary heritage and contemporary Alabama arts.

The theme for 2004, "Women Journalists of Alabama," is derived from an unfinished sequel to Huie's 1975 novel *In the Hours of Night*. This sequel, *A Woman to Be Remembered*, featured fictional Janet O'Barr, female reporter.

Huie, one of Alabama's bestselling authors, also had a long, distinguished career as a reporter. He contributed articles to most of the major magazines of his time. In addition, he was co-editor of "Longines Chronoscope," a television program based in New York City. He was also editor-publisher of the national magazine *The American Mercury*.

The 2004 event will begin with an Afternoon of Art, Music, and Literature. **Kathryn Tucker Windham** will be featured. **John Solomon Sandridge**, who illustrated Windham's *The Bridal Wreath Bush*, will have art on exhibit, including all of the original illustrations for the book. **Dr. Delton Alford**, nationally recognized music scholar, will speak on gospel music in society and direct a choir performance.

The Monday schedule begins with an historical perspective of women journalists of Alabama, followed by Kathryn Tucker Windham discussing

her legendary career. A panel of women who are currently working in both television and newspaper will examine the conditions that women face. **Lisa Washington** of Huntsville's CBS 19 and **Brooke Smith** of Birmingham's NBC 13 will present the point of view of young women in television. **Laranda Nichols** (*Huntsville Times*), **Deirdre Coakley** (*Gadsden Times*), and **Linda Quigley** (Belmont College journalism faculty) will discuss the newspapers.

On Monday evening, **Rheta Grimsley-Johnson** will present the perspective of a currently working woman journalist from the point of view of a syndicated columnist. She will speak again on Tuesday morning, followed by a panel discussion of the Huie family and the founding of the *Cullman Banner*.

Scholars **Ed Williams**, **Bert Hitchcock**, **Don Noble**, and **Wayne Greenhaw** will be leading the discussions. All programs are open to the public without charge.

Martha Huie, the widow of William Bradford Huie, will participate in the programs. She was head of the Art Department at Snead State in the 1970's. She and Huie maintained a home in Marshall County.

For more information on the activities, see www.snead.edu.

The program is being co-sponsored by the Alabama Humanities Foundation, a state program of the National Endowment for the Humanities.

From top: Rheta Grimsley-Johnson, Lisa Washington, Dr. Delton Alford, Deirdre Coakley, Kathryn Tucker Windham, and Ed Williams

Good-Night, Ms. O'Barr, Wherever You Are

I tried but could never locate Janet O'Barr, a fascinating and exceptional television news journalist of the early 1950s, a pioneer in what was then a man's world. Strange as it surely seems to today's audiences, this bright, talented, ambitious young woman was unusual in the news broadcasting industry half a century ago. What stories she could tell about her career!

I never had actually met Janet, because she was nowhere around by the time I met Bill Huie in 1975, but I knew about her, because he told me. I knew how close he and Janet had been, personally and professionally, from the time she was straight out of college and came to ask advice and help from him in getting a start in journalism. Her first job was behind the scenes, as a researcher for *Time* magazine, and she proved herself in the print field, while her aim from the beginning was to break into television. I knew some of her experiences in "clawing her way up," because, when I knew Bill, he was also relating these in his current writing, which would be the sequel to his 1975 novel *In the Hours of Night*. In fact, Janet is referenced in his working title: "A Woman to be Remembered: A Political Novel by William Bradford Huie."

My husband Bill died in 1986 without this being published, and Janet disappeared into the past for me after that. Until now. Now I wanted to find her. I wanted students and others to hear her tell her story and be inspired in their own lives and work.

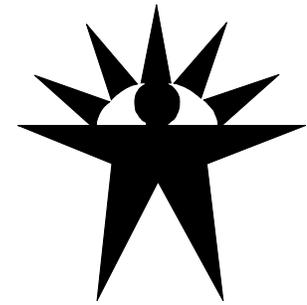
No luck. No sign of Janet and, anyway, even if Janet were still living, she would be a very old woman and possibly not able to make a public appearance. Be sensible, I told myself. But I couldn't forget. Many times the long-ago Jimmy Durante message, with which he ended every one of his stage appearances: "And goodnight, Mrs. Calabash, wherever you are," echoed in my imagination, with "Ms. O'Barr" substituted.

Then I remembered Bill's old unpublished manuscript, found it, and looked excitedly for clues of Janet. There she was! Bill had recorded in his prologue the 22-year-old Janet declaring that, as a journalist and as a human being, she wanted "—every day of my life to try to enhance my feeling of well-being, heighten my self-respect, and avoid boredom. And I'm going to try to help everybody else I can reach to live and feel a little better." To this Bill Huie answered, through the voice of his protagonist, Cordell Hull Castleton, "And I want to learn all I can about the world I'm living in, write about it, and fight about it. In particular, I want to fight those Americans who become powerful while being wrong, inadequate, or dishonest."

Eventually marrying, Janet and Cord were together, active journalists through more than one U.S. presidency, the Bay of Pigs, Vietnam, assassinations of the Kennedys and Dr. King, and other events of the period. By the time I had read to the end of the eleven existing chapters, I knew why I had never had any chance of finding Janet. On her last film assignment, a direct broadcast from Vietnam, not about the war but a human story about the Vietnamese people caught in the crossfire, Janet had contracted a new, incurable liver virus. A few months later, on December 3, 1963, Cord had buried her near his father in the rugged mountains of east Tennessee. "The old, arthritic preacher, —Cord's grandfather—who had loved Janet, said: "Janet O'Barr Castleton was the first American woman journalist to die in a war in Southeast Asia. She is, therefore, a woman to be remembered. May she rest in peace."

But-but-but—Janet was not real, you sputter? Only a fictional character in a book, you say? Can we be sure of that? Are you sure of it? I'm not. And how much can that really, really matter anyway?

—Martha Huie



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The Centennial Celebration of

“THE BANK OF WISDOM AND KNOWLEDGE”

By Tamara Singleton

The centennial anniversary of the Eufaula Carnegie Library, to be celebrated this spring, is an occasion to look both to the past and to the future. Our legacy began with a gift—a gift inspired by another’s generosity to a young boy too poor to purchase his own books. Andrew Carnegie was touched by the generosity of a now unknown gentleman in his community who allowed children to borrow books from his own small library. Carnegie never forgot the knowledge these books provided to him in his youth. Because of this, an older and very successful Andrew Carnegie began a legacy of learning that he contributed to his entire life, enabling many institutions, libraries, and universities to profit from his foresight and generosity.

In his lifetime, Carnegie gave more than \$350 million to various cultural and educational establishments, many of which bear his name. His largest single gift was for \$125 million in 1911 to establish the Carnegie Corporation in New York. One of his beneficiaries was the Tuskegee Institute, now Tuskegee University. Andrew Carnegie funded almost 1700 libraries in the United States and Great Britain. Carnegie’s generosity encouraged a definite acceptance of the idea of a community library supported by local taxes. Carnegie’s example inspired countless local philanthropists to begin supporting libraries in their own communities. Currently, there are approximately 9,000 public libraries in the United States; 772 of these are functioning Carnegie Libraries, and two of these are in Alabama—in Eufaula and Union Springs.

In February of 1903, Carnegie offered the city of Eufaula a \$10,000 donation to build a public library,

with the condition that \$1,000 dollars per year would be given by the city in support for the library.

In only a few days the city council had accepted Carnegie’s offer, stating the library would, “enhance the value of citizenship and result in good to all the people.” A library committee was appointed to select a building site for the library, to solicit subscriptions, and to handle correspondence with Carnegie. In June of that year, the committee secured a deed to the Hart lot on the corner of Eufaula Avenue and St. James Place. The talented local architect Charles A. Stephens designed the building plans, but passed away before the building was completed. A special feature to be designed for this building was a large auditorium to use for various functions and assemblies.

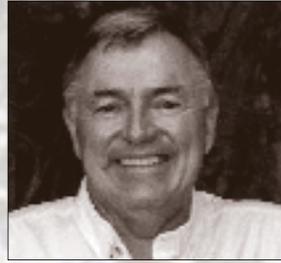
In September of 1903, Algernon Blair of Montgomery began work clearing the ground for the landmark building. Volumes of books and periodicals began arriving shortly thereafter, and the city council donated a piano for the auditorium. The first board of trustees was formed consisting of seven prominent members of the community; J.B. Whitlock was the first president of the board.

On May 6, 1904, the doors of Eufaula Carnegie Library were opened to an enthusiastic community. The *Eufaula Times and News* reported that it would be a “fine place to while away the hours...wrestling with the bright minds of the world.” The completed building was quite magnificent, impressively done in red brick and pressed yellow trim. The formal entrance has double doors with an arched stained glass transom; above the transom is a yellow brick arch with keystone.

A bannistered balcony embraces the entrance and leaded glass windows lend their splendor at sunset. Many of the books were donated by the generous citizens of Eufaula. At the end of the first year, the library had collected 4,789 books, with 1500 visitors and over 7,000 volumes in circulation. By 1908, the library was a popular location for all age groups of the citizens of Eufaula.

In 1990, an addition was added to broaden the area for the ever-increasing collection of books and various services offered to the city and the increasing popularity with surrounding areas. The community was enthusiastically involved with the necessary fund-raising since the city council only funded 23 percent. The result was an impressive architectural match to the building’s original structure while utilizing the new space efficiently.

Throughout the years, our library has been fortunate to have directors and staff members who possess insight and the fortitude to dream, work hard, and transcend the call of duty to achieve what is sometimes thought to be impossible. As we look to our next one hundred years, it is our unyielding desire to pay homage to the ones who paved the way for us and to embrace the challenges that lie ahead. Andrew Carnegie’s legacy continues to inspire us with the same kindness and passionate thirst for knowledge. It will continue to flourish in the capable hands of generations to come.



Interview with Dr. Les Standiford

by Tamara Singleton and Thomas Rodgers

Among the activities of the Centennial Celebration will be an appearance by distinguished writer Les Standiford. He will be in Eufaula on May 6th; tickets to his talk are available. For information call the library at 334-687-2337. Standiford’s biography of Andrew Carnegie, *See You in Hell*, will be out later this year. In a recent interview, he shared some thoughts on Carnegie.

TS: You have a diverse background and a successful career as a writer of mystery novels. What made you decide to tackle Andrew Carnegie as a subject for a new book?

DLS: I have written previous nonfiction about Henry Flagler and John Rockefeller and the oil strike period. My publisher was happy about the previous nonfiction work, and I wanted to write about something outside of Florida. I wanted to do something different than I had before.

TS: What would you like for readers to learn about Carnegie that they would not know?



Eufaula Carnegie Library

14 “THE BANK OF WISDOM AND KNOWLEDGE”

DLS: Not sure I can answer until book is finished, since I am still researching Andrew Carnegie. A lot has been written about Mr. Carnegie and I am trying to illuminate how important and different his story is and directing the focus to a more contemporary audience. I want to make it interesting, not just a historical event.

TS: What did you learn about him that surprised you?

DLS: Everyone assumes that a rich person would be happy, especially considering that Andrew was so generous in his contributions. Actually, Andrew had many personal demons. Carnegie felt guilty about the Homestead Steel strike deaths (the strike was a result of disagreements from a cut in laborer's pay) in 1892. It seems that you don't accumulate that kind of wealth without some sort of mishap or misfortune.

TS: What led Carnegie to decide to donate so much of his money to worthy causes? Why do you think he focused so much attention on public libraries?

DLS: He came to believe that it was his obligation to give back, given the huge amounts of donations. He had particular interests that he gave to, such as libraries and universities. He thought he could make a real difference in those institutions. He believed that an educated person could pull himself up by the bootstraps. Using accumulated knowledge in one place appealed to Andrew and he felt that others should benefit from that as well.

TS: Carnegie was a Scottish immigrant who truly realized the American Dream. How do you think he viewed the immigrant experience in America and was his philanthropy a way for him to give something back to his adopted country?

DLS: He thought it was his duty, something he needed to do. He came to this country with nothing and became one the richest men in the world.

TS: Was Carnegie's amazing success in business due to his sense of business genius, or was he simply someone who was “in the right place at the right time”?

DLS: Yes, absolutely, Carnegie was a hard worker, but he was also a quite lucky, a little bit of everything. In history, these kinds of circumstances produce a hero, as we see it. It's an intriguing thought; these individuals did not elect themselves to be heroes, but stumbled into these situations by accident.

TS: If Carnegie were alive today, how would he view his legacy?

DLS: That's an interesting question. He said at the end of his life that he believed that he was going to get pretty good marks for what he did on earth. The way he expressed that statement made some think that he might have been a little worried about that.

TS: Also, please tell us about your new book and how can we get it?

DLS: The title *See You in Hell* is derived from a statement from Henry Frick, who was Carnegie's partner at the Steel Mill. There was a lifelong feud between the two men as a result of the strike and this became a well-known quote as a result from their disagreement. My book will be available in major bookstores and also online.

Tamara Singleton lives in Georgia. Thomas Rodgers is the “reference dude” at the Eugaula Carnegie library.

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**ALABAMA
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In Memorium

Lindsey Stricklin

Former AWF board member Lindsey Stricklin died earlier this year at his home in Florence. This reminiscence by Jack and Pam Kingsbury recalls his many contributions as well as his gift for friendship.

The world has become a smaller place after the death of (Herman) Lindsey Stricklin on January 26th, 2004. A lifelong advocate for education and the arts, he enthusiastically embraced new ideas, young scholars, and aspiring writers, acting as a lifelong mentor for countless numbers of UNA alumni and faculty members as well as deserving students from his beloved birthplace, Wayne County, Tennessee,

At a time when most people would have been content to rest on their laurels, Stricklin, who retired from teaching English at UNA in 1986, thrived on volunteering in the arts and literary communities. He served on the executive boards for Heritage Preservation, Inc. in Florence; the Friends of the Florence-Lauderdale Public Library; the Edith Culver Museum in Waterloo, Alabama; the Copeland Family Memorial Museum (a family foundation devoted to granting scholarships for higher education); and the Alabama Writers' Forum, Montgomery, Alabama.

Stricklin was particularly proud of his affiliation with the Writers' Forum. He donated his time and energy because he believed that AWF represented and encompassed all his personal goals from encouraging literary festivals (he served on the founding committee of the event now called UNA's Writers' Festival and was instrumental in starting the Stribling Festival at UNA), to giving scholarships to young writers, to reminding people of the pleasures of reading.

While Lindsey will be missed by

all of us who knew and loved him, and who had the good fortune to be loved by him; quite possibly the best way is to honor him is to continue carrying on the projects he loved most — attend a writer's conference, encourage a young artist, buy and support books by local authors, give patronage to the arts, and read, eclectically and voraciously.

— Pam and Jack Kingsbury

Helen Friedman Blackshear

Late last year, the state lost a wonderful friend and writer, Helen Friedman Blackshear. Born in Tuscaloosa in 1911, Blackshear was vivaciously engaged in life, writing, and the literary community to the end. Her poem "Search and Destroy" was published in the 2003 anthology *Poets Against the War* (Nation Books). In addition, she had recently completed a biography of poet Sidney Lanier, just published a new edition of a memoir, *Mama Was a Rebel: Tuscaloosa Sketches in Praise of Gentle People* (NewSouth books), and was at work on at least two more books.

Blackshear was the oldest living member of the Alabama State Association of the National League of American Pen Women. She had served as the treasurer and vice-president of the Alabama Poetry Society and as president of the Alabama Writers' conclave. She was Poet of the Year in 1986 and received the Distinguished Service Award from the Conclave in 1987. In 1995 she was commissioned by then Governor Fob James as the eighth Poet Laureate of Alabama.

Other books to Blackshear's name include *Creek Captives* (Junebug Books), a children's book of stories on Alabama history, and the poetry collection *Alabama Album* (NewSouth Books). In 2000 she edited *These I Would Keep*:

Poems by Poet Laureates of Alabama (NewSouth Books).

A generous-minded person, Blackshear took time to help many writers with their books and often wrote reviews and blurbs for emerging writers. She was her own person, unconstrained by what others might think, a down-to-earth person who embraced new things.

—Mildred Wakefield

IN THE ARCHIVES

Safe in the shelter of these books-lined walls
The devotees of genealogy,
Absorbed as ancient monks in prayer stalls,
Are adding branches to their family tree.

Eagerly they scan the yellowed scrolls,
Searching old Obadiah's vanished track.
Through census records and old muster rolls
And brittle, faded print their minds turn back.

They follow blindly down dim wagon trails
Where Indians lurk and hidden danger lies.
They linger over old-time heroes' tales
And hear in silence ghostly battle cries.

They build with patient toil a wall of pride
To help them bear the loneliness outside.

—Helen F. Blackshear,

From *Alabama Album: Collected Poems*

H. Bailey Thomson

In his eulogy for H. Bailey Thomson, Stan Tiner described the University of Alabama professor of journalism as an intellectual, environmentalist, farmer, animal lover, husband, father, friend, brother, and activist. Tiner concluded that Thompson, who died last November, was "so capable in so many realms that it is difficult to enumerate his various capacities."

But in all these capacities, notes Tiner, Thomson "was above all else



H. Bailey Thomson

a writer, and more than anything he wrote of his great love—Alabama; its people, its land, its successes and failures, and always of its promise. For throughout his life

Horace Bailey Thomson was a man of hope, who cheered those around him to greater heights, urging us to the mountaintops of potential in our personal and professional lives.”

A native of Aliceville, Thomson worked as a reporter for the *Huntsville Times* and the *Tuscaloosa News*, was chief editorial writer for the *Orlando Sentinel*, and served as editorial page and associate editor for the *Mobile Register*. In 1999, he received an ASNE award for Best Editorial Writing and was named Teacher of the Year by the Society of Professional Journalists. He is the author of *Dixie’s Broken Heart* and *Century of Controversy: The 1901 Alabama Constitution*. In 2004, he was posthumously awarded the University of Alabama’s Cason Award, which honors exemplary nonfiction over a long career.

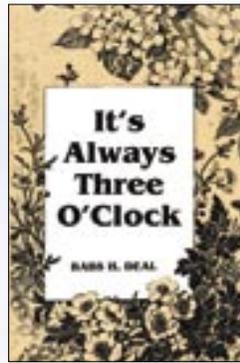
Babs Deal

Her name was Babs. Not Barbara, as people always assumed. She was born Babs Hodges. Later, when she married writer Borden Deal in Tuscaloosa, she became Babs H. Deal, and she made a name for herself.

While Borden was already a writer, having had short stories published in literary quarterlies and having won several prizes for his short fiction, Babs was a writer in her own right. When I first met the couple in their Tuscaloosa home on 11th Street, her first novel, *Acres of Afternoon*, was soon to be published.

I sat on the screened front porch and listened to them talk about their careers. Hers was just budding, and she didn’t jump out in front of her already celebrated husband novelist, whose first novel, *Walk Through the Valley*, had been highly praised in *Time* and *Newsweek*, *The New York Times*, and other publications, and whose second novel, *Dunbar’s Cove*, had already sold to Reader’s Digest Condensed Books and the movies and a dozen foreign publishers.

In the next few months after I first met them, rave reviews of Bab’s *Acres of Afternoon* began to appear in national publications. Her quietly seething account of a summer in the small north Alabama town she called Bellefonte



(her pseudonym for her home town of Scottsboro) soon was compared by critics to F. Scott Fitzgerald and John O’Hara. Babs was elated. And when an occasional piece of dribble would

make light of her characters, her husky cigarette-tinged voice would laugh and say, “Oh, hell, they know better!”

When she was researching the details of the game of football, Babs went directly to Coach Paul “Bear” Bryant and told him what she was doing. “Don’t make it too real,” the coach advised. They had a good laugh, and later he and then-Assistant Coach Gene Stallings read the manuscript and made several changes. Reading about the quarterback who has an affair with the coach’s wife in *The Grail*, a retelling of the King Arthur legend, Bryant said, “I don’t think I’d-a been so nice to the boy,” and Stallings allowed, “I think I’d-a whipped his butt,” and they had another understanding laugh.

A fan of country music, Babs loved Hank Williams. After listening to “Cold, Cold Heart” late one night, she looked

over the rim of her bourbon at me and said, “Listen to *that* man sing, honey. He don’t just sing, he *wails!* They don’t write notes that hit that chord. It’s something he had that nobody else ever had.”

After I went off to Nashville for a year and came back to Tuscaloosa, she wanted to hear about my times with Jim Reeves and Roger Miller. She pried the texture of that life from me, and, in a way, she made me begin to see and feel the real texture of life as a writer. In the late 1960s, when she wrote her country music novel, *High Lonesome World*, I felt deeply honored that she dedicated it to me.

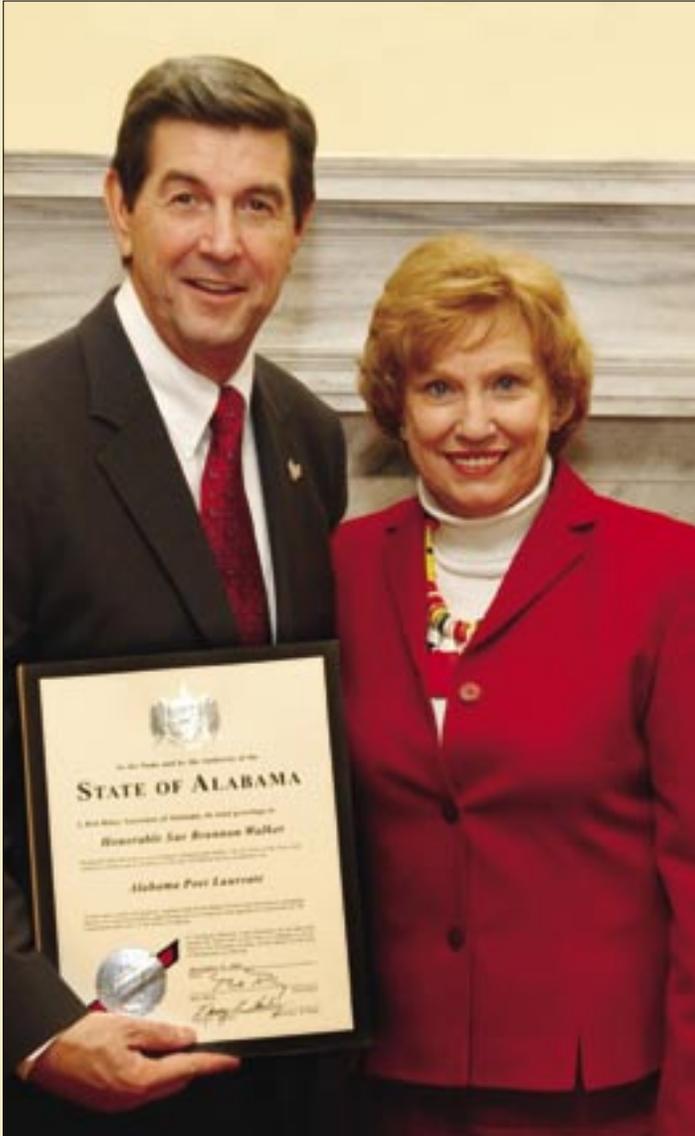
She loved being compared to Fitzgerald, with whom she felt a particular affinity. She took a quote from him for the title of her second novel, *It’s Always Three O’Clock*, and the late-night image resounded through decades of characters she brought to life. We’d be drinking and talking, and Babs would say, “Hell, boys, you know it is *always* three o’clock in the morning.”

Babs and Borden divorced years ago. She moved to Gulf Shores. She didn’t quit writing. She stopped being published. When I’d talk to her about it, she said, “Hell, hon, they don’t want my kind of old stuff any more.” She quit drinking. She tried to quit smoking but finally decided to hell with it.

Thinking about her now, I recall the last paragraphs of *High Lonesome World*: “So what was the meaning of any death? It meant what it meant to whichever person was experiencing it. The meaning in and of itself we couldn’t know.” The writer in Babs Deal’s book tears up the pages she had been writing about the fictional character of Wade Coley. Then she writes simply that the character was buried in a cemetery and that he was “a singer of songs.”

As for Babs, she was a writer of beautiful, powerful, meaningful words, and she died at three o’clock on the morning of February 20th, 2004.

—Wayne Greenhaw



KEVIN GLACKMEYER, ALABAMA GOVERNOR'S PRESS OFFICE

In a ceremony with Governor Bob Riley, Dr. Sue Brannon Walker was named Alabama Poet Laureate for 2004-2008. Walker is the author of five volumes of poetry, including *Blood Will Bear Your Name*. Her critical work includes articles on James Dickey, Marge Piercy, Margaret Atwood, and Carson McCullers. As editor and publisher of *Negative Capability*, she has published numerous Alabama poets and writers. She was a founding board member of the Alabama Writers' Forum. Walker is chair of the University of South Alabama English Department. Her current projects include a novel on the 1878 yellow fever epidemic in Mobile and a biography of Jefferson Davis in sonnets.

TAPAI

Book Donations Benefit Inmates at Alabama Prisons

by Jessica Lueders

Julia Tutwiler Prison and Annex for Women (Wetumpka, Ala.) and Frank Lee Youth Center (Deatsville, Ala.) have received more than 2,000 books in response to a call for donations by The Alabama Prison Arts Initiative (TAPAI).

Substantial libraries at these correctional facilities have been established with these volumes, which were received as donations from people across the state and nation.

The aim of the library project is to provide reading materials to encourage inmates to build literacy skills and develop an interest in the arts and humanities. TAPAI was established in 1999 as a creative writing/reading program for Alabama correctional facilities. The program is led by Auburn University's Center for Arts and Humanities; Aid to Inmate Mothers (AIM) and the Alabama Writer's Forum are also founding partners for TAPAI.

The library project began when Kyes Stevens, a TAPAI creative writing teacher, realized that students could not truly develop their skills in writing poetry if they had no poetry to read. Stevens began to ask for book donations, and publishers and individuals throughout the United States sent boxes of books in response to her call.



KYES STEVENS

Class participants at the Frank Lee Youth Correctional Facility in Deatsville use books donated to The Alabama Prison Arts Initiative by Bedford St. Martin's Press.

Tutwiler and Frank Lee staff modified prison offices to build these libraries. They maintain regular hours for inmates to check out books. Staff at the Tutwiler Annex extend these hours on certain days to allow those who are on work release visit the

library. Currently more than 400 books are available at each prison. Lt. Hawthorne, who oversees the library at Tutwiler, is pleased with the results of this program, noting that some inmates visit the library daily, reading a book a night and returning for another the next day.

Hawthorne also recognizes that the atmosphere at the prison has become more peaceful because reading library books "gives inmates something to do other than misbehave."

Because of book donations Stevens says, "Students can read Federico Garcia Lorca, Hayden Carruth, Yusef Komunyakaa, Lucille Clifton, more titles than can be named. And the books make a difference in the students' lives."

Jay Lamar, Associate Director of AU CAH, believes this program is widely successful because even though any class offered by TAPAI will come to an end, books provide limitless opportunities for discovery and learning.

TAPAI will continue to accept book donations in support of its creative writing/reading programs at the correctional facilities. Those interested in donating books or monetary funds should contact Center for Arts and Humanities, Auburn University, Pebble Hill, Auburn, AL 36849-5637 (phone: 334-844-4946 or email: cah@auburn.edu).

Jessica Lueders is a graduate student in Technical and Professional Communication at Auburn University.



SAVE THE DATE

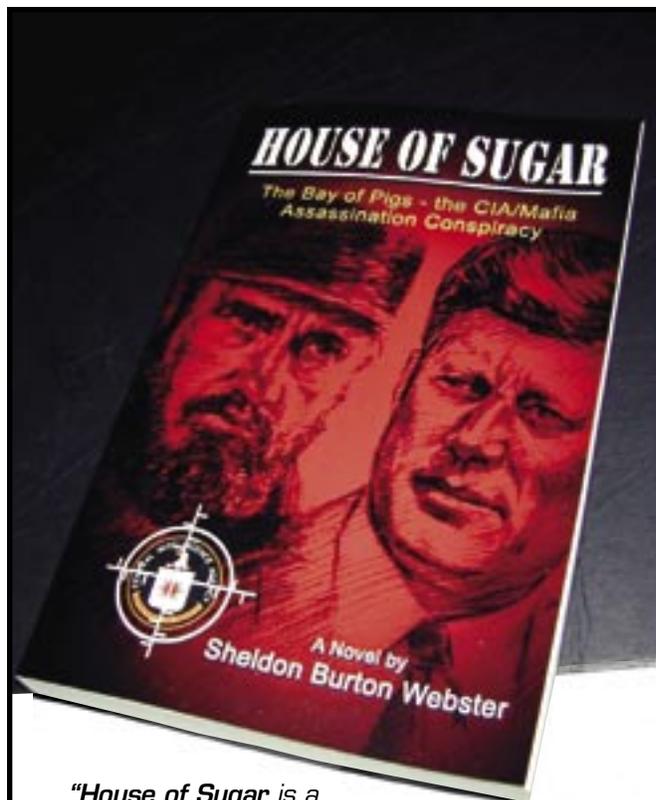


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"House of Sugar is a breakthrough novel and I marveled at the blend of very accurate history with fiction. Webster has a special ear and skill for telling stories through dialog."

Bob Dowling, International Editor
Business Week magazine

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

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



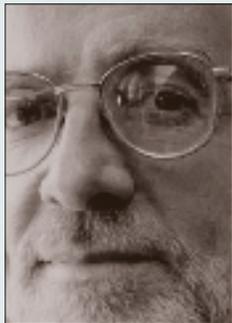
Webster's other books include *The Betheaden Road*, a short story collection set in Mississippi, and novel, *The Voyage of the Encounter*- a look at *Wall Street greed, lust and revenge from Newport to Bermuda*, available from booksmith@mindspring.com.

To order **House of Sugar** from 1st Books Library:
Call 888-280-7715 Or visit:
www.1stbooks.com ISBN 0-7596-8573-8.

Literary News



Meredith Hoffman (left), a junior at Bayside Academy in Point Clear, received the 2003-04 Harper Lee To Kill a Mockingbird Award. The award is sponsored annually by the Honors Program of the University of Alabama and includes a \$500 prize for the winner and \$500 for his or her school. Meredith, daughter of Mobile Register reporter and author Roy Hoffman, is pictured here with **Harper Lee** and second place winner, **Skakendra McDaniel** of Frisco City.



UNIVERSITY OF NORTH ALABAMA LITERARY FESTIVAL Celebrates Twenty Years

Celebrating twenty years of contemporary poetry, fiction, and prose, the University of North Alabama Writers' Festival presents performance poet **Philip Dacey** on April 1 and 2.

Dacey is the author of seven books, including the latest, *The Deathbed Playboy*. Widely published in periodicals and anthologies, he teaches at Southwest Minnesota State University. A dinner will be held on April 1st, followed by a performance and book signing. Another performance and signing will be held on April 2. For reservations for the dinner and more information, contact Lynne Butler in the UNA English Department at 256-765-4238.

Philip Dacey



Montevallo Literary Festival

The second annual Montevallo Literary Festival is slated for Friday and Saturday, April 2-3, 2004, on the UM campus and in the community of Montevallo. A highlight of the conference

is small workshops where participants will work closely with **Angela Ball** and **Don Bogen** in poetry, and **Sheri Joseph** and **Brad Watson** in prose. Workshop leaders as well as featured guests **Marlin Barton**, **Loretta Cobb**, **Linda Frost**, **Alan Grady**, **Peter Huggins**, **Brian Ingram**, **Chrissy Kolaya**, **Marvin Petrucci**, **Dayne Sherman**, and **Rusty Spell** will read from their work. For more information on the festival check www.montevallo.edu/english or contact Jim Murphy at 205-665-6416 or at murphyj@montevallo.edu. The project is co-sponsored by the Alabama Humanities Foundation, a state program of the National Endowment for the Humanities.



AWF Board Member Promotes New Benji Movie

AWF board member **Philip Shirley** is working with Benji creator/producer and screenwriter **Joe Camp** to launch *Benji Returns: Rags to Riches* in the summer of 2004. Shirley's marketing firm GodwinGroup is working with Camp's Mulberry Square Productions to create advertising and promotions for the movie. Camp created the lovable Benji character for the movie series that includes *Benji* (1974), *For the Love of Benji* (1977), and *Benji the Hunted* (1987), which grossed \$80 million combined.

Pictured (L-R) during a recent publicity tour in Phoenix after an appearance on the Channel 12 Arizona Midday show: Philip Shirley, president and COO of GodwinGroup, Todd Ballard, chief creative officer of Godwin, Joe Camp, and Godwin CEO Danny Mitchell holding Benji IV.

The Langum Project For Historical Literature

The Langum Project for Historical Literature announced its 2003 prizewinners. *Rebecca Wentworth's* *Distraction: A Novel* (University Press of New England, 2003) by Robert J. Begiebing won in the historical fiction category. *Brown v. Board of Education: Caste, Culture, and the Constitution* (University Press of Kansas, 2003) by **Robert J. Cottrol, Raymond T. Diamond, and Leland B. Ware** received the award in the category of legal history and legal biography.

The Langum Project seeks to “make the rich history of the American colonial and national period more accessible to the educated general public.” It does so by awarding two annual prizes, each in the amount of \$1,000, for the best books published by university presses in the category of historical fiction and the category of legal history or legally related biography.

The 2003 winners were honored in a ceremony on Saturday, March 20, 2004, at 2 p.m. in the auditorium of the Central Branch of the Birmingham Public Library. The authors talked about their work and entertained questions. The Friends of the Birmingham Public Library hosted a reception in the trustees’ room of the library.

David J. Langum, Sr. founded The Langum Project for Historical Fiction in 2001 out of the conviction that too many historians today write only for each other and that there is a need to encourage excellent scholarship and fiction that can make the rich history of America accessible to the educated general public. For further information please contact David J. Langum, Sr., at 205/726-2424.



BARBARA REED

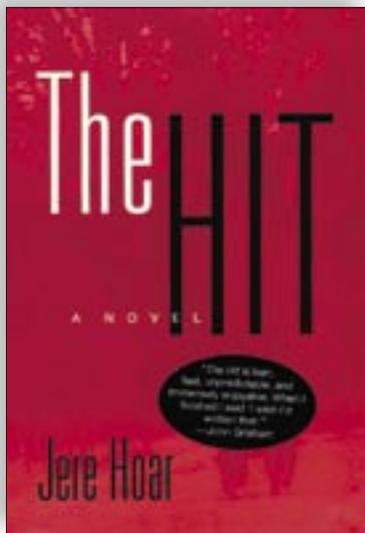
Proud editors of the 30th anniversary issues of Black Warrior Review at the reception to honor the magazine and celebrate the presentation of its archives to the University of Alabama's Hoole Special Collections Library on February 24. L-R, Dan Kaplan, Editor in Chief '02-03 (MFA '04), Aaron Welborn, Business Manager '02-03 and Editor in Chief '03-04, and Braden Welborn, Poetry Editor '03-04.

2004 CASON AWARDS go to Bragg and Thomson

The 2004 winners of the University of Alabama’s Cason Awards are **Rick Bragg**, a best-selling author and Pulitzer Prize winning journalist, and **Dr. Bailey Thomson**, a journalist and educator. The journalism department in the College of Communication and Information Sciences at the University of Alabama established the Cason Award in 1997 to honor exemplary nonfiction over a long career. Winners must be distinguished writers over a lifetime and have a connection to Alabama and the South. The awards carry a cash prize of \$3,000. Thomson died late last year and his family accepted the award for him. Past Cason winners include Diane McWhorter, literary journalist Gay Talese, former *New York Times* editor Howell Raines, biologist Edward O. Wilson, jazz critic and memoirist Albert Murray, and Auburn historian and social critic Wayne Flynt. Like Bragg, McWhorter, Raines, and Wilson also earned Pulitzers for their work.



Author Rick Bragg ended his tour of “I am a soldier, too: The Jessica Lynch Story” at the Public Library of Anniston and Calhoun County, located in the county where he was born and grew up. About 200 fans enjoyed a question and answer period and a book signing that lasted on into the evening on December 4, 2003. Here Rick posed afterward with the staff of the library (from left to right) Sunny Addison, Beth Cason, Library Director Bonnie Seymour, Teresa Kiser, and Sandra Underwood. Bragg plans to continue work on a book based on the closing of the cotton mills in Jacksonville.



The Hit

by Jere Hoar

Context Books, 2003

\$24.95, Hardback

Not since *An American Tragedy* have I so admonished a protagonist page after page for his overtly bone-headed decisions. Luke “Iceman” Carr, the anti-hero of Jere Hoar’s Southern *noir* *The Hit*, is no naïve Clyde Griffiths, though. Carr studied English at OI’ Miss, served three tours of duty in Vietnam as an Army Ranger, and constantly hones his survivalist skills. For all that experience, he certainly commits some careless—and fate-

ful—errors in his mission to rekindle the spark of his college romance.

Hoar begins his novel *in medias res*. Readers first encounter Carr in his psychiatrist’s office where he declares himself a victim of post-traumatic stress syndrome from his experiences in Vietnam and Bridge County, Mississippi. Doc orders Carr to record his story in a series of notebooks. “My story should be written in blood,” says Carr.

Carr’s story certainly is written in blood. Over the course of the nine notebooks that reveal his life and divide the novel, readers discover Carr’s nineteen KIAs in Vietnam and three murders back home. Early on, Carr offers an analysis of and justification for his bloody path. “There are costs to society when it bloods its young men,” Carr says, “when it teaches them it’s all right to kill certain human beings.”

Readers also meet Kinnerly Morris, Carr’s college sweetheart, girl-back-home, and *femme fatale*. Kinnerly steams up the pages of *The Hit* with her assorted and sordid sexual peccadilloes. Kinnerly has a plan, and that plan excludes all but Kinnerly.

Here too is Tom Morris, Kinnerly’s husband and Carr’s first victim. Kinnerly wishes her husband dead, and Carr covets Morris’ art collection. The murder happens early, the art heist later.

As plot goes Hoar sticks fairly close to the *noir* formula—beautiful woman and lusty man kill rich husband and run off together. Nothing new here, except a Mensa member country sheriff rather than a hard-boiled detective.

Hoar distinguishes his novel from lesser works of its genre—and especially from the aforementioned Dreiser story—with a lively, verb-driven style. An automobile engine “chugged vapor into the crisp night air.” Tom “scratched” a match. His “stereo roared air.”

Hoar also engages his reader with vivid similes. When Carr and Kinnerly reunite, Carr says, “I went for her, like a bass on a bright new spinner...” Kinnerly’s hair “bushed like a curly mop.” A stable hand “threw tantrums like the only male child of a widowed mother.”

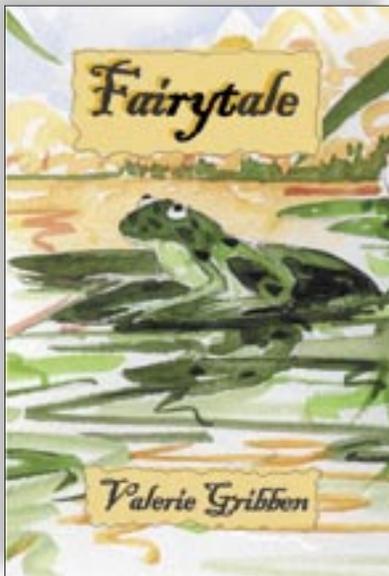
Like any good writer with an eye for detail, Hoar instructs his readers in more than adultery and murder. Through Carr’s notebooks, Hoar teaches readers about

dog training, tracking, and the four-tiered social strata of Bridges County. Readers discover a fine critique of nineteenth century English sporting art.

Literary allusions abound as well. Hoar nods and winks a reference to O. Henry, who informs the novel's resolution. Faulkner is never far away, as he shouldn't be in a novel set in northwestern Mississippi. And Carr has a recurrent dream-vision-porment in which he chases, catches, and loses Kinnerly on the frieze of a Grecian urn. Hoar even throws in a dead mule for good measure.

As an exercise in genre, Hoar offers a novel that engages its readers and keeps them guessing. More important, Hoar offers a genre novel as an exercise in style. *The Hit* is a finalist in the Barry Award for best first mystery/crime novel and was selected a notable book of 2003 by the *Kansas City Star*. It was also a BookSense pick and included on the *Library Journal's* Best First Fiction list. Hoar is a native of Troy, Alabama.

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



Fairytale

by Valerie Gribben

Junebug Books,
Montgomery, 2003
\$9.95, paper

In the first chapter of Valerie Gribben's *Fairytale*, an articulate and perceptive frog named Prince quizzes the book's heroine, Marianne, about her intentions. Could it be that there's a little bit of

attraction between these two representatives of different species?

While everyone who has read even one fairy tale has learned to expect that any kissable animal species will inevitably be transformed into a wonderful, princely human, readers who begin Gribben's book will find that all their pre-

conceived expectations of fairy tales should be released with the wind. The down-to-earth appeal of this opening scene between the talking frog and the lonely girl has the immediate effect of drawing in readers who are eager for a fresh take on a long-established genre.

Fairytale begins as 15-year-old Marianne is spending one last hour of freedom by the pond on her family's estate—conversing with Prince, her only friend—on her last afternoon as a single girl. Marianne, like many fairy tale heroines before her, is facing a wedding she has not chosen, to a man she does not know, arranged by parents whose goodwill she has come to doubt. Sadly, there is no one in Marianne's household with whom she can talk about her worries. Thus, she talks to herself: "What will come after marriage?" she wonders. "Will I learn to love him? Will he want children? What a stupid question! Of course, he'll want a son. But can I be a wife? Maybe it won't be so horrible. Maybe he'll be wonderful and let me run through his forests and stay up all night reading. Perhaps I'll fall in love with him and live happily ever after like all the heroines I've read about."

Marianne is definitely in need of supernatural intervention—and Gribben, a high school student who lives in Montgomery, responds to this need with a wonderful array of magical creatures, surreal plot twists, and enchanting humor. While many readers may initially be motivated to pick up *Fairytale* because of the youthful age of its author, it is Gribben's innovative talents that will keep readers engrossed.

Gribben's most impressive skill is in creating a heroine who comes across as fully human—complete with her very human limitations and idiosyncrasies. Gribben seems to know well that one of the pleasures of reading about magical settings comes from observing regular mortals as they enter into and interact with those settings. Marianne comes across as 100 percent human. Although she is clearly not a "regular" young woman, her greatest pleasure is in reading, particularly when the books have intriguingly alliterative titles such as *Fairy Flings* or *Jasmine's Journal of Jewelry Jinxes*. Perhaps it is Marianne's wealth of book knowledge that arms her with her lively wit, caring empathy, and resourceful problem-solving skills.

Marianne's hot-headed and ambitious brother, Robin, and a sagacious dragon named Leo become her companions in adventure, after handily assisting her in solving the arranged marriage problem. In search of fortune and knowledge, the threesome travels through a world where nothing is ever quite what it seems. The challenging creatures they meet include

an injured goblin lying in a pool of green blood, a charming sideshow poet, and a princess who is trapped under an evil spell.

As a female fairy tale heroine whose primary goal is to find out more about herself—rather than find herself a husband—Marianne is a character whose creation has been long overdue. She is certain to be welcomed to the world of fantastic literature by educators, parents, and youngsters alike.

Likewise, Valerie Gribben, Marianne's creator, deserves her own red carpet celebration. Gribben's first book is a wonderful accomplishment, and her first readers are sure to find themselves eagerly anticipating what her imagination comes up with next.

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

The Spider's Web

A Novella and Other Stories

by Wayne Greenhaw

River City Publishing, Montgomery, 2003
\$23.95, Hardcover

In *The Spider's Web: A Novella and Other Stories*, Wayne Greenhaw extracts pandemonium from the peaceful ideal of Alabama in the fifties. Greenhaw's collection conjures that pandemonium from the hoods and hangars of rural towns and suburbs alike; as he does this, he constructs an unvisited, darker, and more complex mid-twentieth-century. Author of many plays, short stories, and four novels—and most recently *Montgomery: The River City*, a charming map of sorts for the heart of Alabama—Greenhaw succeeds in this suspenseful, bittersweet collection that shakes the supposed safety of 'Bama back then.

Scoliosis forces fourteen-year-old Thomas Morgan Reed to abandon the innocence of his Boy Scout days as a suburban adolescent in the title novella, which—in shorter form—won the Hackney Literary Award for short stories. In return for his childhood, Reed gets a painful vacation to a children's hospital ward. The ward, sinister in its stoic whiteness and plentiful in its sufferers, serves as the backdrop for Thomas' coming of age. There he escapes the confines of his abruptly ended youth through the courage of his wheel-chair-bound friend Lanier and through the fantasy offered by Sarah Jane, a teen girl whose pubescent desire is stronger than the iron

lung machine that keeps her alive. When the tests and treatments end and our Thomas finds himself in a body cast, he continues to escape the web of his emotions by dreaming of the courage, fantasy, and life within. Like Lanier and Sarah Jane—like George Washington, the African-American orderly who continuously fulfills one child or another's request—and like the spider that sets up shop in the corner of the hospital room, Thomas Morgan relentlessly works at his goal of becoming normal.

From SEC football and the Crimson Tide to delicious Ollie's barbecue sandwiches, local color exists throughout the text while disguising itself as anything from comic relief to irony. Still, the stories of *The Spider's Web* contain the dynamics of a larger story, one that could take place in urban Chicago or trendy Los Angeles: the complex and curious tale of becoming a man. Greenhaw explores the awkward state of puberty and the first crush in "My Original Sin." Here the author also begins to paint a picture of Harold Reed, Thomas' father, as a makeshift renegade who will torment and console his son throughout the collection of stories. In "Season of Fear," Thomas finds a friend in Hector, a boy from Honduras who is beyond his years physically and emotionally. Thomas trusts Hector to protect him from a local bully, but soon learns that trust does not come easily in the real world. "My Mother's Ear" celebrates a mother's courage and compassion for her children.

Greenhaw threads *The Spider's Web: A Novella and Other Stories* with details and accounts of southern and Alabamian culture in the fifties; the result is the intricately woven habitat of family skeletons, friendships, and frivolous youth, which is Thomas' background and—in the final three stories—his future. By the end of *Web*, readers realize that, like Thomas' spider friend, Greenhaw has accomplished a home in an uncomfortable environment. We all get caught in the ambition of that web, don't we?

Marie Sullivan is an English major at the University of Montevallo.

In a Temple of Trees

by Suzanne Hudson

MacAdam/Cage, 2003
\$23, Hardback

The Baby Boomer generation has had its good press and its bad: a recent trend has been to berate it for its failed ideal-

ism—all those youthful dreams sold out so easily for stock portfolios. The fate of stock portfolios aside, I find the criticism unfair: isn't this the destiny of every living thing?

One legacy of the Howdy-Doody crowd does live on, however, whether gift or curse: the break-up of American homogeneity and the advent of multiculturalism. Attribute it to the success of many struggles, but also to the general receptivity of the generation who played host. In race relations, especially in the South, one could argue that, as the middle-aged white baby boomers write their books, a sub-genre that might be called "white-guilt literature" has emerged. It's not surprising. For us, the Civil Rights movement, the long dark history in its wake, was the great moral upheaval of our lives, and that we should revisit in our maturity this vast pool of moral drama is only natural. Among contemporary southern writers exceptions are harder to find than examples. Suzanne Hudson's powerful new novel, *In a Temple of Trees*, might be placed in that category.

As interesting as her work, Hudson won prestigious writing awards and contests as a graduate student in the mid-seventies, then fell silent until the recent publication of her short story collection *Opposable Thumbs* (Livingston 2001), and now her novel. One encounters the word "fearless" in discussions of her work—quite deserved—and I'll let that observation serve as a warning to the fainthearted. *In a Temple of Trees* is a novel ultimately about sickness and the redemptive power of love—though the redemption is the child not of grace but of revenge—and to earn it we must plow through the very heart of the infection, with no provisions made for the squeamish, and no apologies. It is the story of Cecil Durgin, a black orphan raised by a Jewish couple in the small community of Three Breezes, Alabama, where he finds himself woven into the fabric of the 1950s white power structure of timber barons and bankers and lawyers and trailer trash. At twelve, in 1958, he witnesses a murder/cover-up so despicable it both haunts the rest of his life and lies latent as a source of potential power. The novel follows him and the other characters to 1990 when middle-aged Cecil has inherited his adoptive father's local radio station, and commands the black vote. This is not a linear narrative but a jigsaw puzzle. Hudson expertly manages suspense and piecemeal disclosure, and lets the reader put the pieces together.

Completely. Not a piece left out. Which is both satisfying and a little deflating. Some readers may feel the novel sacrifices in mystique what it gains in its almost mathematical thoroughness. The culprit would be the omniscient

narrator, spokesman for the author's extraordinary labor of imagination, who tells us *everything*, sometimes judgment in thin disguise: "She had been around folks all her life who snatched at the perverse past of the Old South as if it were handed down from Moses, folks who grabbed at defiant symbols because their feeble brains could not process history or religion in a way to render them productive."

The cast of characters is broad and complex, well understood by the author, and familiar to us: Big John McCormick and the hanger-on moral maggots who do not possess, only reflect, and later scavenge, his power; the degenerate white trash Pierce brothers ("one a mook-ass halfwit and the other a cold-eyed vessel for all the demons of Dixie"—and evidence of Hudson's keen understanding that when you remove the barriers from a permanent underclass and open the way for its upward movement, the next in line get very nervous); the one-time hellraising rich daughter and the anal-retentive milksop she has married; the good-hearted black wife and the alcoholic white one; and of course Cecil, the half-breed as we come to find out, struggling with his horrible secret; and many others,



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struggling with theirs. Secrets, in fact, are a major theme of the book. “It’s so sad to think of all the secrets we keep in us, how they just eat us up inside,” one of the characters says. One of the “good” characters—and the characters do resolve pretty neatly into good and bad. And the bad (i.e., the white men), as I’ve already warned you, are *really* bad.

The sins of the fathers will be visited upon the children—in no arena more than in the unfolding saga of race relations in modern America is that proverb more manifestly true. Every act, every word of cruelty and inhumanity of our grandfathers, back when such acts were so cheap and easy, comes back in some form or other to weigh upon us. Hudson’s novel dramatizes this truth memorably, as part of a deeper preoccupation with themes of paternity in general. Fatherhood is the novel’s great symbol, resonating throughout, but most importantly in Cecil himself—literally, as we are deftly led to understand, and figuratively, as the fatherhood of white culture itself doesn’t, or can’t, reject him entirely, creating through this parental ambivalence the channel for the child’s revolt and righteous revenge.

In a Temple of Trees carries the weight of these themes naturally, but it is in the scenes, the details of characterization, the human interactions, that the novel’s real power lies. I implied earlier that the reader might enjoy inferring more from situation—especially since the scenes presented here leave no doubt as to the author’s mastery.

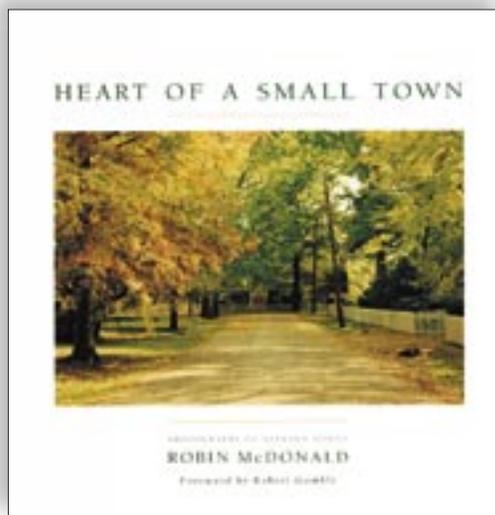
I caught myself several times in reading this novel exclaiming out loud, or laughing, at the absolute rightness of something. The primal-scene beginning, where we spy with young Cecil on the white men and the ill-fated prostitute Charity Collins playing “The Game,” before we even understand exactly what “The Game” is; the deer-hunting scene where the men slyly turn on one of their own—are unforgettable. And the whole sequence where Ronnie Pierce blunderingly picks up Honey Drop, the singer Cecil manages and his latest side-squeeze, and takes her to his and Claud’s trailer, is a gem of comic raunch.

The strength of *In a Temple of Trees* is its refusal to compromise. But the violence—physical, verbal, moral—is compensated by the redemption in store, symbolized ultimately by the “temple” of the woods: “the only place where [Cecil] knew, deep down, he was meant to be.” Though the woods hide an ancient evil, they also harbor an even older innocence. They aren’t savage; the savages have all moved to town. “It was a beautiful world, the deep woods. Cecil respected it with the deference one would show a church

sanctuary, letting the purity of it enter his pores and bring its peace all up inside him, in short segments of fine moments, forgetting the perversions of life he had seen played out before him in this Eden of his.”

It’s a good thing. These particular perversions are likely to stay with you for a while.

John M. Williams’s novel Lake Moon was published by Mercer University Press in 2002



Heart of a Small Town

Photographs of Alabama Towns
by Robin McDonald

University of Alabama Press, 2003

\$29.95, Hardback

When the reader opens Robin McDonald’s *Heart of a Small Town*, he or she will immediately recognize the vibrant photography that captures the “heart” of small towns across Alabama. In a collection of 126 photographs, McDonald, who immigrated to Alabama from London as a teenager, succeeds at illustrating the simple, yet wonderfully significant, characteristics of towns like Athens, Camp Hill, Harpersville, and Marion. The reader is largely aware of McDonald’s talent and practiced eye in the way he presents common small-town items like park benches, Coke machines, and drug store signs in an intimate fashion. Looking through these photographs, the reader can imagine walking through a town such as Clayton and becoming aware of the beauty of the faded, peeling paint on abandoned buildings.

McDonald's photographs are enhanced by the selection of writings that are interspersed throughout *Heart of a Small Town*. The inclusion of quotations from Alabama authors, including Mary Ward Brown, Harper Lee, William March, and Howell Vines, brings the reader closer to the nature of small-town life. McDonald's meticulous accounting of the mood and value of a small town is illustrated, for instance, when he places James Agee's words from *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* next to a photograph of baskets mounted on a darkly stained wooden wall.

The combination of vibrant photographs and well-chosen literary selections makes *Heart of a Small Town* a necessary book for anyone who wants to embrace the beauty and peacefulness of small-town life in Alabama. Robert Gamble explains it best in his foreword, saying "[t]his is a book that can be enjoyed on a number of levels: as sheer visual artistry, as a snapshot of 'place,' as recollection, or even as portent."

Jessica Lueders is a graduate student at AU.

House of Sugar

by Sheldon Burton Webster

1st Books Library, 2002
Hardcover \$24.95

Readers of Sheldon Burton Webster's *House of Sugar* will begin their journey of intrigue on September 25, 1960 as we are introduced to master CIA operative Axial Hanson, nicknamed "Mr. Coup" for his reputation of covertly toppling governments unfriendly to the United States. Hanson is planning to meet with syndicate leaders Sam Giancana, Santo Trafficante, and other Mafia chieftan "friends" in the Boom Boom Room of Miami's Fontainebleau Hotel. What is the agenda for this gathering of odd bedfellows? Nothing less than the swift and efficient assassination of Cuba's new dictator, Fidel Castro.

From this point on, the reader begins a thousand day odyssey into the dark narco-political arena during the hottest days of the Cold War. The Syndicate, Washington, and Wall Street will be watching as Hanson maneuvers through the world of espionage and secret agendas that will culminate in his introduction to a peculiar loner by the name of Lee Harvey Oswald. By now, the target of assassination has shifted away from Castro and is aimed directly at the president of the United States.

Another assassination conspiracy theory? Author Sheldon Burton Webster clearly describes his *House of Sugar* as a

novel, a re-creation "by characters whose lives and voices are inserted into history."

If readers are left wondering where fact begins and fiction leaves off, Webster has included an extensive bibliography of twenty-six books researched before writing this historical novel. This is in addition to the author's research into hundreds of newly declassified documents on the Bay of Pigs invasion and interviews with the actual participants, including CIA operatives, politicians, revolutionaries, and aging Mafia lieutenants.

Of special interest to Alabama readers is Webster's account of the Alabama National Guard and the eighty members of the 117th Tactical Reconnaissance Wing under the command of General Reid Doster. The unit gained international notoriety for flying into Cuba during the height of combat to provide air cover for exiles on the ground invasion force. Lieutenant Colonel Joseph Shannon was the exile air force training officer who flew the final meeting at the Bay of Pigs and survived. Major Riley Shamburger, Captain Thomas W. Ray, Wade C. Gray, and Leo F. Baker were all killed in action.

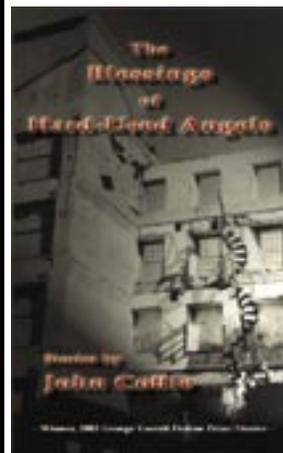
Webster's plot in *House of Sugar* paints a broad stroke that may prove controversial to some readers and come to no

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surprise to others familiar with new light shed on the people and places of the first thousand days of the early 1960's. As Webster unfolds events, the reader is introduced to an ambitious joint mission between an unholy alliance of the CIA and American Mafia to target President John F. Kennedy after the failed invasion at the Bay of Pigs.

The Mafia saw the botched invasion as a lost opportunity to restore control over the billion dollar drug and casino operations of "Lucky" Luciano, Meyer Lansky, and Santo Trafficante. The Mafia felt a double-barrel insult after the organized crime chairman Sam Giancana came under investigation by the administration, despite Giancana's alleged involvement in fraudulent vote rigging in Illinois and West Virginia that resulted in a presidential victory for Kennedy.

Secret agent Hanson introduces us to rogue characters within the CIA who saw the Bay of Pigs failure as a major loss to the multi-million dollar profits it skimmed from the Luciano organization in a partnership that began during World War II to fund covert operations.

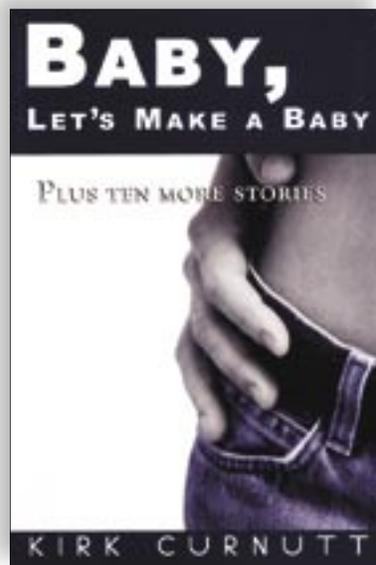
Facing a major CIA downsizing by the Kennedy administration of the agency's vast operations around the world, and feeling equally betrayed by the president for calling off the

CIA-orchestrated invasion, this "Evil Empire" comes together to eliminate the leader of the free world.

House of Sugar is the third book by Birmingham author Sheldon Burton Webster. His first, *The Betheaden Road*, is a collection of short stories set in Mississippi spanning the four decades between the 1950s and 1980s. This was followed by *The Voyage of the Encounter*, a novel of intrigue set against the backdrop of Wall Street corruption and greed.

Burton will follow *House of Sugar* with *House of Sham*, a continuation into presidential politics of the Johnson administration and the international turmoil surrounding the Vietnam War.

Michael Boyer is a twenty-year veteran location coordinator for the motion picture industry.



Baby, Let's Make A Baby

Plus Ten More Stories
by Kirk Curnutt

River City Publishing,
2003
\$23.95, Hardback

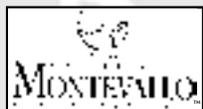
In his first book of short stories, Kirk Curnutt is saying something about the struggles of being human. Despite its auspicious title, *Baby, Let's Make a Baby*, it is not as hope-

ful as it would seem as each story is a poignant tale of characters at critical turning points in their lives.

Curnutt opens with *Overpass*, a story of eleven people who come together, tragically, on a southern highway. None will leave the same person he was when he showed up.

Etude and Bell Tower takes place in an unnamed city at an unspecified time, but you get the feeling that it is Germany during WWII. This story is about the strange bond between a rookie and Oscar, a military brute, who becomes a bumbling music theory professor at the sound of Prokofiev. With nothing much to do in the bell tower, Oscar's informative lectures boarder on annoying.

The title story is a depiction of a couple that obviously



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does not belong together but, out of revenge toward each other, produce a baby.

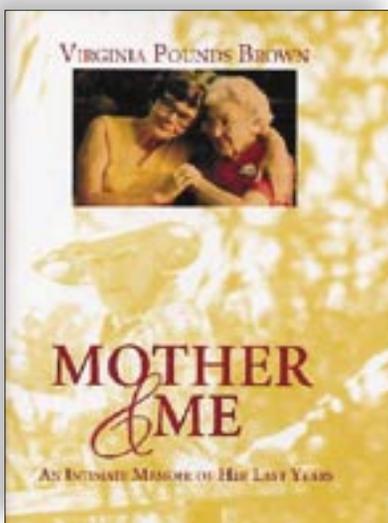
All Apologies portrays a young man, Guidry, who is serving out his community service duties due to the fact that he killed an old man while driving drunk. Guidry has a gift for public speaking until the daughter of the man he killed starts showing up at his lectures. Her presence jars his concentration, which causes him to start filling his speech with lies. In order to keep his facts straight, he decides to read his speech from notes cards, which makes him sound insincere to his audience. But somehow Guidry is comforted by his insincerity.

In one of the most touching stories, *Down in the Flood*, Curnutt gives us a man who comes to terms with his life by facing his own mortality.

In *The Story Behind the Story*, we see the rise and fall of a teen idol and her entourage in the form of a VH1-style documentary. The surprise of this teen idol is that she is well-read and seemingly unaffected by her short-lived fame.

Throughout *Baby, Let's Make a Baby*, Curnutt manages to combine his character's cruelty and beauty in an effort to show us that we all have good and bad within us. With this book, Curnutt has firmly planted his feet in the world of fiction.

Jill Deaver is a recent graduate from the University of Montevallo. She works at the Hoover Public Library.



MOTHER AND ME

by Virginia Pounds Brown

New South Books,
2004
\$20, Hardback.

When Duke Ellington was receiving one of the most prestigious awards of his music career, he said, "There no place else I'd rather be, except

in the loving arms of my mother."

Mother and Me is a book that takes the reader on a

journey whose destination is already known but not experienced, dreaded by some, sought by others.

Virginia Pounds Brown generously allows us to meet her mother and, more importantly, to meet the author herself. Brown is not one to allow you to know more than you need to know about her—it's her profession, you know. As a historian and preservationist, her integrity and wise observational abilities are well respected, but here, in *Mother and Me*, Brown lets you peek into her personal life on a most honest level.

Mother and Me is simply excerpts from a well-crafted diary, a diary mostly concerned with cherishing and chronicling the last days of the author's mother, a sharp and witty powerhouse of a woman whose finest times are being left behind.

Brown takes you inside the world of one of the better nursing homes in Alabama. The snippets of conversation and spontaneous wisecracks of her mother and the nursing home residents and staff get you through this painful but gentle journey.

The seating arrangement was for tables of four and six. At one table were those in wheelchairs being fed by attendants. I realized that the table seating had been planned so that the people eating together shared similar mental and physical states.

"Not a man here," Mother said, looking over the room.

"And I'm glad," said Mrs. Clark. "You have to fix up when men are around. Besides, men don't want to be there when anything's wrong with you. They will leave every time."

Virginia Pounds Brown learns much about herself during her mother's declining days. Not big things, just the little things we all have to learn in order to find peace and humor in our lives.

One of the nursing home residents mistakes the author for Harper Lee:

"But I didn't know you were Mrs. Pound's daughter." Just for the moment, I enjoyed not being an obscure Southern writer. I didn't try to straighten her out. I had learned through the years with Mother the futility of endless straightening out.

This very small book can be read in one brief sitting, and that's what you will want to do. I don't think you can bear to put it down till the journey of Virginia and her mother is over—that would be like abandoning someone you love.

Mother and Me by Virginia Pounds Brown is a book that makes you want to go back and re-appreciate all the people who loved you without question, all the people you didn't love well enough or long enough.

Jim Reed lives in Birmingham.

Working the Dirt

An Anthology of Southern Poets

edited by Jennifer Horne

New South, 2003

\$20, Paperback

If ever you thought that poetry was a little like gardening—then read this book. It is an absolute pleasure.

Jennifer Horne has gathered the finest company of gardeners, farmers, and poets in *Working the Dirt: An Anthology of Southern Poets*. Within the pages are widely known poets like James Dickey and Randall Jarrell, along with those who enjoy local fame like Loretta Cobb and John Beecher.

As stated in the preface, Horne believes, and many people (especially Southerners) would agree, that there is a special connection between people and the land around them. And not so much in the hippie, cosmic, peace sign kind of way, but in the “My father made a living with his hands” and “My grandmother makes *the best* fried okra you ever put in your mouth” kind of way. Some poems that express these feelings are “The Terrapin Maker” by Wade Hall, “Snapshots in the Red Fields” by Jeanie Thompson, “Summer Food” by Coleman Barks, and “Preserves” by Jack Butler.

And even though more and more subdivisions crop up everyday, these feelings still ring true. People still have that connection and that desire to grow and to create something of their own. “A Sort of Adagio” by Sandra Agricola demonstrates the need for flowerbeds in our front yards and vegetable gardens in the back.

The book is set up in sections to take you from the sun-beaten farm to the manicured lawn. In between lie some very touching poems of mothers and fathers, grandmothers and grandfathers, such as: “My Grandfather’s Funeral” by James Applewhite, “The Gardener” by Rick Lott, “December Portrait” by Davis Daniel, “Farm Wife” by Ellen Voigt, “My Grandmother Washes Her Feet,” by Fred Chappell, and “Planting in Tuscaloosa” by Emily Hiestand.

When reading through the poems, you get the feeling that

the processes of planting seeds and writing poetry are not that different. And this collection in particular makes you wonder if the two could survive on their own. Horne seems to have a deep understanding of the connection between gardening and poetry, which is obvious in her own poem, “Preservation of Life.”

As gardeners and poets know, both poetry and gardening take a great deal of talent, knowledge, patience, diligence, and tenderness. And with poems like “Letting the Garden Go” by James Mersmann, “Compost: An Ode” by Andrew Hudgins, and “Dirt” by Rodney Jones, Horne hits upon what it is to find oneself in the dirt and also in the poetry.

Working the Dirt: An Anthology of Southern Poets is a charming and inspiring read for those who love their gardens and those who dream of planting their own one day.

Jill Deaver

The Story Behind the Story

Twenty-six Stories by Contemporary Writers
and How They Work

Edited by Peter Turchi and Andrea Barrett

W.W. Norton, 2004

\$16.95, Paperback

In Richard Russo’s introduction to *The Story Behind the Story*, he distills the zillion questions that nonwriters want to ask writers into this: Did ya’ll learn that stuff or were ya’ll born that way? (Forgive the added southern twang, Richard). The book, a story collection edited by Peter Turchi, director of the Warren Wilson College MFA Program for Writers, and Andrea Barrett, winner of the National Book Award for *Ship Fever*, should help answer that nature/nurture dilemma because it doesn’t stop at its twenty-six engaging stories. It goes on to include twenty-six well-crafted essays on the writers’ experience of creating each story. Russo calls this glimpse into the process “a window on the creative writing process.” For some this may be true; for others, these essays may simply shed light, reveal shadows, suggest shape.

At the heart of the nurture side of the nature/nurture dilemma stand such MFA programs as Warren Wilson, programs where the “stuff” of writing is taught. All twenty-six writers in the volume have taught at Warren Wilson at one time or another. This means that they’re aware of the grumblings at large that MFA programs homogenize writing. So the irony

isn't missed when Charles Baxter, recipient of the Award in Literature from the American Academy of Arts and Letters and a veteran leader of writing workshops, says he's chosen to share and discuss his story "The Old Fascist in Retirement" for two reasons: first, he's proud of it; and second, because any writing workshop would hammer it to bits. It's quite frankly a delightful admission. "The story violates most of the narrative norms I have spent a lifetime teaching to my own students," he says. And how!

The collection is not filled with complex, inaccessible narratives or experimental prose. Instead, it is filled with other surprising and delectable delights: the Hindenberg, piano movers, mutts, amniocentesis, adoption, Indiana, and any number of ways to name home. Add to this the voyeuristic window-peek of how the stories came to be, how the dog got into the bar, how the furniture got into the tree, how running over a cat is both murder and muse, and the back story becomes more than an inside look.

In spite of Baxter's narrative violation, only one other story seems to plunder fictional boundaries: Michael Martone's "Moon Over Wapakoneta" is a boundless hybrid of sorts. This story stretches toward poetry, lyric essay, satire, and, as he suggests with his tongue rammed inside his cheek, regional science fiction—and all in a single motion. Martone has developed a reputation for messing with boundaries when it comes to writing, and the results are often side-splitting. In this story he consciously repeats "moon," "Ohio," and "Wapakoneta" as many times as possible. What emerges is a sort of incantation that creates a gravitational field strong enough to pull Hoosiers over the border, worthy of Neil Armstrong's hometown, and as effective as moonshine to boot. One or two who know Martone to be an inhabitant of Tuscaloosa, Alabama, and a state employee who works beneath the stretches of a famous stadium's shadow, may wonder why, with all the moon stuff, he only worked 'tide' in once. But legions among us are rejoicing.

Narrative violations? Creative voyeurism? Hybrids? How can this be? This is a serious collection by Pulitzer Prizers and the like. These guys ooze craft and genius. How then can the collection come to be described in such unusual sounding terms? "We're allowed to enjoy ourselves, we writers," Russo says. "In fact, if there's a secret we're reluctant to share with nonwriters it's this: Damn, it's fun." Well then. To the window.

Wendy Bruce is a writer and a producer at the Center for Public Television at the University of Alabama.

What the Moon Knows

by Sue Scaf

Elk River Press, 2003
\$14, Paperback

This book, Sue Scaf's fifth, consists of forty-one poems, most short lyrics, on the themes of childhood and family, nature, age, death, and loss—age-old themes for poetry, the universal found in the particular. In the particulars of these poems are an Appalachian family reunion, a memory of the day Franklin Delano Roosevelt died, Easter in the Nashville bus station, a husband's operation.

Sue Scaf has said of these poems that they were all her life in the making, and this is reflected in the range of her subjects, the vision of ongoing generations, the desire for connection to the past. Always beneath the surface is the question "What does life mean?"—the inevitable wondering why we are here. Scaf's nature poems reinforce the sense, present throughout the book, of life as a cycle from childhood to old age, spring to winter. This cycle may be painful to accept when winter comes—and here Scaf does not flinch, acknowledging that, for some, spring will not come again—but nature as a kind of Romantic all-seeing presence provides some comfort (as in the title poem), and human connection more than anything makes life worth the living.

I especially enjoyed the poem "Canticle in September," in which the narrator and her dog, both old, sit in their backyard, and the narrator remembers choosing to be a writer in childhood, affirms her choice, and imagines what the future beyond death might look like: "perhaps there I shall study / sainthood and poetry, / the ball of the world at my feet . . ."

Among other things, writing is a way of paying careful attention. It can even be a way of loving a sometimes unlovable world, a daily practice of making the difficult one's own. This book's challenge was to earn its affirmations of life in the midst of death, to avoid a too-easy accommodation of the losses that come with age, and in this Sue Scaf has succeeded. Almost always, her language is rich without being overblown, her observations the clean lines of a plein-air sketch. *What the Moon Knows* has some terrific lines (as in "their voices weightless / as a communion wafer on the tongue" in "'Processional in Gray'"), images that stay with you ("pale eggs / of spiders hidden under chairs" in "Another Room"), and, as a whole, a sense of rounded completion that deserves attention.

Jennifer Horne's Working the Dirt: Poems of Farming and Gardening in the South, was published in 2003.

Redneck Riviera

Armadillos, Outlaws, and the Demise of an American Dream

by Dennis Covington

Counterpoint Books, 2004
\$25, Hardcover

Readers of Vicki and Dennis Covington's *Cleaving* will recognize "The Good Part," a recycled chapter also included in Dennis Covington's most recent memoir, *Redneck Riviera*. Like most long married couples, the Covingtons have shorthand catch phrases, one of which is "Are you at the good part yet?" meaning, "Have you reached the good part of the story?" Dennis Covington defines the good part of the story as "the indispensable part. It is the part where you know you won't be able to put the book down."

As in his earlier memoirs, *Salvation on Sand Mountain* and *Cleaving*, in *Redneck Riviera*, Covington writes about his two families — the family into which he was born and the family he and Vicki have created. His birth family con-

sisted of his color-blind father, his distant mother, two much older brothers, and a sister who was closest to him in age and temperament. The Covingtons have two daughters, both of whom have cameos in their parents' memoirs.

At its simplest level, Covington's latest autobiographical sojourn is about his father, Sam Covington, and his one and only investment, a piece of real estate in Florida, one of only two places the elder Covington had ever gone on vacation. Sam liked to joke that "no Covington has ever left anybody anything." When Dennis inherits the deed, a piece of paper that made him the butt of the jokes among his siblings, he decides to claim the two and a half acres of inland Florida real estate for his own family. The lengths to which he is willing to go in his attempts to reclaim his father's legacy are frightening and poignant. Apparently, it's only in the retelling of his father's story that Covington realizes the ways in which his father's DNA lives on in him.

Sam was forced into early retirement after thirty years at U.S. Steel in order for the company to hire a recent college graduate. "The grief and depression over losing his job took

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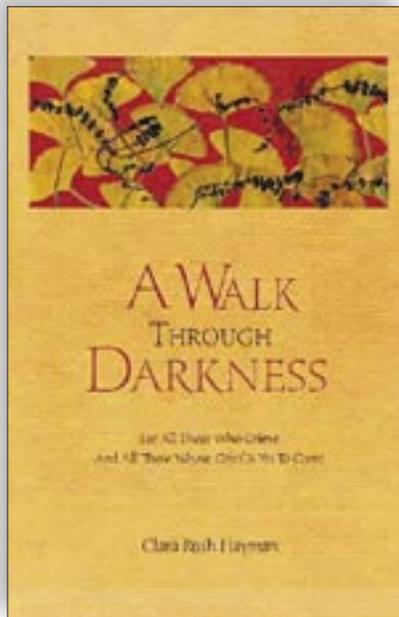
on an aura of temporary insanity.” Sam bought a VW Beetle on credit and a grocery store that failed. He sold the store to an upholsterer and used the money to buy the land, sight unseen.

Dennis’s foray into land ownership runs parallel to his father’s crisis. When he goes in search of the unsurveyed parcel of swamp, he learns the land has been taken over by the Hunt Club. Over the course of several years, Dennis’s makeshift cabin was vandalized, his truck was torched, and his life threatened, yet he clung to his land the same way his father held on to his dreams. One of the more humorous moments in the book recounts a visit from the F.B.I. to the Covingtons’ home in Birmingham. It alone is worth the price of the book.

In “The Good Part,” Covington wrote, “But what about our lives? The good part, for me, has been elusive.” *Redneck Riviera*, at its most complex, is about the elusive and complicated relationships between fathers and sons, loss and legacy, and the ways in which humans have to re-live the impulses inherit in their DNA in order to have their own lives.

A native of Birmingham, Covington is currently Professor of Creative Writing at Texas Tech University in Lubbock, Texas.

Pam Kingsbury teaches English at the University of North Alabama in Florence.



A Walk Through Darkness

by Clara Ruth Hayman

Court Street Press,
2003
\$12.95, Paperback

A Walk Through Darkness is subtitled, “For All Those Who Grieve And All Those Whose Grief Is Yet To Come.” I guess that includes you and me, too.

In this small book,

Clara Ruth Hayman has given us something special—an insider’s guide to getting through the death of somebody well loved.

No preaching here. Hayman is taking us on her personal

journey and allowing us to feel and learn along the way. She’s not ashamed to reveal herself. She gently shows us that it’s okay to wade through the mysterious stages of grief and that it’s okay to survive, to learn small lessons, and to come out the other side with renewed respect for the fragility of life.

After the deaths of her husband and mother, Hayman is alone and groping for a way or a reason to go on. She chronicles with great honesty and insight what happens to her, and we learn through her eyes how we may be able to face death and loss, ourselves. It’s the little things in this book that mean the most to the reader:

I will always be grateful for and indebted to a longtime friend who will be my example in what to do for others. She would not call and “ask” me if I needed anything or if I wanted to do something. Instead, she would call and say, “CR, I’m coming over and bringing some tea. We’ll have a cup of hot tea together. If you want to talk, we will. If you just want to sit quietly, we will do that—whatever you want.” Or “I’m picking up sandwiches. It’s a pretty day. We’ll walk over to the park and eat.” Or “CR, there is an event at so-and-so. I’ll pick you up and we’ll go.” These acts were lifesavers for me because it was hard to make any effort on my own.

This tends to bring you up short, make you regret all the times you didn’t do something for someone in pain because you “didn’t know what to do.” It makes you want to pick up a phone, take a deep breath, and do the right thing for someone who is hurting in silence.

As Ray Bradbury says, “Death is a lonely business.” It’s something we will experience, reluctantly or willingly. This book will bring you back to earth and set you thinking straight, just when you are ready to give up or give in.

Jim Reed, columnist and author of several books of Alabama childhood and adulthood, is editor of Birmingham Arts Journal and curator for Reed Books, The Museum of Fond Memories in Birmingham.

Pie in the Sky

A Few More Clues to the Meaning of Life

by Jim Buford

River City Publishing, 2003
\$17.95, Hardback

Jim Buford, a native of Alabama, provides a nostalgic glimpse into his life in a third collection of essays entitled *Pie in the Sky*. As in his previous collections, *The Kindness*

of *Strangers* and *The Best of Times*, this volume is full of refreshing narratives that meditate on Buford's life as a member of the Baby Boomer generation. In his own words, Buford's "writing has focused on insights I picked up in the country during my formative years," and, although these insights may not provide the final word on the meaning of life, they capture a simpler, quieter time in Alabama during the 1950s and 60s.

Buford begins this collection by recalling his experiences as a boy exploring the beginnings of rock 'n roll music, budding romances, and the politics of high school popularity. The first section, "Dancing to the Music," reminds Buford's reader of the teenage struggle to determine one's own identity. "We Were Soldiers Once and Young" continues the discussion of identity and self-worth in recollections of Buford's days as a paratrooper in the 82nd airborne division and his service in the Korean War. The reader has inspirational glimpses into this man's patriotism.

In the final two sections of *Pie in the Sky*, Buford moves to his later years and illustrates his humor by retelling stories of cement pigs and talking crows. These stories are nostalgic as well, and they give insight to Buford's own philosophy—humor is a necessary part of life. This is a theme throughout the book as Buford appears not to take himself too seriously when he recalls wanting "five more minutes" to finish a story or the importance of having random pieces of trivia or proverbs to offer at dinner parties. Such skill reveals one to be a Renaissance man (or woman).

Overall, this collection provides light reading for those who desire an afternoon spent remembering the "good ole days" of a simpler life. Buford's nostalgic narratives overflow with amusing anecdotes and worthwhile insights, which are necessary ingredients to Buford's "pie in the sky."

Jessica Lueders is pursuing a master's degree in Technical and Professional Communication at Auburn University.

The Ocean Was Salt

by Loretta Cobb

Livingston Press, 2004
\$14.95, Paperback

Loretta Cobb of Montevallo has watched her husband, Bill, write fiction for the last thirty years, so it's no surprise that after retiring as Director of the Writing Center there, she took up short story writing herself. Her first collection, *The Ocean*

Was Salt, has now been published, and the ten stories are varied and pleasing.

As one might expect, these stories are set in Alabama, in Montevallo and Gulf Shores. Several have as protagonists middle-aged women, and health concerns play a large part in these stories.

One of the best of these is "Seeing It Through," which will resonate with many a reader. The story begins, "I've always been a good-natured, easygoing woman, but I don't take no crap either. As long as things are rocking along smoothly, I'm easy to get along with, but my friends and my husband Hooty know better than to cross me."

Thelma Sims is feeling poorly. Sometimes she feels cold and sometimes hot, and often she is without her normal energy. She is rightly worried that she may have cancer of some kind and needs tests. What ensues is horrible *and* funny. Her doctor keeps ignoring her, putting her off, losing her urine sample, in short being as inconsiderate as one could possibly imagine. So, finally, angry and exasperated, Thelma and Hooty shoot him. Some physicians may blanch when they read this story, but I have heard it read aloud and many in the audience cheered.

In the story "And the Word Was God," one is reminded of Katherine Ann Porter's "The Jilting of Granny Weatherall." The story is told from Mama's point of view, and Mama is dying. In fact, part of the story is told after Mama is dead. She has grown weaker, become confused, suffered the indignities of her final illness, and died, but she continues to narrate.

Several stories have women less ill, but still hurt or angry. In "Before We Crawled to Tears," Mama is hurt because her idiot husband ogles a strange woman at the beach. In "That Fall," where the characters are younger, the idiot husband has sex with the babysitter, who is a cheerleader at the local college.

In "Things Visible and Invisible," Damrell, an Alabama wife, is recovering from a mastectomy and visiting her city cousin in New York. Inspired by Manhattan and several Manhattans, the two women bring home a stranger and the three "carry on," one might say. Somehow, though, rather than just being an unfaithful spouse story, it is oddly life-affirming. The terror of cancer, the fear of death, her seeking after the vital experience, all seem to make sense.

An exception to the pattern of female protagonists, and perhaps the best story in the collection, is "Feeling Salty." Here a divorced father, Nick, has custody of his son, Tony, for a month. The relationship between father and teenage son is always tricky. This one is explosive. They quarrel. They misunderstand each other. Tony is much more knowledgeable

and mature than Nick believes, but is still an angry brat. Out of their more or less mutual determination to have a relationship, they manage, a little.

“Belle’s Balls,” which is not a hermaphroditic tale of Dixie in spite of the title, concerns the college president’s wife, Belle, who gives big official parties. This is very much an insider story and will be relished by academics, especially. There is a visiting writer, a handsome footloose single faculty member, jealousy, ambition, political tension, sexual tension. In short, life on campus.

Loretta Cobb is a relative beginner in the short story game, but she is certainly knowledgeable about domestic relations and fearless in writing about sex *and* death, and there is every reason to believe that she will become more technically polished. I look forward to her next collection.

Don Noble is host of Alabama Public Radio’s Alabama Bound and Alabama Public Television’s BookMark. This review and the following aired on Alabama Bound earlier this year.

Willem’s Field

by Melinda Haynes

Free Press, 2003
\$24, Hardback

Melinda Haynes published her first novel, *Mother of Pearl*, in 1999 and became, briefly, an overnight celebrity and, probably, millionaire. Oprah chose *Mother of Pearl* for her book club, the book hit the best seller lists, and Haynes was established. *Chalktown* (2001) was her second and, I think, better novel. It is the story of a Southern hamlet in which many of the residents are too filled with shame to speak, so they write on chalkboards they have erected in their front yards. *Chalktown* did nothing critically or commercially. Now we have *Willem’s Field*, published a few months ago and seemingly going nowhere. This is a pity because I think *Willem’s Field*, set in Mississippi in 1975, is her best yet and deserves some readers.

This is an odd, but oddly funny novel. The title character, Willem Fremont, suffers from acute panic disorder. SURELY he is the first panic disorder protagonist in all of American fiction. In the first chapter, Willem, seventy years old, is having

lunch in a diner in Texas when an attack develops. The seizure is described from the inside—Melinda Haynes herself suffers from panic disorder—and I was transfixed. Willem is conscious of what he is doing and how he appears to others, but he can’t stop himself. First he loses control of his utterances, much like a Tourette’s Syndrome victim. He begins to babble, then rage, to yell at the top of his lungs. He climbs up onto the table, scares the dickens out of the other customers, and is then thrown bodily out the door. Other times, he hears humming, he faints, he sees colors, and he becomes locked into repetitive, obsessive behaviors. It is terrible, but surprisingly very funny.

Willem is returning to Mississippi to try to get back the farm he had abandoned years ago. On this farm is a field, Willem’s Field, and it too is like no other field you have read about. One does not walk onto this field of some size. One falls into it, if one is not careful, because it is a sinkhole fifty feet deep and more or less square.

The present owners of the farm are wonderfully odd, too. Eilene Till, the mother of two grown boys, Sonny and Bruno, really doesn’t like them. Sonny is a 300-pound sloth, single and worthless. Bruno is a wounded Vietnam vet who can’t or won’t get on with his life. He sits all day long rereading old *National Geographic* magazines. “Eilene was chronically irritated, eternally frustrated, enormously weary of her boys. Like bad viruses they invaded her heart, wreaked havoc with her brain, stole the strength from her muscles . . .” But she is a mother and cannot really admit this, so she punishes them in her own way. She pretends to be deaf. This gives her the right to shout at them constantly, even when they are standing near, AND enables her not to hear anything they say to her. These scenes are a riot, especially in the kitchen where she pretends to be absent-minded and burns their cornbread and scorches their lima beans on purpose. Any claims as to the universal human instinct for motherhood are dispelled in this novel.

Haynes also includes, in this perversely funny book, two peculiar love affairs. Bruno, married, falls in love with the woman selling Electrolux vacuum cleaners and Sonny marries a stripper/hooker. In addition, there is a very unusual burglary of a small-town jewelry store. Yes, there is a lot of sadness in this story, but it is also one of the funniest novels I have read in ages.

Don Noble

LITERARY POSSIBILITIES AT MCCLELLAN

What could you do with old army barracks, an empty residence, or a block of dormitories? What about that contemplative view of the Mountain Longleaf National Forest in the background? And how about the temperate North Alabama climate?

All of these questions and more are part of the discussion that six statewide arts partnership are pondering as they make exploratory trips to McClellan in Anniston, Alabama, through a special grants project.

Several years ago the United States Army gave Fort McClellan to the Joint Powers Authority (JPA) in Anniston with

the notion of returning the property and buildings that had once been a thriving U.S. Army installation to the people of Calhoun County and the surrounding communities. JPA board members and staff hope to develop the property with retail establishments, arts and crafts markets, high-end condominiums, and educational ventures. A school for homeland security education and a canine training program are already in place.

Part of the vision for McClellan is that arts organizations from Alabama will find innovative ways to make use of the property. Because 7 million people live within driving distance of McClellan

(think Birmingham and Atlanta), the possibilities for an arts gathering place are rich, according to JPA officials.

On March 4-5, the Alabama Writers' Forum was the first partnership to hold a retreat at McClellan to explore the artistic possibilities there.

An extended board meeting over two days at Lide Hall, also called the Community House, yielded fruitful discussion about Revenue Committee Chair Philip Shirley's draft of a plan to organize fund-raising efforts for the Forum. Out of its usual Montgomery meeting place, and in the foothills of the Appalachian Mountains, board members found new perspectives on fiscal issues.

During a Thursday evening dinner at Remington Hall (the former officer's club), Forum board members visited with Dan Clecker, JPA's executive director. Book page editor of the *Anniston Star* Bruce Lowery discussed the advent of that excellent feature of the newspaper, and Forum board member Don Noble held an



A writer's residence would provide space, time, and solitude for one writer, or a writing couple at McClellan. Here board members (l-r) Philip Shirley, Bettye Forbus, and Julie Friedman tour an unoccupied house.



Board members Sheldon Webster, Brenda Estill (for Lee Taylor) and Randy Shoults listen as Pete Conroy, member of the JPA board in Anniston, explains where the Alabama Symphony's summer performances will take place on the former McClellan parade ground.

after-dinner conversation with Bruce about the unique demands of editing the book page. Noble and Lowery also touched on plans for the *Anniston Star* Foundation, which includes University of Alabama journalism interns at the *Star* in a community newspaper laboratory.

On Friday, the Forum toured the property, stopping at a couple of sites that could conceivably be writers' retreats. Linda Dean, Alabama Shakespeare Festival education director, was encouraged to learn that McClellan is interested in developing summer camp facilities for young learners in programs like her popular "Camp Shakespeare." Dorm facilities and the proximity of a number of fine writing teachers could make possible an in-residence summer creative writing camp.

At lunch on Friday, Bonnie Seymour, director of the Anniston Calhoun Public Library, and Sherry Kughn, library board member, told about the "Accent on the Author" program that regularly brings writers to the library for luncheon programs.

Another well-known local literary endeavor is the long-standing "On the Brink" writers conference, managed by Steve Whitton, professor of English at Jacksonville State University. Although cancelled this year due to budget constraints, the conference has enjoyed nine runs and it is hoped that it will continue. Running even longer is the Southern Playwrights Competition, now in its fifteenth year. The winner receives \$1,000, and JSU mounts a student production of the work. Whitton and fellow faculty member Judy McKibben talked with board members about how the Forum might help promote these literary endeavors.

Last but not least, the Forum's board dreamed about a place where a writer could just *write* at McClellan. Several

individual residences are vacant and could be renovated. One, situated on a little rise with the mountains in the background, was snugly inviting. According to Forum director Jeanie Thompson, if funding were secured, the Forum could manage the application process for a writer to live there, similar to other writers' homes such as the Frank Dobie house in Texas or the newly established writer's residence at the Fairhope Center for the Writing Arts.

If you are interested in learning more about the McClellan site, visit www.mcclellan-jpa.com to view photographs or a short video. Other arts partnerships traveling to Anniston are the **Alabama Alliance for Arts Education**, which will host several arts leadership meetings, and **Design Alabama**, which will focus on how existing buildings can be renovated to house artists and their work. The **Alabama Folk Life Association** and the **Alabama Crafts Council** will also meet at the former fort.

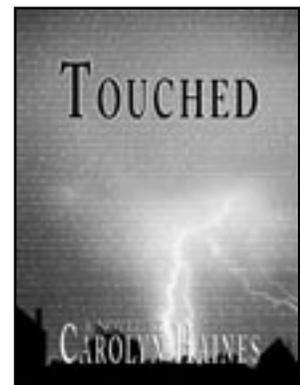
The **Alabama Symphony**, also a JPA grant recipient, is making use of its funds to help host a short summer season, with a Friday night performance in Birmingham and a Saturday night performance at McClellan. For dates and times, see www.alabamasymphony.org or call ASO at 205.251.7727.

Written with a languid sensuality, this rich and complex work features quirky, fully developed characters involved in an unpredictable story, with Mattie's long-awaited revenge providing a bitter-sweet but satisfying coda. —*Publishers Weekly*

Like the heat of a Deep South summer, Ms. Haines's novel has an undeniable intensity; it's impossible to shake its brooding atmosphere.

—*The New York Times Book Review*

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Thank you!

WHO KNOWS WHERE LEADERSHIP ARISES?

A Personal View of the Writing Our Stories 2003 Book Events



Queenia Vines smiles as the audience applauds her reading from *Shadow and Light* at Sequoyah School on November 6, 2003.



Chris Pearsey, who is published in *Open the Door VI*, relaxes with two proud family members after the reading.

ALL PHOTOS BY JAMIE MARTIN

by Jeanie Thompson

IT COULD BE ANY SCHOOL IN ALABAMA WHERE FRIENDS AND FAMILY GATHER FOR A SPECIAL DAY. But this October 30th we are at the Lurleen B. Wallace School at Mt. Meigs, a campus of the Alabama Department of Youth Services (DYS) School District. The boys assembled to read from their work have sweated blood over the poems and stories. They are nervous, not sure that people will like what they are about to read, afraid that they may stumble or make a mistake when they open their mouths. They are filled with stage fright, like all talented performers.

Miraculously, when they approach the podium, the fear seems to vanish. They look out at the audience and say their names, then begin to read from *Open the Door VI*, an anthology of poems and stories from “Writing Our Stories: An Anti-Violence Creative Writing Program.” Marlin Barton, their teaching writer, quietly watches as they read from the book he edited, his sixth in this program.

A week later, on November 6, we witness the debut of *Light and Shadow*, the fifth “Writing Our Stories” anthology from Sequoyah School on the Chalkville DYS Campus. Teaching writer Priscilla Hancock Cooper has edited the girls’ poems and stories by girls. She presents roses to those featured in the book, a tradition she started several years ago. The new class members—those just finding their way into creative language—each receive a rose of promise.

Teaching Writers on Their 2003 DYS Anthologies

“The student writers in 6 x 9 embraced the discipline of writing their poems in metrical feet. They learned that editing and revision sharpened their imagery and clarified their themes.

“J.L. revised his poem “My Room” a couple of times. Finally we got to the “Line Break by Syllable Count” lesson from the *Writing Our Stories Curriculum Guide*. When I suggested he revise this poem one more time, he grew frustrated. However, with a little coaxing he set about counting syllables.

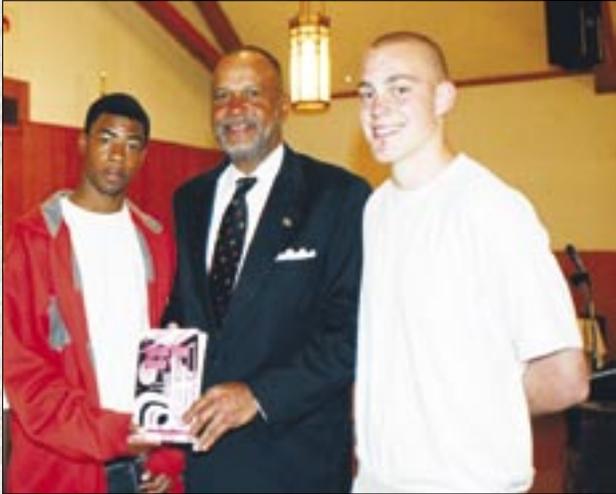
“He discovered that when he changed certain words to conform to his ten syllabic beats per line, his poem became less abstract. I was so impressed with his new poem that I titled the anthology from his first line: ‘My room is a 6 x 9 cell...’” —Danny Gamble,

McNeil School,
Vacca Campus

“The writing students at Chalkville continue to teach me the lesson that the human spirit can triumph in the face of incredible odds.

“These young women have the courage to face and write about extremely difficult experiences, and yet their work reflects love, joy, and hope. Watching their evolution as both writers and individuals is both fascinating and rewarding.”

—Priscilla Hancock Cooper,
Sequoyah School,
Chalkville Campus



Authors from Open the Door VI present the book to Rep. John Knight (D, District 77, Montgomery). L-R, Chavis Storey and Randy Rose proudly display their publication to Rep. Knight at the Lurleen B. Wallace School reading event on October 30.



Dr. Barry Burkhart (left) hands over his copy of Open the Door VI for signatures at the Mt. Meigs event. Burkhart, professor and chair of psychology at Auburn University, co-directs the Accountability-Based Sex Offender Training Program (ABSOP), which also includes "Writing Our Stories" classes taught by Marlin Barton and Danny Gamble. Next year's volume will include work from ABSOP students.



Ashley Briggs, who returned to Chalkville to take part in the book event, shares a moment with her proud mother in the library at Sequoyah School. Behind them are the photographs that were created by the students, some of whom are published in Shadow and Light. Briggs hopes to attend a college where she can study art.



The authors of Shadow and Light gather with their adult mentors: Priscilla Hancock Cooper (left, back row), Rep. Priscilla Dunn (D, District 56, Bessemer, second from left, front row), Susan Toole, Chalkville Campus Superintendent, and Janet Dickson, classroom teacher.

Finally, on November 13, the triad of book events is capped at the Adele Goodwyn McNeel School on the Vacca Campus of DYS. Danny Gamble leads his little flock to the chapel. They wow the audience and are covered this year by the *Birmingham News* with exposure any adult writer would covet.

While listening to the boys tell their harrowing stories always seems to make the audience feel stronger in their collective honesty—such bravery—no one is ever prepared for

the anger, pain, and recovery of the girls ages 13-18. It is obvious that in our society, we still do not understand very much about what women feel or say—especially young women in trouble.

Many family members and friends of these young people have witnessed what can only be called a transformation at these events. Young people whom they released into a youth correctional system – often with considerable fear – stand before them to proudly exhibit a triumph. They have done

AWF Participates in Summer Writing Workshops for Teachers

“Writing Our Stories” teaching writers will conduct creative writing workshops using the lessons developed in the program at several in-service centers throughout Alabama this summer. These in-service workshops are offered free of charge to Alabama teachers who want professional development training or CEU credit. The “Writing Our Stories” Curriculum Guide (see www.writersforum.org) is used as the basis for the workshops and participating teachers will receive a copy.

For a complete list of these and other workshop opportunities for writing teachers this summer, contact the Alabama Writers’ Forum at 334 242 4076, ext. 233 or email awf1@arts.state.al.

something worth talking about. The parents beam and hug their children afterwards, breathing a little easier today. Photos taken at the events show these families uplifted in their happiness and hope.

It has been our habit in “Writing Our Stories” to invite successful adults, role models if you will, to speak to our published authors and to set the tone for the events. This year, we were fortunate to have three very busy Alabamians spend a morning with us. I thank them here publicly for their dedication and time.

Chairman of the House Finance and Taxation Committee,

Representative John R. Knight (D, District 77, Montgomery), was between the fall 2003 Special Session and preparations for the upcoming 2004 regular legislative session when he spoke to the boys at Mt. Meigs.

Barry Woodham, Shelby County assistant public defender, who has worked to set up the county’s drug court and works with juvenile offenders, complimented the Vacca authors’ work and pointed out that applause was a good thing, worth standing up for.

Representative Priscilla Dunn (D, District 56, Bessemer) exhorted the girls to greatness at Chalkville, standing before them as an example of a woman who has worked hard for years to be a strong spokesperson for African-American Alabamians and for women from her district and her hometown of Bessemer. .

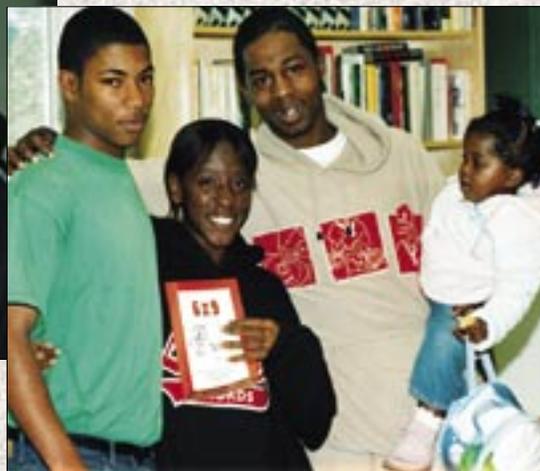
Each one of these speakers arrived with a prepared text, but each looked the young writers in the eyes and said, essentially, *you have done something. You can do more. Do not return to this place except to tell your story to those, who like you, have stumbled from the path.*

The speakers encouraged the young writers to examine how their writing could shape their lives to come. As Rep. Knight put it, “I want to take my hat off to you for producing a literary masterpiece born out of conflict, marked by candor, and focused on the future.”

I know these speakers leave with the words of the young writers ringing in their ears. Each year, our legislators and other elected officials have been profoundly changed by seeing tax dollars make a difference. Personally, I have walked away for the past seven years renewed that my work with the Alabama Writers’ Forum has meaning beyond job and paycheck.



William Aaron and his mom, Kelly Woodard, visit after the reading from 6 x 9 during the reception in the school library. William recently received his high school diploma at McNeil School.



DYS book-signing events are a happy time for student writers. Here Tony Anderson and his family celebrate after the reading from 6 x 9.

We teach these children *to be better writers*. And thus better communicators. Who knows which of them may help lead us to a solution for the problems that are legion in our state. One on one, person to person, this makes a difference. Who knows where leadership arises?

I dream of an army of writers working in Alabama's

public schools to help all children write their stories, not just those confined on campuses of the DYS school district. There is no reason every student in Alabama shouldn't have the skills and the confidence to stand before us and read what he or she has written with power, imagination, and beauty, from the heart.

Community arts expert endorses writing programs for incarcerated youth.

by Grady Hillman

Some 23 years ago, I was invited into the Texas penitentiary system to conduct creative writing workshops for a then unique, GED-oriented prison school district. The call to adventure (and that's what it was for me then. I'd never ventured behind the highly dramatic and dramatized concertina draped fences and red brick barriers into the "yard") enticed me for purely selfish purposes.

Certainly, the ten-month poet-in-the-schools residency offered a financial incentive after enduring a string of nomadic two- and three-month gigs throughout Texas. But the two most compelling summonings were personal. One was my literary voyeurism, a characteristic I then rationalized as noble. As a writer, I felt obliged to stick my nose into society's seamier districts. Such opportunities were rarely offered and should, therefore, be immediately accepted, the more dangerous the assignment the better copy it would make. If Virgil called, who was I to turn up my nose?

My second reason actually derived from a fear that I was unable to shake. My first child, Darby Rose, was about six months old when the offer came, and for those six months I'd skirted a paralyzing paranoia about her vulnerability to harm. The romantic high-risk existence I'd cultivated was now confronted with a deep need to know all the dangers of the world so I could nullify them for my daughter. Going to the prisons where the "monsters" lived and learning about their ways seemed a positive method of getting a handle on my anxiety. Fear is born of ignorance, and I'd have a chance to see the worst of the worst, or so I thought.



Grady Hillman

Of course, my adventure never gave me exactly what I expected. True adventures never do. I worked in sixteen Texas prisons in what turned into a three-year stint, and I've since visited over 80 additional correctional facilities in four countries including two juvenile facilities where the Alabama Writers' Forum directs a remarkable creative writing program called "Writing Our Stories."

What I learned in Texas and elsewhere was that monsters were highly unusual in prisons. On very rare occasions, an individual might enter the classroom and drop the temperature ten degrees or so, but for the vast majority, the monster was a mechanistic system of mandatory sentences that addressed addiction with prison, poverty with prison, race differences with prison, mental illness with prison. The number of prisoners in Texas who were mentally retarded—about 10 percent of the total population—outnumbered the sociopaths and psychopaths about 5 to 1.

My first lesson back then was that if nothing changed, my daughter was actually in greater danger of the criminals after they came out of prison than before they went in. Prisons didn't capture monsters but made them. I realized once in that I couldn't leave. In a briar patch with thousands of Br'er Rabbits, poetry was much more powerful than punishment in affecting positive change in people's lives.

The reasons for this change are myriad. Literacy, and by this I mean the ability to express one's thoughts and emotions effectively on paper, comes with a cornucopia of benefits. In a sea of pop culture and corporate seductive dis-

course that elevate materialism to religious dimensions, the media literate (and self-literate) can better navigate without fatalistically turning to drugs or theft. Unlike Billy Budd, the articulate have a solution to the frustration that begets violence. Facility on paper for those in prison enables a meaningful discourse with family on the outside and a safer and more productive return to society. Crafting a story or poem involves critical thinking skills and realistic appraisals of characters, setting, and how conflict can be resolved. Creative writing is a reflective tool that stabilizes memory so that traumatic wounds can be managed and soulful affections maintained. And, of course, the publication of poems and stories, an important part of what “Writing Our Stories” does, offers so many benefits of its own just in the artisan satisfaction of creating a beautiful product, the enhanced critical thinking skills that comes from an editorial eye, and, most important, the initiation of a dialogue of reconciliation and understanding with a society that has previously condemned the writer.

“Writing Our Stories” is to my knowledge the premier creative writing program for young offenders in the nation. Now in its seventh year of uninterrupted operation, it has consistently provided high quality literary artist residencies to Alabama youth incarcerated in three state facilities, publishing and promoting the workshop efforts in fifteen volumes. The “Writing Our Stories” curriculum has been codified and published, showcased in the national journal *Correctional Education*. And the program has been piloted in three Mississippi alternative schools. The Alabama Writers’ Forum has made a true commitment to community arts with this program.

Through its remarkable and enduring engagement with “Writing Our Stories,” the Alabama Writers’ Forum is affirming the right of all children to have access to the cultural resources of the community. In doing so, it has assured that many of these incarcerated children have the tools necessary to survive, and hopefully thrive, in society without ever seeing the back side of bars again, making for a much safer world for all our children.

Grady Hillman is a poet, folklorist, anthropologist, and internationally recognized arts and education consultant. Recently, he was the Technical Assistance Provider to the federal initiative Arts Programs for Young Offenders in Detention and Corrections through a two-year collaborative grant from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention.

From *Light and Shadow*, a poem in the blues vernacular

You Thought Wrong

My heart is like a bomb,
Ready to explode.
My heart is like a bomb,
Ready to explode.
Don't know how to defuse it,
And it's fixing to blow.

Should I just leave,
Or should I go back to you?
Should I just leave,
Or should I go back to you?
Torn between right and wrong,
Uncertain what to do.

Now, you're in trouble,
And you don't have anyone.
You're in trouble,
And you don't have anyone.
You want me to drop everything,
You should remember what you have done.

Remember how you left me,
Standing in the rain.
Remember how you left me,
Standing in the rain.
Now you need me,
And you want me to forget all my pain.

You took me for granted,
Using me for your sick games.
You took me for granted,
Using me for your sick games.
Now you want me to help you,
Now, ain't that just a shame.

Now, I finally decided,
You're going to be sorry.
I finally decided,
You're going to be sorry.
I'm dropping you like a bad habit,
Leaving you to worry.

A.E.B.

ALABAMA

A State of Voices

How do we find the way to our voices as writers? This question has haunted me since I was fourteen.

I began writing in a notebook because older students (actually, senior boys) were writing what they called *poems* and circulating them through the high school. The words sounded like a north Alabama version of Bob Dylan lyrics. I decided, “I could do that,” and began showing my efforts to my girl friend Linda, who egged me on.

What I discovered was the world of poetry, a place where I could go *alone*, find courage, be myself, and come back later to read and reflect. It was a place of such freedom, candor, and forgiveness that it made me giddy. I wanted more and more. I have not left the room of poetry since.

Last fall, when we launched the thirteenth, fourteenth, and fifteenth anthologies of writing by juveniles in the “Writing Our Stories: Anti-Violence Creative Writing Program” on three Department of Youth Services campuses I was reminded of that room.

As the young man at Mt. Meigs approached the podium to read from his published work in *Open the Door VI*, as the young girl at Chalkville bravely read from *Shadow and Light*, I was stunned back to the realization, as I am each year, that our program is working for a very simple reason: we honor the *voices* of these individuals.

We listen without judgment to what is in their hearts and minds. We tell these young people that they matter, no matter how many mistakes they’ve made. We are forgiving them their sins against the State by welcoming them into the community of writers.

What a beautiful way to make Alabama a better place to live—for everyone concerned. What a real civics lesson—that within our youth corrections system, we are helping redirect lives.

I can imagine that this year’s Harper Lee Distinguished Alabama Writer recipient, Sonia Sanchez, might understand what I am saying. A poet and an outspoken advocate for women and for African-Americans her entire life, Sanchez told me that this is her first award from her home state. What a beautiful homecoming to welcome one of our most recog-

nized native daughters in Monroeville on April 30th.

You’ll read elsewhere in these pages of

a first-time novelist, of dedicated editors, librarians, academics, volunteers, and you’ll taste the riches of newly published books. As I try to put these pieces together – working with young writers, honoring senior writers—I find myself faced with a dilemma.

I know beyond a shadow of a doubt that we are richly blessed in Alabama with writing talent. I also know that the work of the Alabama Writers’ Forum is currently well supported by a variety of funds, but unlike the wellspring of literary talent, *none of these is guaranteed*. Simply put, it is time for you, a reader of *First Draft*, to educate yourself and become an advocate for Alabama arts.

Know your elected officials and tell them why the arts should continue to be supported in Alabama. Point to programs like the Alabama Writers Symposium in Monroeville and the Harper Lee Award or “Writing Our Stories.” Go to www.arts.state.al.us to learn about arts advocacy on the state level. Buy a “support the arts” car tag—part of those funds support partnerships like the Forum. Be part of the solution.

Later this spring we will announce the Forum’s Campaign for Sustainability, our initiative to bolster state and federal funding with a private-giving fund that may serve as an encouragement to other arts non-profits to do likewise. In the meantime, remember that your membership is *vital* to the Forum’s health – please renew if you are lapsed or join if you never have.

Your voice in the community of writers and readers is important – it is *yours*, and no one will ever take that away from you. But we must ensure through our advocacy that the Forum’s voice remains strong.



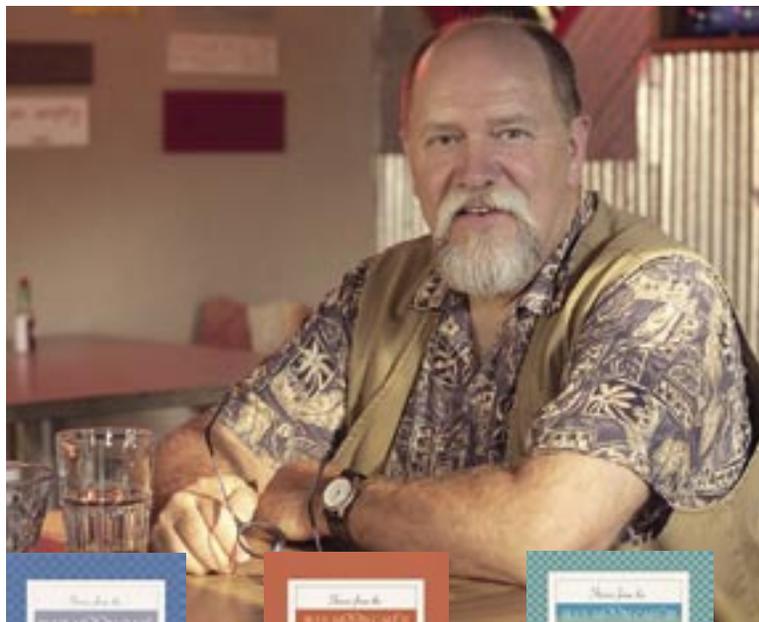
Jeanie Thompson

Jeanie Thompson, Executive Director of the Alabama Writers’ Forum, is author of three collections of poetry, and co-editor with Jay Lamar of The Remembered Gate: Memoirs by Alabama Writers.

DOING ALABAMA PROUD

THE SWEET HOME CONTRIBUTIONS OF SONNY BREWER

Photo of Mr. Brewer by Dennis Hearne



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Pat Conroy
Tom Franklin
W.E.B. Griffin
Winston Groom
Melinda Haynes
Silas House
Bev Marshall
Barbara Robinette Moss
Jennifer Paddock
Brad Watson

Book Two Features:

Jill Conner Browne
Beth Ann Fennelly
Fannie Flagg
William Gay
Suzanne Hudson
Cassandra King
Suzanne Kingsbury
Ron Rash
George Singleton
Sidney Thompson
Steve Yarbrough

Book Three Features:

Jan Chabreck
Joe Formichella
Tim Gautreaux
Wayne Greenhaw
Donald Hays
Michael Knight
Jonathan Odell
Michelle Richmond
Brewster Robertson
Dayne Sherman
Daniel Wallace

Sonny Brewer wears many hats including independent bookstore owner, author scout, editor, poet, memoirist, and novelist. But his true talent lays in directing an international spotlight down on Southern literature and, particularly, its artistic center—Alabama.

With the *Stories from the Blue Moon Café* anthology series, Mr. Brewer has brought new audiences from around the world to Alabama’s most renowned and eclectic living authors including Tom Franklin, Winston Groom, Melinda Haynes, Frank Turner Hollon, Michelle Richmond, Fannie Flagg, and Rick Bragg. He even found room for some writers not fortunate enough to be born or live in Alabama including Pat Conroy, Larry Brown, Jill Conner Browne, William Gay, and Brad Watson.

But perhaps Mr. Brewer’s real legacy will be his eye for young and emerging talent. Alongside the greats on the *Blue Moon* menu are the debut and early fiction pieces of Alabama’s most promising new voices such as Eric Kingrea, Suzanne Hudson, Joe Formichella, Jack Pendarvis, Dayne Sherman, and Mack Lewis.

www.Macadamcage.com

“There is no one out there I know of who has done more to help Southern authors find an audience and their confidence than Sonny Brewer.”—Rick Bragg

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