

FIRST DRAFT

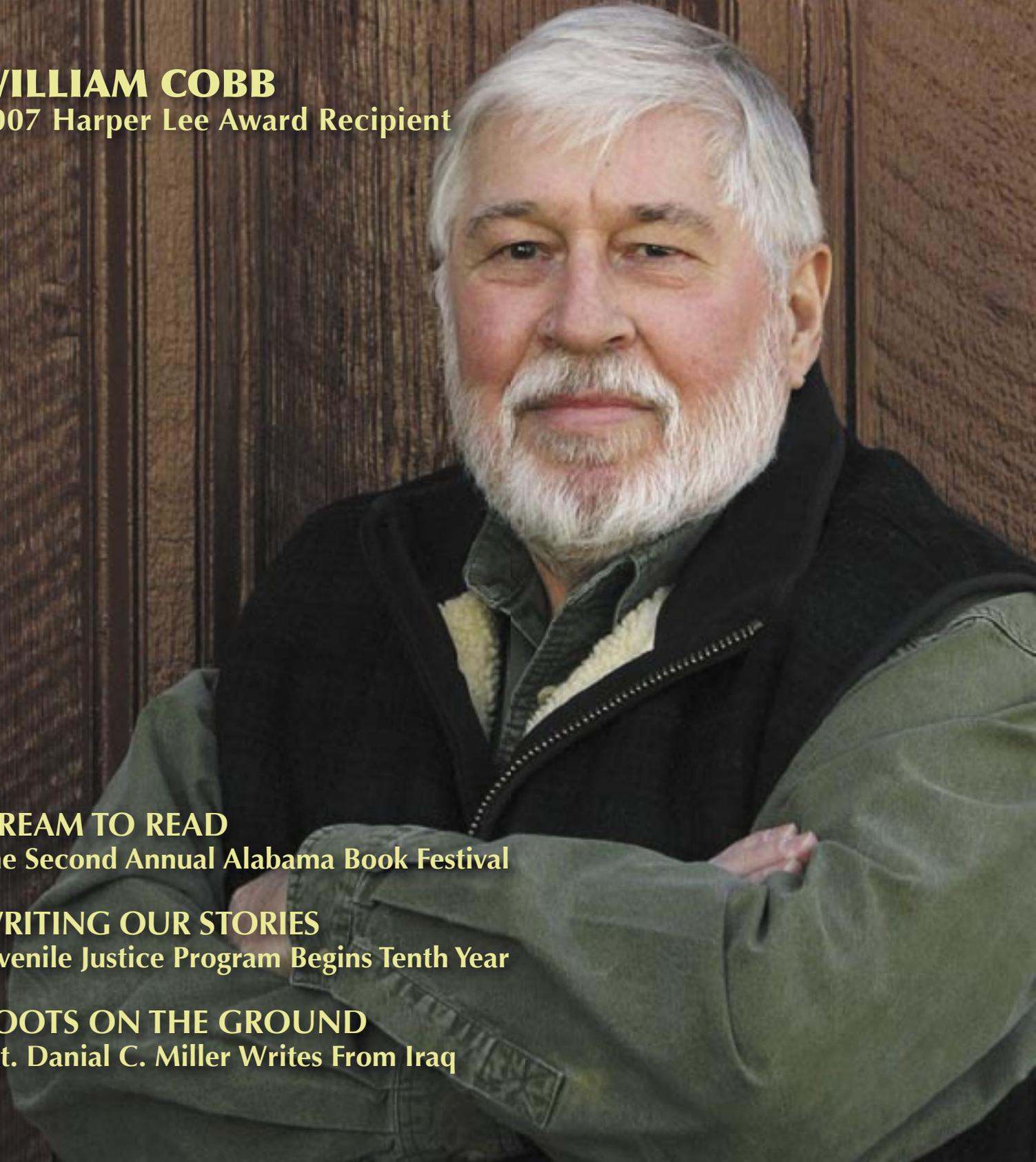
THE JOURNAL OF THE ALABAMA WRITERS' FORUM • SPRING 2007

WILLIAM COBB
2007 Harper Lee Award Recipient

DREAM TO READ
The Second Annual Alabama Book Festival

WRITING OUR STORIES
Juvenile Justice Program Begins Tenth Year

BOOTS ON THE GROUND
Sgt. Danial C. Miller Writes From Iraq



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First Draft is a journal for writers,
readers, editors, publishers, and those
who support and work in the literary arts.

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BOARD MEMBER PAGE



*Derryn E. Moten is an Associate
Professor of Humanities at Alabama
State University.*

I am delighted to serve as chairman of the board for the Alabama Writers' Forum and on behalf of the executive board members I want to thank you, our readers, supporters, and friends, for your continued support. Alabama writers are a diverse and bountiful community. Their individual works and collective reputations are well known inside and outside our state.

Alabama writers are professional and amateur, rural and urban, young and old. Some are model citizens, some are errant marauders. The Alabama Writers' Forum works with them all. For example, the Forum's work with juvenile offenders within the Department of Youth Services began ten years ago. The Writing Our Stories:

An Anti-Violence Creative Writing Program is a nine-month, intense workshop that provides young folk an opportunity to express in words what before they may have acted out in physical or personal violence. Writing offers hope and a chance for a new beginning. In the words of Forum Executive Director Jeanie Thompson, "Our goal is to give these young people a new language...to envision themselves as someone different than the person who entered the DYS facility."

The Forum also promotes writing through our hosting of the High School Literary Arts Awards, a state-wide competition offering monetary awards to students enrolled in the ninth through twelfth grades.

As an educator and librarian, I am keenly aware of the transformative power of writing and reading. Indeed, writing is part and parcel with reading. *For Colored Girls...* author and playwright Ntozake Shange says she found her voice through reading. The Forum joins Alabama's schools, libraries, and bookstores in their efforts to increase literacy among our populace.

Alabama writers enrich our lives and our state by continuing to challenge our convictions and conventions. The Alabama Writers' Forum will continue to be a conduit for writers and writing, but to ensure our longevity we must raise the ante by asking you to help us grow the Forum. We need you to invite your colleagues, friends, and neighbors who are not members of the Forum to join. Like most non-profits, the Forum relies on your generosity and your goodwill. The envelope enclosed in each *First Draft* provides one vehicle to join, or people may download a form at www.writersforum.org.

We are just one piece of the overall arts community in Alabama. Our state abounds with talent and the Alabama Writers' Forum is one venue to showcase that talent. The members of the executive board appreciate your commitment to the arts in Alabama and to the Forum. I hope to see you at a reading around town.

Derryn E. Moten

Founded in 1992, the Alabama Writers' Forum is a not-for-profit, statewide literary arts service organization whose mission is to advance the art of writing by promoting writers, educating young writers, and cultivating Alabama's literary arts. The Forum partners with other not-for-profit arts organizations, schools, libraries, and like-minded entities across the state in a range of public programs and educational endeavors. Some of its partners include the Alabama Alliance for Arts Education, the Alabama Center for the Book / Center for the Arts and Humanities, Auburn University College of Liberal Arts, the Alabama Department of Youth Services, and Alabama Southern Community College. In addition, the Forum works in communities to promote local literary arts programming and to support teachers of creative writing.

Sustaining funding for the Alabama Writers' Forum comes from our major partner, the Alabama State Council on the Arts, with additional funds from our extensive membership base, education contracts, individual contributions, and corporate commitments. Additional funds for special projects have come from the Alabama Children's Trust Fund, the National Endowment for the Arts, the Southern Arts Federation, and the "Support the Arts" Car Tag Fund.

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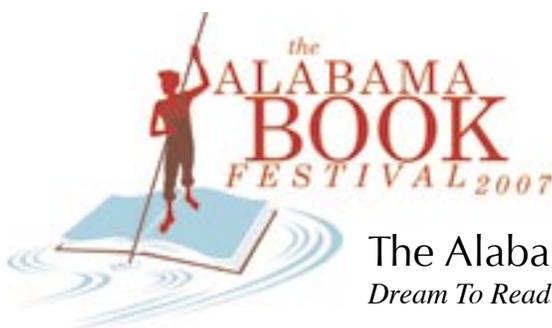
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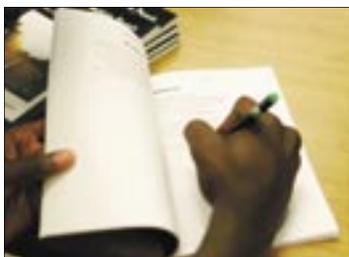
William Cobb Wins 2007 Harper Lee Award

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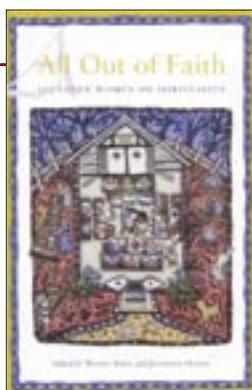
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A SENSE OF PLACE

William Cobb Wins 2007 Harper Lee Award

by Danny Gamble

Folks in Montevallo have grown accustomed to spying William Cobb tooling around town in his Mercedes Benz, his skillet hat perched atop his thick silver hair, his writer wife Loretta—the picture of eternal youth—sitting beside him, her beret slightly askew. These sightings have become less frequent, though.

“I’m the biggest hermit of all,” said Cobb. “As I get older it becomes more and more important to me to get said what I want to say. I rarely go out, except with my father during the day for coffee. And that’s usually a thirty minute break from the keyboard.”

William Cobb—“Bill” to his friends—is the tenth recipient of the Harper Lee Award for Alabama’s Distinguished Writer of the Year. Named for the Monroeville native and author of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, the annual award recognizes the lifetime achievement of a writer who was born in Alabama or who spent his or her formative years living and writing in the state.

In his letter of nomination, Don Noble, host of the APT literary interview show *Bookmark*, wrote, “I think it is important to mention that Cobb’s work, while sometimes very funny, for the most part has real gravitas.”

Noble noted that Cobb’s body of work—six novels, a short story collection, and three plays produced off-Broadway—has examined such weighty topics as the civil rights movement, toxic waste, religion, metaphysics, and the Klan. Readers, like Noble, know that Cobb generally approaches such subjects with a nod and a wink.

“I think in this day and time,” said Cobb, “people want to find something to laugh at. Have you seen *Borat*? Irony is not dead. I have difficulty writing really serious stuff.”

Cobb admits that his often wildly grotesque characters even crack him up.

“If they don’t tickle me, I figure they won’t tickle anybody else,” he said. “I think most of my major characters have a comical element to them. I really got a boot out of Brother Bobby (from a recent short story “Brother Bobby’s Eye”) and all those bizarre characters in *Coming of Age at the Y*. I got a lot of laughs out of Bud Squires in *Harry Reunited* and all the characters in *A Spring of the Souls*.”

Born in Eutaw, Alabama, in the throes of the Great Depression, Cobb moved with his family to Demopolis—his fictional Hammond—at the age of six weeks. He received his early education there and later earned degrees from Livingston State (now the University of West Alabama) and Vanderbilt.

Cobb wrote his first work of fiction after a six-month bout with rheumatic fever at age eight.

“I presented my mother with my first novel—four bound pages—sometime after that illness,” he said. “I do not recall what it was about, and it is nowhere to be found.”

Anyone who has had even the most casual conversation with Cobb immediately tags him an honest-to-God, fixin’-to, Black Belt Southern boy. His drawl crawls as slowly as the Tombigbee River through his hometown. One can finish a plate of buttered grits before Cobb makes his point. He rushes

nothing. His rural Southern upbringing means something to Cobb, and this sense of place informs his work.

“I think for every Southern writer—for me, certainly—place is paramount,” he said, “because it shapes what we’re doing. I do write about the rural South and Southerners, and people in this place called the South are different from people anywhere else in the world. They talk different. They act different.

“I’m often reminded of what Flannery O’Connor said when someone asked her why there are so many freaks in Southern fiction. ‘Because we still know one when we see one,’ she said.”

Some writers may shy away from the label “Southern writer.” Not so Cobb.

“I don’t mind being called a Southern writer,” he said. “Some of my friends don’t like it because it’s sort of a qualifier, like a ‘woman writer’ or a ‘male nurse.’ I’ve never worried about that. People outside the South love our literature. Great Southern literature is universal. Welty, O’Connor, Warren, Percy (both of them), Conroy—none of these is limited by being Southern. After all, the South has produced America’s greatest writer to date: William Faulkner.”

So Cobb is not shy of dropping the F-bomb. In his early days, critics often compared his work to Faulkner. He resented it. Then, he said, he “held himself back, not wanting to be a Faulkner imitator.”

“Somewhere along the way, I realized I had my own voice,” he said. “It might be similar to Faulkner’s, and why not. I don’t worry about that anymore.

“When you have a body of literature like ours was in the first half of the twentieth century, it is both a curse and a blessing.”

Cobb made a legend of himself teaching those influences in his creative writing and Southern literature classes at the University of Montevallo

from 1963 until 2000, the last dozen or so years as writer-in-residence. His legacy looms large, but those years took their toll.

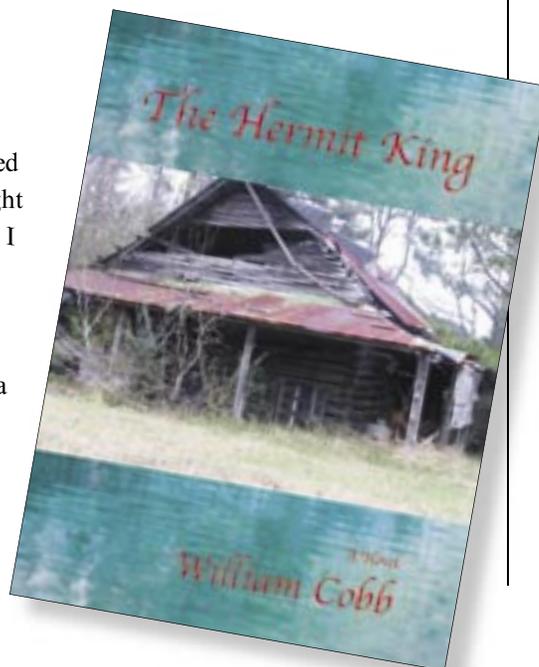
“During the early years, I was loaded down with general education courses with lots of papers to grade, so I didn’t have much time to write. I wrote many short stories and my first two novels late at night and on weekends.

“I loved teaching, though. When I was appointed writer-in-residence, I had more time for my students, and more time for my writing. Retirement has given me the opportunity to write full time, which was a lifelong dream.”

The Harper Lee Award for Alabama’s Distinguished Writer of the Year, presented annually by Alabama Southern Community College at the Alabama Writers Symposium in Monroeville, is made possible through a generous grant from George F. Landegger, Alabama River Pulp Company, Inc.

William Cobb will receive the Harper Lee Award at the tenth annual Alabama Writers Symposium, May 3-5. For more information, see www.ascc.edu.

John Wendel, a writer and ESL instructor in South Korea, contributed to this story. Danny Gamble is managing editor of First Draft.



WILLIAM COBB

BOOKS

Coming of Age at the Y, re-issue, Livingston Press, 2007

The Hermit King: A Novel with Five New Stories, Livingston Press, 2005

Wings of Morning, Crane Hill Publishers, 2001

A Spring of Souls, Crane Hill Publishers, 1999

Somewhere in All This Green, Black Belt Press, 1998

Harry Reunited, Black Belt Press, 1995

A Walk Through Fire, William Morrow and Company, 1992

The Hermit King, Portals Press, 1986

Coming of Age at the Y, Portals Press, 1984

PLAYS

A Place of Springs, 1988

Early Rains, 1987

Sunday’s Child, 1987

AWARDS AND HONORS

The Alabama Library Association Book of the Year in Fiction (*Somewhere in All This Green*), 2000

The Dictionary of Literary Biography Notable Novel of the Year (*A Spring of Souls*), 1999

The Yearbook of the *Dictionary of Literary Biography* Honor Roll (*Harry Reunited*), 1995

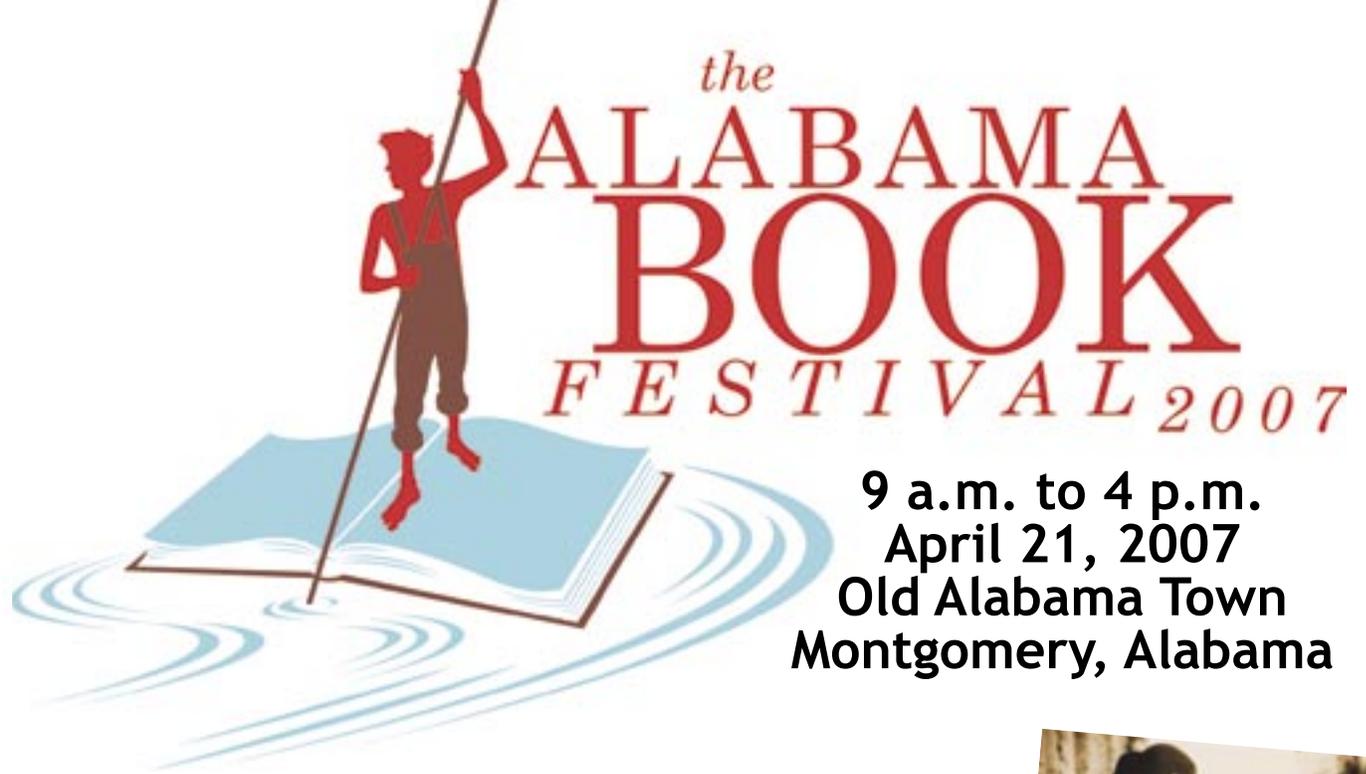
Fellowship in Drama, the Alabama State Council on the Arts, 1994

Fellowship in Fiction, the Alabama State Council on the Arts, 1989

Fellowship in Playwriting, the Atlantic Center for the Arts, 1985

University of West Alabama Alumnus of the Year, 1984

Fellowship in Fiction Writing, the National Endowment for the Arts, 1979



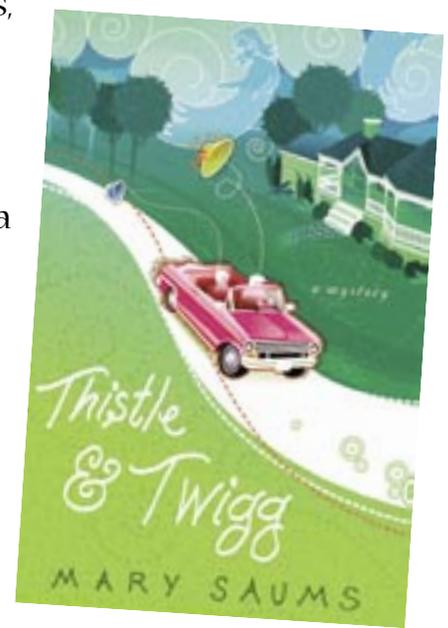
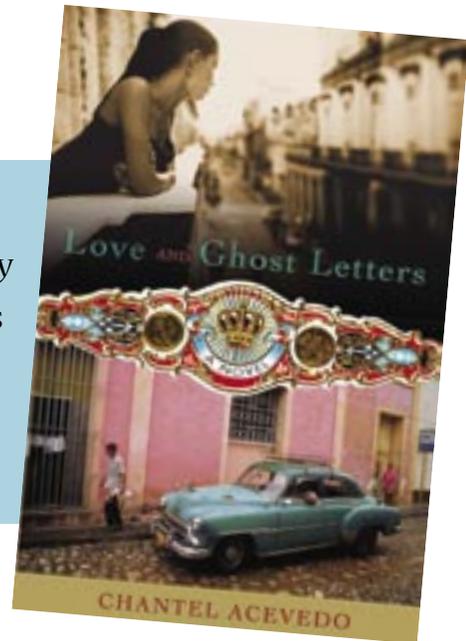
9 a.m. to 4 p.m.
April 21, 2007
Old Alabama Town
Montgomery, Alabama

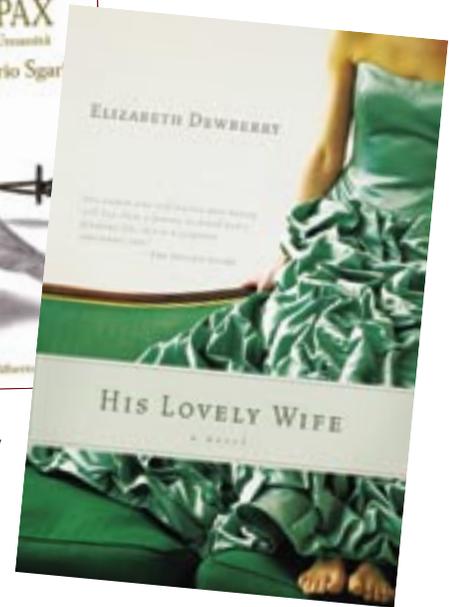
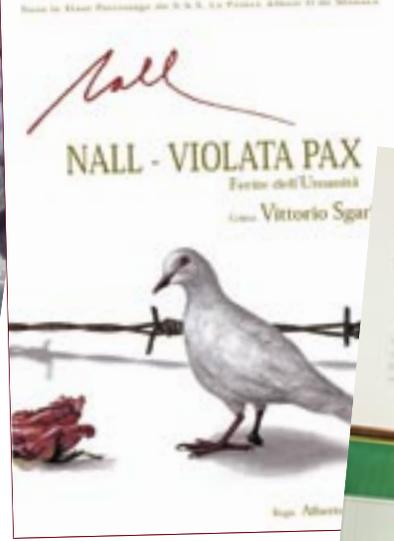
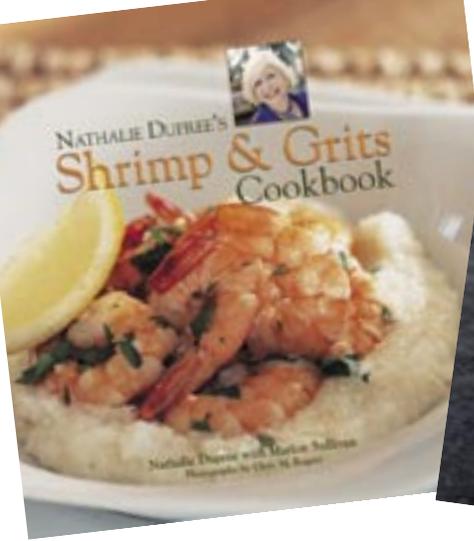
“Dream to read and read to dream.” The words of Alabama First Lady and Alabama Book Festival honorary chair Patsy Riley speak to the joy of books. Picture books and poetry, cookbooks and mysteries, short stories, novels, art, mystery, romance, history, nature books—they will all be on the menu this spring at the second annual Alabama Book Festival.

Join us in celebrating Alabama’s thriving literary culture and hear your favorite authors talk about their work at the Year of Alabama

Arts top literary event. More than fifty nationally recognized writers, book appraisers, book artists, illustrators, publishers, and performers will be on site. Special offerings include book give-aways, children’s activities, a Southern Writers’ Project premiere, and Alabama Public Television’s Reading Rainbow awards.

For more information:
www.alabamabookcenter.org





The Alabama Book Festival will begin at **9 a.m.** with an onsite coffee hour. Author readings and talks, as well as special activities for **young readers**, will begin at 10 a.m. and run to 4 p.m. **Author readings** will be followed by signings, and books will be on sale all day. A vendor row will feature publishers, literacy and literary organizations, and many others.

As a Year of Alabama Arts event, the Alabama Book Festival will feature acclaimed writers—**Pulitzer Prize** winner Robert Olen Butler, Alabama’s beloved **Kathryn Tucker Windham**, *Being Dead Is No Excuse*

author Gayden Metcalfe, Elizabeth Dewberry, famed cookbook author Nathalie Dupree,

Caldecott winning children’s author Vera B. Williams, and many more—and noted artists, including the **quilters of Gee’s Bend**, Nall, and hand printer Amos Kennedy.

The Alabama Book Festival is a **free** event for all ages and interests. For more information, go to www.alabamabookcenter.org.

ALABAMA SHAKESPEARE FESTIVAL PREMIERE!

Alabama Shakespeare Festival will offer specially priced tickets to Alabama Book Festival attendees for the April 20th premiere of Peter Hicks’s “Thinking of You,” a Southern Writers’ Project produced romantic comedy. Playwright Peter Hicks will be on hand Saturday at the festival to talk about his work. To reserve a ticket and for more information, contact Katie Perkowski at 1-800-841-4ASF.

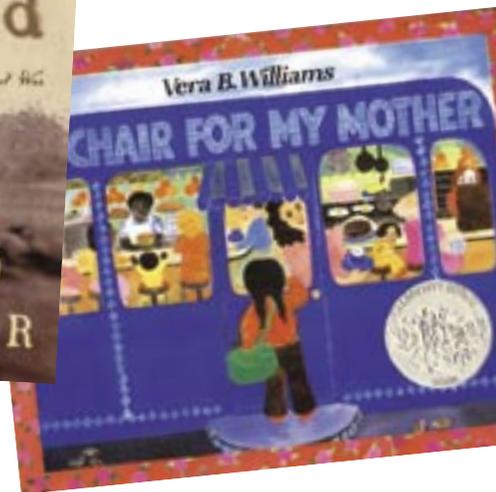
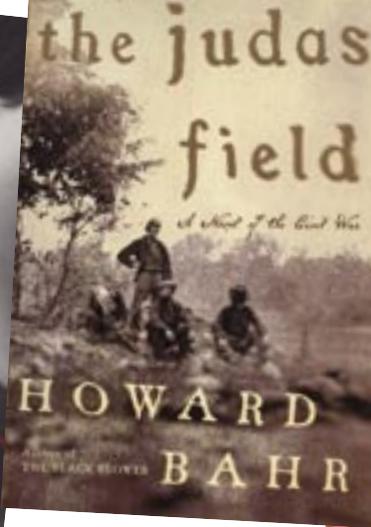
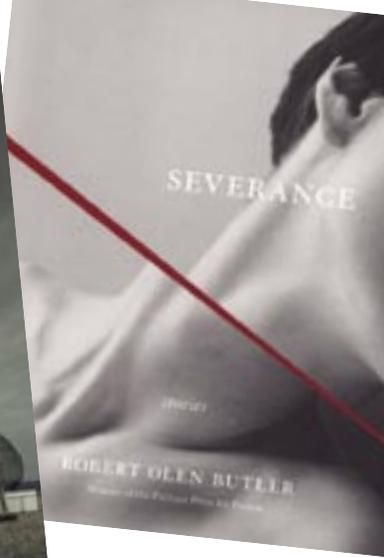
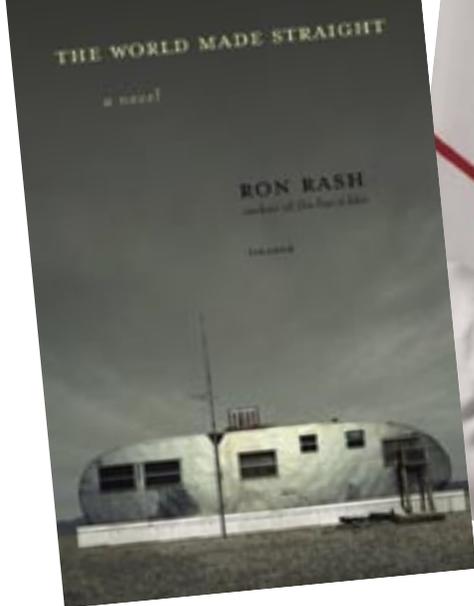
APT READING RAINBOW AWARDS

Alabama Public Television invites festival-goers to celebrate the work of young writers at the Reading Rainbow awards. Join APT, the Reading Rainbow winners, their teachers and families at 11 a.m. at the main festival tent.

CREATIVE WRITING WORKSHOP

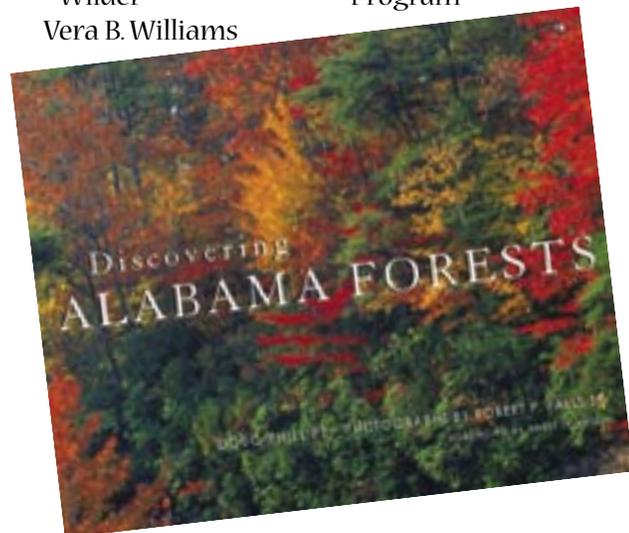
On Friday, April 20, the Alabama Writers’ forum will offer a creative writing workshop for teachers in conjunction with the Alabama Book Festival. Teachers grades 7-12 are invited to apply for 50 scholarships. Chantel Acevedo, Janice N. Harrington, Luke Wallin, Marlin Barton, Danny Gamble, and Priscilla Hancock Cooper will lead sessions on poetry, fiction, and nonfiction. For more information, contact the Alabama Writers’ Forum at writersforum@bellsouth.net.





For a full list of Alabama Book Festival presenters, go to www.alabamabookcenter.org. Festival presenters include

- | | | | | |
|--------------------|-----------------------|------------------------|-------------------|-------------------|
| Chantel Acevedo | Linda Fisher | Gayden Metcalfe | Sidney Thompson | Kathryn Tucker |
| Leah Atkins | Julia Spencer-Fleming | Shelley Fraser Mickle | Kali Van Baale | Windham |
| Howard Bahr | Wayne Flynt | Nall | Brad Vice | J. Wes Yoder |
| Leslie Bailey | Christopher Forhan | Sally Nemeth | Luke Wallin | University of |
| Marlin Barton | Frye Gaillard | Don Noble | Elyzabeth Gregory | Alabama Book Arts |
| Hester Bass | Wayne Greenhaw | Kevin O'Keefe | Wilder | Program |
| Jack Bass | Dan Griffin | Julia Oliver | Vera B. Williams | |
| Kate Bernheimer | Carolyn Haines | Jennifer Paddock | | |
| James O. Born | Janice N. Harrington | Doug Phillips | | |
| Joey Brackner | Aileen Henderson | Quilters of Gee's Bend | | |
| Wendy Bruce | Peter Hicks | Ron Rash | | |
| Robert Olen Butler | Jennifer Horne | Mary Saums | | |
| Ruth Cook | Ravi Howard | Eric Schmiedl | | |
| Kirk Curnutt | Amos Kennedy | John Sledge | | |
| Anne Dalton | Tom Kimmel | Carl T. Smith | | |
| Brent Davis | Michael Martone | R. T. Smith | | |
| Elizabeth Dewberry | Kerry Madden | Mary Stanton | | |
| Kim Dozier | Cynthia Mask | Duane Swiercynski | | |
| Nathalie Dupree | | | | |



SPONSORS

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Old Alabama Town is located in Montgomery's historic district. For information about OAT, go to www.oldalabamatown.com.





Writing Today

The Writers' Conference

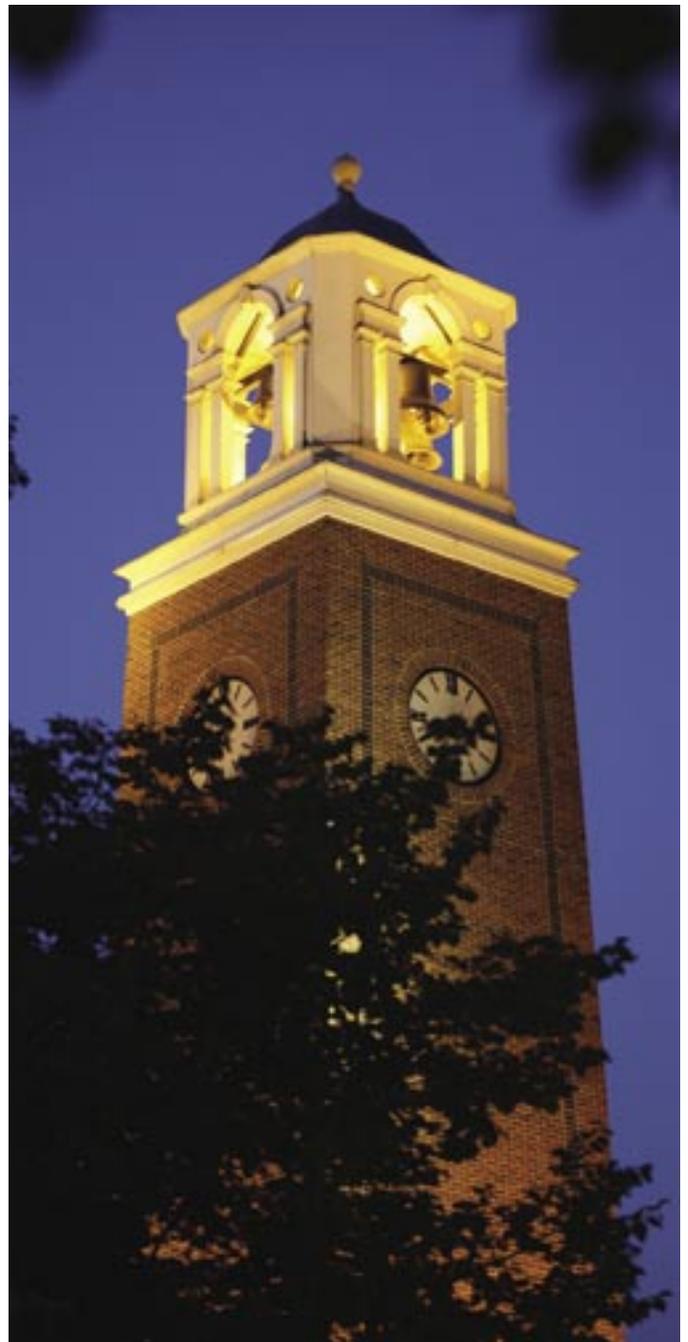
Friday and Saturday,
March 9 and 10, 2007

Writing Today has been a world-class conference for more than 25 years.

- Inspiring yet practical advice
- Tools and tips for every level of the craft
- Fiction, non-fiction, drama, screen, juvenile
- Publishers, editors, agents as well as master writers

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

For more information, please contact Birmingham-Southern's College Events Office at **205-226-4921** or go to our website at **www.writingtoday.org**.



BSC

Birmingham-Southern College

www.bsc.edu

SPEAKERS INSPIRE AND ARE INSPIRED

Writing Our Stories Launches New Anthologies

by Jeanie Thompson
photos by Jamie Martin

In 2006, Writing Our Stories began its tenth anniversary year. Teaching writers Marlin Barton, Priscilla Hancock Cooper, and Danny Gamble launched the previous years' anthologies with reading events at their respective campuses in the fall. As is our custom, we invited community leaders to speak words of inspiration to the newly published writers.

This year the range of guest speakers included a U.S. Congressman, a community arts administrator, and a minister. Each one recognized the immense potential of Writing Our Stories as a catalyst for change in the lives of young men and women undergoing rehabilitation through the Alabama Department of Youth Services.

On October 26 in the Chapel of the Mt. Meigs Campus, **Executive Director of the Alabama Department of Youth Services J. Walter Wood** welcomed guests to the campus. To the students who nervously thumbed copies of *Open the Door 9* from which they would read, Mr. Wood said, "Guys, you don't know it but we care about you. We're working to give you opportunities you wouldn't ordinarily have.

"This program lets you express yourselves with the written word, guided by professional writers. This program is a national model," Wood said.

The Honorable Artur Davis, U.S. House of Representatives, 7th District (D-Birmingham), the first member of the U.S. Congress to address a group of Writing Our Stories authors, held up a copy of *Open the Door 9* and said, "Today these students are inspired not by me but by what they've done." He urged the parents who had attended to "always be proud of your child," adding, "I don't care if your child stumbles and falls. Be proud of him always."

Making reference to the recent ascension of several African-American men in the national political arena, Congressman Davis said, "We know rising stars. We know politicians, but do we know how many young men have been rescued from despair?" His remarks centered on the dream of a truly



U.S. Congressman Artur Davis (D-Birmingham, District 7) spoke to the Mt. Meigs writers whose work was published in Open the Door 9 on October 26 in the Mt. Meigs Chapel.

changed world. Addressing the students directly he commented, "In a really changed world, possibility opens for everyone, and the only ceiling to your achievement is inside of you."

Following his remarks, twenty-three writers from *Open the Door 9* read a selection of poems. After the applause died down, Congressman Davis briefly regained the podium to say, "I look forward to the day when I'm an old man with gray hair putting gas in my car and some young man walks up to me and says, 'You have no idea who I am, but I'm a teacher now or I'm a lawyer now or I have a family now. One day when you were younger and I was young, I read to you at Mt. Meigs and here I am now, a success.'

"Tell everyone you see," Davis said to the audience, "I know a group of young men at Mount Meigs who people had written off, and I recognize the genius in them and they recognize the genius in themselves."

The Congressman's parting remark to the students indicated the effect they had on him. "You have inspired at least one person in this room to keep doing what he's doing, and that person is me," he said.

The following week on November 2, **Reverend Thomas Miller of the First Baptist Church of Kingston in Birmingham** gave a stirring address to young writers on the Vacca campus. He included a bit of personal testimonial about his youth, saying he was one of the "baddest" kids at the college he attended.

But he continued by exhorting the students to maintain against all odds. "When your burdens are heavy," he said, "when you're angry at your parents, mad at yourself, you can make it. Sometimes you have to encourage yourself. Tell yourself, 'I can do all things.' Don't give up, don't throw your hands up, don't be mad at the world."

On November 6, the young women on the Chalkville Campus heard from a woman who set an example for them in her achievement as a regional arts administrator and leader. **Kathy Yarbrough, Executive Director of the Cultural Alliance of**



Rev. Thomas Miller congratulates the authors of *An Incomplete Puzzle* during the book signing reception in the Adele Goodwyn McNeel School media center (Vacca campus).



Kathy Yarbrough, Executive Director, of Cultural Alliance of Greater Birmingham, spoke to the young women at Sequoyah School (Chalkville campus) whose poems and stories are published in the anthology *My Secret Place*.

Greater Birmingham, manages a twelve-county organization that funds arts programs large and small.

Yarbrough related her work to the work of the young writers being celebrated. “I have the privilege and honor of working with artists every day,” she said. “I’ve learned one thing about artists: Artists have to create. Once the idea comes, they have to write it down. Art is just in them.

“All of us have an artist in us, and we have to find that artist... Art is about the truth. Art peels away the layers of the onion to get to the stinking part. You have to peel away the layers to get to the truth.”

After Yarbrough read from a poem in *My Secret Place* titled “Like Mother Nature,” she observed, “Isn’t that poem a little bit of everybody? What a truth she arrived at.

“When you get to your truth, other people will relate. Real, good art is universal. Thank you for sharing your stories.”

Writing Our Stories is a juvenile justice and the arts collaboration between the Alabama Department of Youth Services and the Alabama Writers’ Forum, a partnership program of the Alabama State Council on the Arts. Auburn University and the University of Alabama partner through a specialized treatment program for young men at Mt. Meigs in which *Writing Our Stories* is also included. For nine months, published authors teach creative writing (poetry, prose, and personal narrative) using a skills-based curriculum developed by the Alabama Writers’ Forum with the DYS team. To obtain a copy of the **Writing Our Stories Curriculum Guide**, contact writersforum@bellsouth.net. The Forum also provides **training for teachers and others who work with youth**. For further information, contact Marlin Barton at bartawf@knology.net.



Cooperating teacher Sandra Whatley-Washington and teaching writer Marlin Barton present Congressman Davis with his copy of *Open the Door 9*.



Cooperating teacher Linda McQueen, guest speaker Rev. Thomas Miller, McNeel School secretary Pamela Bowen, and teaching writer Danny Gamble celebrate the publication of *An Incomplete Puzzle*, the seventh anthology from the Adele Goodwyn McNeel School.



Following the reading, Chalkville students and their guests gathered with consumer science teacher Evelyn Miles, cooperating teacher Janet Dixon, and computer technology teacher Carolyn Stanton at a reception in the school’s library. WOS especially thanks Ms. Myles and Ms. Stanton, who are retiring and have lovingly prepared receptions for Chalkville writers each year.

The Alabama Writers' Forum,
a statewide literary organization promoting writers and writing, wishes to thank its
generous partners and friends who contributed in fiscal years 2006 – 2007.

Partnership Support, 1993-2007

Operations and Programs; *The Alabama State Council on the Arts*

Partner in Education, 1997-2007

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The Literary Capital of Alabama

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Friday, May 4 – Awards Luncheon

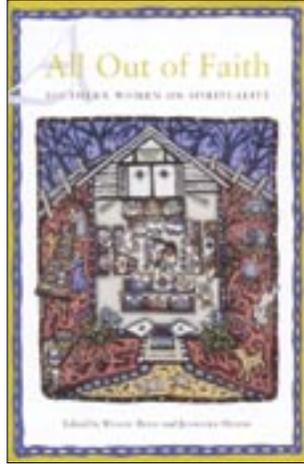
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All Out of Faith
Southern Women on Spirituality
edited by Wendy Reed and
Jennifer Horne

The University of Alabama Press, 2006
\$29.95, Hardcover

All Out of Faith: Southern Women on Spirituality, edited by Wendy Reed and Jennifer Horne, shares the faith journeys of seventeen women, nineteen if you count the poignant Afterword written by Wendy Reed and Jennifer Horne. “What strikes me most,” says Horne, “is how diverse these paths are, how much room there can be, when we have the courage to claim it.”

For Jan Willis, who calls herself a Baptist Buddhist from Alabama and who currently teaches religion and social studies at Wesleyan, a tumultuous landing on an airplane elicited an involuntary prayer to both her guru, Lama Yeshe, and Jesus. She calls this dual prayer a “deep response.” It is a telling phrase, and yet even so, a deep response can be filled with more questions than answers, for that is the nature of a spiritual journey, southern, feminine, or otherwise. The seventeen paths we vicariously walk in *All Out of Faith* are filled with questions, contradictions, irony becoming paradox, and hopeful perseverance. One could not ask for a more honest literary collection of faith stories.

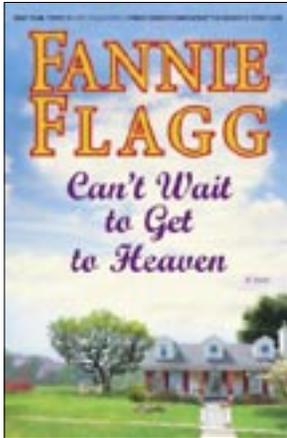
The women writers who offer these journeys “present as wide and varied a view as possible of Southern women’s responses to and reflections on spirituality and organized religion.” And most, if not all, of the writers seem to agree with the notion that “spirituality refers more to one’s sense of connection to the divine or the sacred, and connection to others, and to the search for meaning in one’s life” than to a prescribed set of beliefs espoused by a particular denomination. In other words, spirituality may lead to religious practice; however, religion in and of itself does not necessarily lead to spirituality.

The stories are filled with the guts and humor of growing up female in the Bible Belt. Shirley Abbott tells of coming down with food poisoning at a religious summer camp in Arkansas due to improper food refrigeration. And many of these writers, like Cassandra King, former wife of a Methodist minister, found the busywork of serving God and trying to be one of *them* replaced the search for Him. Years later, King discovers, after leaving her marriage and the conventions of church proper, she begins writing a novel in earnest and discovers that God is too large and too mysterious to be put inside four walls. “God, as I understood the concept, wasn’t limited to ritual and convention or to liturgical spaces. To find God, I had to fling the church doors open and run outside,” she writes.

Many of the writers in this anthology discern that the search for spirituality often happens in unexpected venues. The liturgy of the people takes place inside and outside the walls of the church. Diane McWhorter finds a spiritual grace in mining the history of Birmingham’s segregated past. Dorothy Allison discovers spiritual healing in speaking the unspeakable domestic crimes of childhood. For Barbara Kingsolver and Sena Jeter Naslund “literature offers valuable psychological insights and did, in fact, do good.” There is, for these seventeen writers, saving grace in the humanities.

There is, as well, a fearless searching that weaves all of these essays into a unified fabric of grace. Naslund quotes poet Maureen Morehead: “One must take off fear, like clothing. / One must travel at night! / This is the seeking after God.”

Sandra Agricola is the author of Master Bedroom Poems, White Mercedes, and Yellow.



Can't Wait To Get to Heaven

by Fannie Flagg

Random House, 2006
\$25.95, Hardcover

We've all heard the joke. A church group heading by van for a weekend of fellowship in Gatlinburg weaves too fast along a dangerous road when the van's driver—full of love for the Lord—yells, "I just *can't wait* to get to heaven!" Just then a nervous woman calls out, "Well, can you pull it over

and let me take the wheel for a while? I wasn't expecting to go quite this soon."

Such is the vein of Fannie Flagg's latest. Philosophy in the hands of these characters becomes a double-edged, hilarious sword.

Mrs. Elner Shimfissle falls out of a tree, triggering a series of events and spurring reflections on the extraordinary life of this ordinary woman. The characters contemplate many classic questions of life. What happens, for instance, to a good person after death?

Elner Shimfissle *is* a good person if ever there was one. Good natured. Caring. Willing to help all whose lives cross paths with hers. What is heaven like for her? And when suddenly she is sent back to Elmwood Springs, Missouri, from heaven, what will she tell everyone? Elner's nervous niece Norma Jean advises Elner to keep quiet. By the end of the novel, we learn that there have been more secrets than just Elner's preview of heaven that Elner has wisely kept.

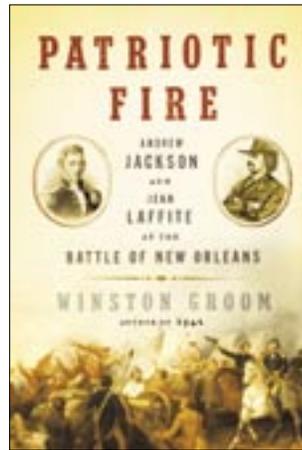
As we expect in Flagg's work, it is the juxtaposition of the low and the high that delights as her simple characters contemplate the complex questions of the universe. Questions such as "Which came first, the chicken or the egg?" or "What if the world comes to an end before I can collect my Social Security?"

In perfect comic timing, Norma Jean's hairdresser Tot Whoooten comments upon that dilemma one day: "If the end of the world *does* come before I can collect my Social Security, then I'm really going to be mad."

As the conversation segues to suicide bombers who "blow themselves up thinking they are going to wake up and have seventy virgins or something," Tot responds, "Yeah, well, they may be in for a big surprise when they wake up and find they're just plain old dead."

Readers expecting Alabamiana won't be disappointed. A gentleman named Thomas York makes an appearance. (Tom York was Flagg's former colleague on the long-running *The Morning Show* on WBRC-TV in Birmingham.)

Anita Garner teaches and writes in Florence.



Patriotic Fire: Andrew Jackson and Jean Laffite at the Battle of New Orleans

by Winston Groom

Alfred A. Knopf, 2006
\$35, Hardcover

If everybody wrote history the way Winston Groom writes it, far more people would have enthusiasm for the subject. Superbly written, this book is narrative at its best, devoid of laborious sentences and tedious detail. Still, it offers abundant

information about and insight into the battle of New Orleans, Andrew Jackson, and Jean Laffite. Even the footnotes deserve mention, for they are frequently filled with anecdotal information that is both useful and sometimes entertaining.

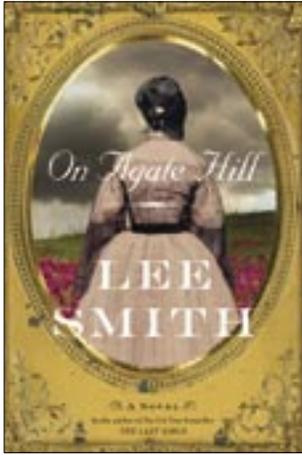
Jackson emerges as a rough frontier lawyer/planter with a minimum of military experience but plenty of grit—a man who is quick to capitalize on his opportunities. Given the chance to go after the warring Creek Indians in Alabama, Jackson defeats them, and this paves the way for his elevation to commander of the rag-tag army charged with defending New Orleans against an impending British invasion. Against great odds he meets this challenge head on. Smart enough to take advice from others and flexible enough to accept the help of Jean Laffite, a mysterious figure considered by many to be a pirate, Jackson triumphs over the British.

Notwithstanding Laffite's operating too close to the outer edges of the law and his sometimes trouble with American authorities, the man spurns a British offer to join their side for a rich reward and casts his lot with the American cause. Groom concludes that Laffite played a significant and perhaps a crucial role in the battle and helped make Jackson a national hero.

While this work might not satisfy those who insist on original research, thorough documentation, and painstaking analysis, it is based on considerable research and careful thought. Some might look askance at Groom for relying too much on outdated biographies, but he did consult some of the more up-to-date studies. Also, he makes a plausible argument for accepting the controversial *Memoirs of Jean Laffite* as authentic. No matter who writes about Laffite, he will always be an enigmatic figure, and the authenticity of the *Memoirs* will forever remain in dispute.

All told, this is a beautifully written, worthwhile account of the battle of New Orleans and an insightful look into two of the central figures involved in that momentous event.

David T. Morgan is a professor of history, emeritus, at the University of Montevallo and the author of eight books.



On Agate Hill

by Lee Smith

Algonquin Books, 2006
\$24.95, Hardcover

Novelist Lee Smith, who grew up in southwestern Virginia a few miles from the Kentucky line, has roots also in North Carolina. For over two decades, she has resided in Chapel Hill with her journalist husband Hal Crowther. Alabama has a claim on her too. In the late 1960s-early 1970s, Smith and her first

husband, the poet James Seay, lived in Tuscaloosa, where she was a reporter and feature writer for the *Tuscaloosa News*. An interview quotes her as saying that experience provided her with “endless material for new fiction.” “I had considered myself already ‘Southern’...but I’d had *no idea*,” she said. “Alabama was like another country.” Her comedic-ironic third novel *Fancy Strut* (1973) is based on topics she’d covered for that Tuscaloosa newspaper, such as the county’s Sesquicentennial Celebration and a high school majorette competition held on the campus of the University of Alabama.

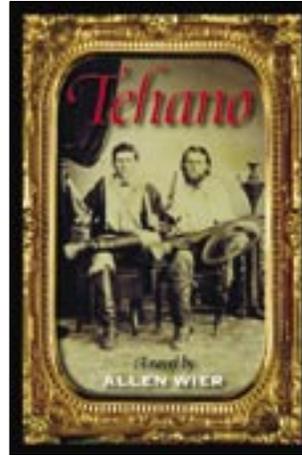
In the thirty-three years since, Smith has captivated readers with her richly textured novels and spirited, resourceful female protagonists. The one who comes to mind first is always Ivy Rowe in *Fair and Tender Ladies*.

We meet Smith’s latest, Molly Petrey, as a pre-adolescent “ghost girl” who in 1872 is pretty much raising herself at Agate Hill, her uncle’s devastated post-Civil War plantation in Wilkes County, North Carolina. After her uncle dies, Simon Black, a friend of her late father, claims the precocious Molly as his ward and sends her to Gatewood Academy. We learn of Molly’s adventures and misadventures through her diaries and writings of others. These relics are found by a haphazard, present-day researcher in the attic of the old Agate Hill house, which has now become a bed-and-breakfast. (This framework seems unnecessary, and it is distracting. This reader would prefer to stay with the vividly rendered nineteenth century scenarios and not be jarred back to the present from time to time.)

Molly has the opportunity to marry a rich man, but she doesn’t take it. She and her former teacher, Alice Rutherford, find their way to the top of a mountain, where Molly teaches in a one-room school and falls in love with Jacky, a country charmer with a beautiful singing voice. After marriage to Jacky, Molly’s life becomes one long, sad ballad of stillborn babies, and then she is accused of murdering her husband.

This is a deeply satisfying book. Lee Smith’s narrative fiction is as good as it gets, in this century or any other.

Julia Oliver’s recently published novel, Devotion, is based on the life of Winnie Davis, the iconic younger daughter of Confederate president Jefferson Davis.



Tehano

by Allen Weir

Southern Methodist University
Press, 2006
\$27.50, Hardcover

Tehano, the fifth novel by former University of Alabama professor Allan Weir, is a 714-page epic of Manifest Destiny, American westward expansion, focused on the northwest Texas frontier during the year immediately following the Civil War (1865-1866). It follows a central cast

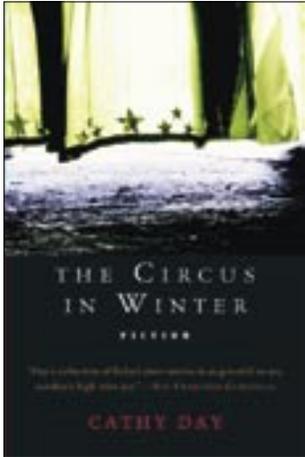
of seventeen principal characters, supported by dozens of minor figures, in their destiny-ridden peregrinations in time and space toward an explosive denouement on the Llano Estacado, the Staked Plain of what is now the Texas Panhandle, last refuge of the proud Numunuu, or Comanche.

To get there, however, the characters and the reader first must make their ways from origins as diverse as Germany, a Mississippi plantation, dirt farms in Virginia and Indiana, an insane asylum in Baltimore, a Manhattan drawing room, and a Comanche tipi. They must traverse oceans of salt water and seas of prairie grass, Civil War battlefields and Louisiana swamps, Texas’ fixed border with Mexico and her amorphous frontier with the Comancheria, the vast territory ruled by the Numunuu/Comanche.

Weir intends a novel of Tolstovian scope and weight, a saga of war and peace, terrible conflict and nation-building reconciliation, growing out of the Civil War to embrace the destinies of Native Americans and westering pioneers. The detailed descriptions and compelling power of his situations, as well as his acknowledgments, witness the substantial historical research which undergirds the novel. At times, the narrative seems to lose its way in the complexities of incident and background, but the patient reader is rewarded. As the individual storylines become more and more closely interwoven, what at first seems to be a historical novel becomes in addition a suspense thriller. The more the reader learns about the various characters and their stories, the more intense grows the anticipation and even dread of what must lie in wait at the novel’s climax.

One storyline, that of Gideon Jones, unites the others. Gideon embodies the pioneer virtues of loyalty, courage, good-heartedness, and resourcefulness. He suffers much, but he prevails. Weir’s depiction of the westward expansion is a compellingly realistic one, often violent and grim. In Gideon, and especially through excerpts from Gideon’s journal, the author ensures that the reader experiences enduring human (and humane) values crucial to civilizing the new country.

Richard Anderson is an independent scholar living in Montgomery.



The Circus in Winter

by Cathy Day

Harcourt, 2005
\$13, Paperback

If you've not yet encountered Cathy Day's first book, *The Circus in Winter*, stop reading and dash out immediately to get it. Alabama readers have the rare chance to claim first acquaintance with a future star.

Day, who now teaches writing in Pennsylvania, takes characters and incidents from the circus

that wintered in her childhood home, Peru, Indiana. More details come from her years at the University of Alabama. But only innate genius could imagine flood-chilled elephants imploring through second-story windows or the atonal banging of a semi-submerged piano as a "log, pushed in a steady, thunderous rhythm by the current, struck the keyboard in random chords."

Sidestepping circus freak clichés, Day beguiles readers with universal themes. Framing the saga, mismatched couples in 1885 and 1967 both learn that the attraction of opposites soon turns sour. In "Wallace Porter," marriage to his New York banker's daughter liberates the title character's long-repressed yearning for urban luxuries. Sadly, "he could not see that she was tired of temples," until after she died in their new mansion. Too late, Porter sees "a vision clear as the sun: his name on a dozen railcars, Irene beside him in a private Pullman as they chugged across America." In his beloved wife's honor, he abandons his old life and buys a circus.

Decades later, Porter's granddaughter loves a high school athlete and sees him as her ticket out of small town life. She dreams of living somewhere like Indianapolis, where "sudden anonymity made [her] feel so happy she scooted over next to Ethan and rubbed his thigh." When pregnancy results, Ethan honorably proposes, abandons his dream of playing professional baseball, and finds himself in another marital tragedy: frustrated Laura Perdido eventually walks away and disappears.

The uncanny persistence of memory unifies the book almost enough to call it a novel. In the final story, Laura's daughter, Jennifer Perdido, can never be lost, as her name implies, because she lives in a timeless world peopled by characters from every other story in the book. Jennifer reposes in this flock of souls, realizing "what felt claustrophobic at eighteen feels strangely comforting at thirty-two." Not all of us have circus clowns and elephant trainers in our family trees, but like Jennifer, no matter how far we wander, "we can all hear our hometowns talking softly to us in the back of our dreams."

Karen Pirmie is retired from teaching college English and now reads and writes in Montgomery.



The Space Between

by Kali VanBaale

River City Publishing, 2006
\$23.95, Hardcover

Our thoughts and sympathies always go to the victims and their families. But what about those other casualties found in the spaces between the "legitimate" victims and incomprehensible actions? When a horrific event such as a school shooting occurs, we tune in, riveted to the shocking

pictures of screaming children, horrified teachers and parents, and swarms of SWAT teams. Such is the theme of this compelling, prize-winning fiction by Kali VanBaale, which received the Fred Bonnie Award for a first novel. The competition is sponsored by River City Publishers in memory of Bonnie, the author of a collection of short fiction and a novel, who was an inspiration to other writers.

The narrative begins on Valentine's Day as Judith prepares breakfast for her husband, Peter, and children, Lucas and Lindsey, in their affluent suburban household. Things seem so normal when she kisses them goodbye, puts away the dishes, and goes about her day.

Her life is shattered by the news that someone has gunned down children and teachers at school. Hideous news rips through her like powerful slugs. Lucas is dead. He was the shooter. But how could this be? He was her child, a good son, whom she loved with all her heart.

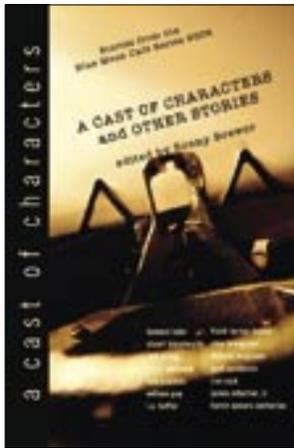
Dazed and in mourning, the family tries to cope with the aftermath. Except for one woman, the mother of a girl Lucas killed, friends and neighbors shut the family out of traditional circles. That mother and Judith share a terrible bond—each has lost a child in this violence.

In riveting prose, VanBaale reveals the ordeal of the parents who feel the brunt of their child's actions. A lawsuit hangs over them and they know they do not have the money to ever make up for the pain and suffering their son has caused others.

Eventually, Judith must find the strength to examine the past. She laments that she and Peter had "squandered opportunities to do more for our son."

While the reader may wonder if the agony will ever end for this family, VanBaale convincingly shows her readers that those whom we birth must answer for themselves and, regardless of the tragedies that befall us, new beginnings are possible.

Marianne Moates, a freelance writer in Sylacauga, is the author of Truman Capote's Southern Years.



A Cast of Characters and Other Stories

edited by Sonny Brewer

MacAdam/Cage Publishing,
2006
\$22, Hardcover

In the last few years, Sonny Brewer has built a reputation for mixing old favorite and soon-to-be new favorite Southern writers in his Stories from the Blue Moon Cafe Series. With his fifth anthology, Brewer wanted to “make the

next Blue Moon Cafe book fit into a coat pocket, a purse... give readers less on their plates, but more to digest...” The end design is a lovely book, reminiscent of the Everyman Series of poetry from Knopf and the discontinued “front porch” series of books from Algonquin Chapel Hill.

Brewer takes the title for the fifth collection from a fishing tale by his good friend Rick Bragg. Ten of the fourteen stories, poems, or essays appearing in this anthology are being published for the first time.

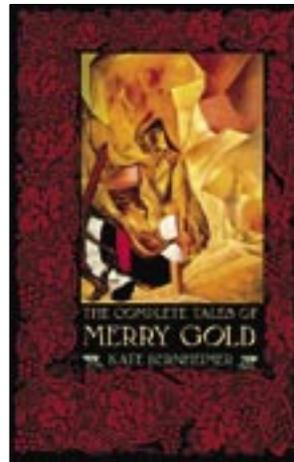
In “Holiday” by Tom McGuane, the author captures the subtleties of the rich versus the middle-class and the eternal wars between the sexes when two sisters, Teresa and Carrie—one of whom is married to a very wealthy German soundman turned New York music producer and the other of whom is married to man who works for a public utility in the west—insist on staying in contact and remaining close by traveling together to the islands by private plane. Smoldering at his “pet status,” Clem, Carrie’s husband and the story’s narrator, finds out more than he wants to know about the price his sister-in-law has paid for being the wife one of the *uberrich*.

Pia Z. Ehrhardt’s “A Man” explores the relationship between Lillian, a twenty-five-year-old woman awaiting her rapist’s trial, and Doss, the high school senior who saved her life. Bound together by violence, instant intimacy, and media attention, they’ve become “a celebrity couple in the small town in Arizona.” Even though Doss witnessed the gory aftermath of Lillian’s rape, she still can’t bring herself to tell him the one detail that would offer her redemption.

Other writers with works included in this edition are Howard Bahr, Stuart Bloodworth, Tom Franklin, William Gay, L.A. Hoffer, Frank Turner Hollon, Chip Livingston, Jack Pendarvis, Ron Rash, James Whorton, Jr., and Karen Spears Zacharius.

Brewer, the author of the novels *The Poet of Tolstoy Park* and *A Sound Like Thunder*, owns the Over the Transom Bookstore in Fairhope. He also serves as board chairman of the Fairhope Center for the Writing Arts.

Pam Kingsbury, author of Inner Visions, Inner Views, teaches at the University of North Alabama.



The Complete Tales of Merry Gold

by Kate Bernheimer

The University of Alabama
Press, 2006
\$19.95, Paperback

Kate Bernheimer, an assistant professor in the creative writing program at the University of Alabama, is fascinated by the fairy tale form. She believes they “provide the possibility for narrative to shine a different sort of terrible light. They are...one

of the most brutal and narrative forms.”

In *The Complete Tales of Merry Gold*, the second installment in the author’s “contemporary roman flueve” (a series of intertwined novels), Bernheimer returns to the stories of the three Gold sisters. As in her earlier collection, *The Complete Tales of Kertzia Gold*, the stories are told in first and third person narration and set in an unnamed suburban area. Here, the Golds are always aware of the icy edges of the ponds at the edge of the city limits. Using Russian, German, and Yiddish folktales as her starting point, Bernheimer shows readers how the tales might be retold in the contemporary world. Taking isolation as their collective theme, both collections are full of brutality, dark imagery, and episodic adventures.

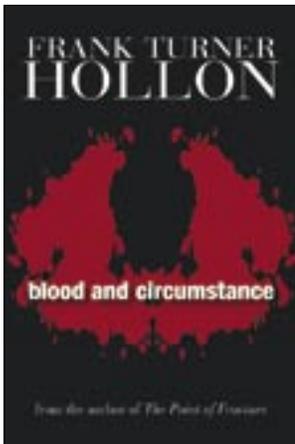
As in the original German tale, Merry walks the streets, giving away everything she owns. In the original tale, the young, kind-hearted, selfless child is rewarded with a lifetime of riches. In this retelling of the story, Merry’s parents, after discovering Merry has not been attending high school, help her find her way into a trade school where she’s supposed to become an apprentice, seamstress, and artist.

Merry Gold, who has terrorized her sisters since childhood and whose earliest memories are of watching her grandmother drink from her mother’s hidden liquor stash, has blurred the lines between good and evil most of her life. Eventually, she finds herself walking the streets naked, picking up men for money. All of her unselfish intentions are turned into selfish intentions once she understands “all animals must die.”

Reminiscent of Anne Sexton’s *Transformations*, *The Complete Tales of Merry Gold* is not for the faint-hearted. Bernheimer, who created and edits the journal *Fairy Tale Review*, also edited *Mirror, Mirror on the Wall: Women Writers Explore Their Favorite Fairy Tales*. She has been the George Bennett Fellow in Creative Writing at Phillips Exeter Academy in New Hampshire.

The University of Alabama Press became the publisher of the Fiction Collective 2 Series last April. *The Complete Tales of Merry Gold* is the first work to appear under the FC2 imprint.

Pam Kingsbury



Blood and Circumstance

by Frank Turner Hollon

MacAdam/Cage, 2007

\$23, Hardcover

Among the most interesting information for accomplished and aspiring writers can be found in the writing and reference shelves of any reputable bookstore, but writers must know what they're looking for. The most valuable information is hidden in interviews with other writers as they talk

about craft. Eventually, even the best prose stylists will admit the quest for effective dialogue is the most challenging facet of their field.

Frank Turner Hollon meets this demon head-on. His *Blood and Circumstance*, a short novel exploring the inexplicable fratricide that opens the story, unfolds almost entirely through dialogue between Joel Stabler, jailed for shooting his brother Danny and Dr. Ellis Andrews, a psychologist sent by the courts to determine Joel's mental state and ability to stand trial for the murder of his brother.

Hollon, a practicing lawyer in Baldwin County and author of five novels and a children's book, displays particularly keen insight into the jailhouse discussions between the accused and the mental health professionals sent to determine what makes them tick.

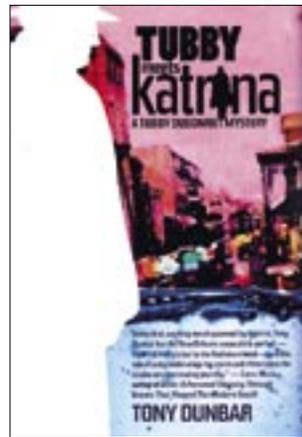
However, it's Hollon's ability to embroider a compelling story with snippets of conversations pregnant with deeper meaning and Joel's own ragged and private thoughts that draws the reader in and keeps the pages fluttering.

Hollon's novel runs much deeper than a first glance reveals. His choice of character names offers hints of foreshadowing: The protagonist's surname, Stabler, undergirds the sound logic of a man who understands that there is no one absolute truth. His given name, Joel, suggests the great intellect and foresight of the biblical Joel.

Hollon's *Blood and Circumstance* is a work that operates on several levels. At 175 pages, it's brief as novels go. But his characterization of Joel Stabler is one that will resonate in the reader's mind for days and weeks to come.

Frank Turner Hollon's other works include the novels, *The God File*, *The Pains of April*, *Life Is a Strange Place*, *A Thin Difference*, and *The Point of Fracture* and *Glitter Girl and the Crazy Cheese*, a children's book.

William Perkins is editorial page editor of the Dothan Eagle and a contributing writer to Paste magazine. His work has also appeared in the New York Times, the International Herald Tribune, Sports Illustrated, Nation's Business, and Business Alabama Monthly.



Tubby Meets Katrina

by Tony Dunbar

NewSouth Books, 2006

\$24.95, Hardcover

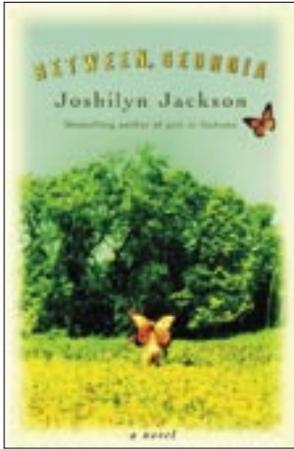
When New Orleans lawyer Tubby Dubonnet returns home from an excursion to Bolivia, he has no inkling of the havoc that awaits. Hurricane Katrina churns like a demon in the Gulf, the City of New Orleans squarely in its crosshairs, while in rural Pointe Croupee Parish, a sociopathic

killer has escaped from jail and is heading for the Crescent City. In *Tubby Meets Katrina*, Tony Dunbar blends the destructive forces of nature with the dark side of humanity, spicing it up with flavors from America's most exotic city, to serve up a rich gumbo of suspense that will keep the reader spooning for more.

Dunbar sets the table of conflict nicely, first giving us a glimpse of the maniacal yet resourceful escapee, Bonner Rivette, and then alternating between Rivette's flight and the approaching storm. The convict and Katrina arrive in New Orleans together where an odd twist of fate brings Rivette to the empty downtown streets and Tubby's office building. After breaking into the lawyer's office, Rivette telephones Tubby's daughter, Christine, a student at Tulane and, posing as the building superintendent, convinces her that her father has fallen and needs help. Christine rushes to the office where Rivette takes her hostage. Tubby and Flowers, his private investigator, rescue Christine, but Rivette escapes into the chaotic aftermath of Katrina where his street savvy and survival skills will serve him well. Wandering aimlessly about the devastation, Rivette devises a plan to leave New Orleans and take Christine with him. As Tubby correctly suspects, he and Christine have not heard the last of Mr. Rivette.

Though the book succeeds well enough as a thriller, perhaps Dunbar's greatest accomplishment is his vivid portrayal of the societal breakdown that followed Katrina. From the incompetent bungling of bureaucrats to the savagery of a population cast into anarchy, Dunbar lays bare the tragedy that sprang from the storm. And yet into this tapestry of despair, he weaves threads of hope, revealing how human dignity can quietly endure in the face of pandemonium and leaving us with a sense that man's better qualities will ultimately prevail over our darker instincts. It is an age-old message, but one that bears repeating, particularly when packaged inside a well-told tale.

John Cottle is the author of the award-winning short story collection, The Blessings of Hard-Used Angels.



Between, Georgia
by Joshilyn Jackson

Warner Books, 2006
\$22.99, Hardcover

“The war began thirty years, nine months, and seven days ago, when I was deaf and blind, floating silent and serene inside Hazel Crabtree...” Thus begins a feudalistic saga narrated by Nonny Frett, the central character in a cast that includes two rival clans in *Between, Georgia*, population ninety. Lest a reader

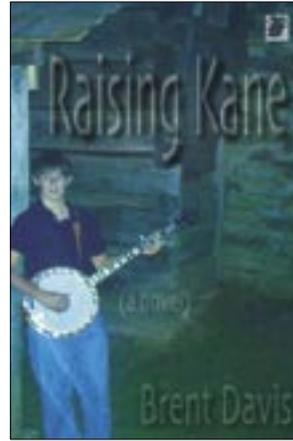
assume that the symbolic name of the town came from the author’s fertile imagination, Jackson notes in her Acknowledgments: “I have taken some liberties with Georgia’s geography; *Between* exists (it’s on highway 78 between Athens and Atlanta), but I have never set foot in it.”

Nonny’s biological mother, Hazel Crabtree, gave birth to her at the age of fifteen. Stacia Frett, the adoptive mother who raised Nonny, has Usher’s Syndrome, which has rendered her deaf and nearly blind. Nonny’s Aunt Genny is gentle and fey. Stacia and Genny live next door to their other sister, Bernise Frett-Baxter, who is responsible and domineering. The plot is a dense thicket of long-hidden secrets. Stacia is attacked by Crabtree dogs, Bernise shoots and kills one of these (dogs, not Crabtrees), and the violence intensifies when other Crabtree relatives come to town as backup. Nonny has problems of her own. She is trying to talk herself into divorcing her philandering husband, Jonno. Her return to *Between* to spend time with her mother and aunts gives her some needed distance from that situation, which is also affected by her renewed and intensified friendship with Henry, a distant cousin of the Crabtrees.

This novel and the author’s best-selling first novel, *Gods in Alabama*, are gourmet, Southern-fried chick-lit. One of the saving graces of this at times brilliantly written but bizarre book is the humor that lurks around the corners of paragraphs. A fast reader might miss some of it. Example: Bernese wakes to a sound of pounding on her front door and starts downstairs with her “gun hand” stuck in the sleeve of her robe. Her husband Lou trails behind, saying nervously, “Is the safety on? Hand the gun to me and then put your robe on, Bernice. Is the safety on...Is that the thirty-eight...Lord-a-mercy, why didn’t you get your little purse gun?”

Joshilyn Jackson lives in a small town near Atlanta with her husband and two children. She grew up in North Alabama, and her parents reside in Birmingham.

Julia Oliver



Raising Kane
by Brent Davis

Livingston Press, 2006
\$13.95, Paperback

The hero of Brent Davis’ second novel is Eddie Kane, a twelve-year-old boy on Sand Mountain. Eddie’s school is in Geraldine, his post office is in Albertville, and he lives in *between*. Eddie has a passion for baseball and wants to spend the summer

playing second base, but the folk of Sand Mountain in 1961 have two passions. Baseball is one, to be sure, especially the St. Louis Cardinals, but the other is music—country music, bluegrass, the string band.

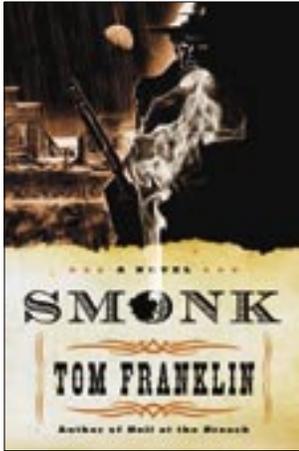
“Music lives on Sand Mountain like nowhere else,” writes Davis. “Even today if you visit you’ll find people in church playing guitars and mandolins, and when the weather starts getting warm in the spring you’ll see family bands on front porches playing songs for their neighbors.”

Music is in the air and soil of Sand Mountain and in Eddie Kane’s blood. He is a prodigy, “the twelve-year-old terror of the five-string banjo.” Eddie’s uncles have a band, the Bragger Brothers, and they need a banjo player to travel with them on the road all over the South. Although he is very young for this kind of adventure, Eddie’s family agrees because they need the money he will make. His dream of playing baseball will have to be deferred.

The band of five play one-nighters everywhere and they don’t earn much. After most performances they move on immediately to the next one, taking turns driving—except for Eddie—sleeping in the car, and only occasionally staying in cheap rooming houses. There are too few showers, too few laundromats, and none of Mama’s cooking, and Eddie, who starts out painfully shy, becomes just tired and homesick. It is a tough life for a twelve-year-old, but as the band moves from VFW dance to Elks Club picnic to car lot grand opening, Eddie learns more in one summer than most boys would in five years.

This novel is sold as young-adult reading and is just that. There is no sex or unpleasant violence, and Eddie is a boy without vices who misses his mama. Like any twelve-year-old, he is a combination of innocence and curiosity. It is amusing, or perhaps unsettling, to think of the difference in sophistication and experience between that 1961 twelve-year-old and a twelve-year-old in 2006, but that is another subject altogether.

Don Noble is the host of APT’s Bookmark.



Smunk

by Tom Franklin

William Morrow, 2006

\$23.95, Hardcover

The strongest element of Tom Franklin's new novel, *Smunk*, is character. You have absolutely never seen people like this before. If they lived in our world, you could not take your eyes off of them, and that would be a good plan because these characters are the most amoral, violent, blood-thirsty, murderous creatures I

have come upon in a long while. *Smunk* reminds one of *Blood Meridian* by Cormac McCarthy, in which there seems to be a homicide on every page.

The protagonist of this bloodfest is E.O. (Eugene Oregon) Smunk. Smunk is an obscene collection of weapons and ailments. Five feet and one quarter inch tall, Smunk has an "immense dwarf shape," "hands wide as shovels," "a bushel basket of a head," a big goiter, tiny legs, a glass eye, consumption, "gout, . . . the clap, blood sugar, neuralgia and ague. Malaria."

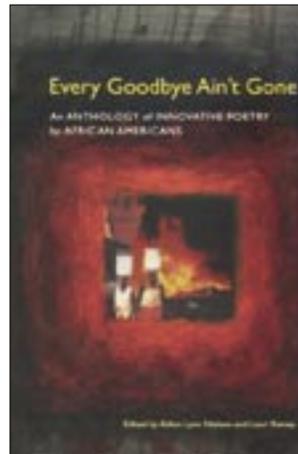
But Smunk, diseased as he is, seems not exactly mortal. Shoot, stab, or poison him as you will, he cannot be killed. Franklin is working here to create a myth, a character of legend, and to some extent, he succeeds. He also is trying to create a genre one might call The Southern instead of The Western—violence on the Southern frontier.

Co-starring in this phantasmagoria is Evavangeline. A scrawny fifteen-year-old girl, filthy with chopped-off hair, she is a professional prostitute, but she is often taken for a sodomite, since half the people she meets think she is a boy.

Evavangeline is, like Smunk, a stone killer who leaves many of her clients dead. After several murders in Shreveport, she flees to Mobile, then up the Tombigbee to McIntosh, and then, finally, to the site of the novel's opening and closing scenes, Old Texas, Alabama, a fictional town in Clark County near the real Jackson, Alabama.

Evavangeline is being pursued by Phail Walton of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, the self-appointed Captain of the Christian Deputies, a little posse of paid puritans he has assembled. The cast of grotesques is extensive—the bailiff McKissick, his son Junior, Walton's deputies, Smunk's lieutenants—but the plot is frail. Walton is chasing Evavangeline. McKissick is chasing Smunk. It reminded me of the capture, escape, flee, capture, escape of *The Last of the Mohicans*, and, as in Cooper, you should surrender to the fun of it, or put the book down.

Don Noble



Every Goodbye Ain't Gone
An Anthology of Innovative
Poetry by African Americans
edited by Aldon Lynn Nielsen
and Lauri Ramey

The University of Alabama
Press, 2006

\$27.95, Paperback

\$60, Hardcover

Perhaps *Every Goodbye Ain't Gone* should be re-titled *Why Can't We All Just Get Along!*

Anyone not privy to the world of anthologies might be shocked by how elitist that world can be. Editors Aldon Nielson and Lauri Ramey explicitly position this book in opposition to those anthologies represented in "the syllabi of historically white universities and colleges." This then is an enterprise of historical recovery.

But who gets recovered? And whose goodbye stays gone for good? "Anthologies may be read," state the editors, "as simultaneous gestures of greeting and exclusion." One salient exclusion is Nathaniel Mackey who may have elected not to be included because of his stated aversion to anthologies that reduce their content to race or region.

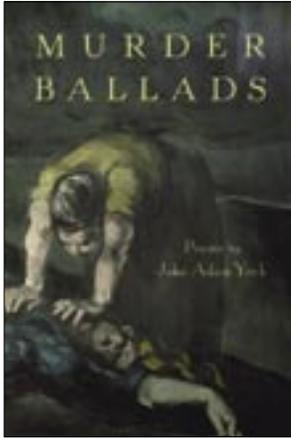
However, in spite of the qualifier in its title, *Poetry by African Americans*, this anthology is not so insular. The editors have placed this selection in a modernist context.

That this anthology could be considered controversial—and Nielson and Ramey devote much of the introduction to its vigorous defense—is an indictment of the prevailing state of academia. They cite one reviewer who writes, "This proposal does not pass the significance test." The editors challenge this assessment by revealing that these poets influenced each other and that they were influenced, as well, by high modernists such as T.S. Eliot.

As for the poets, there are thirty-eight of them here from the decades following World War II. They range from the experimental poems of Norman H. Pritchard—one poem looks like a blocky fish made of quotation marks—to "Badman of the Guest Professor" by Ishmael Reed, which captures the essence of this anthology. Here's a bit of the third stanza: "wasn't me who opened d gates & allowed / d rustlers to slip thru unnoticed. u / ought to do something abt yr security or mend ur fences partner / don't look at me if all dese niggers / are ripping it up like deadwood dick; / doing art d way its never been done."

At the end, the reader is left with the sensation that the poets here are all heroic desperados.

Bruce Alford is assistant professor of creative writing at the University of South Alabama in Mobile.



Murder Ballads

by Jake Adam York

Elixir Press, 2005

\$13, Paperback

Scanning the table of contents of Jake Adam York's first book, how could I, a fellow Southerner, resist immediately turning to "George Wallace at the Crossroads"? I kept my hopes low, half-expecting a sprawling, stringy poem of two to three pages—the length so many contemporary poets gravitate to

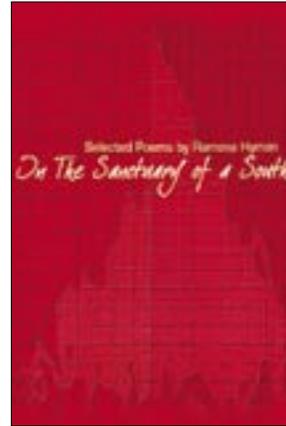
as an average-length poem. What I found was a fourteen-line poem in which there is a delicate interplay between George Wallace the man, George Wallace the determined politician (after his opponent had beaten Wallace by essentially being more racist), and the impact of that interplay on Alabama's future, all built around the metaphor of a guitar string. The poem is not in a received form, but these are crafted lines of vigorous syllables.

The rest of the book also does not disappoint. The existence of free verse and prose poems notwithstanding, York knows the difference between prose and poetry, and this is a book of poetry. In this book of four sections and twenty-five poems there are a number of poems about history, particularly racially motivated murders including lynchings, but also murders at the hands of civil authority, such as the massacre of Native Americans in "On Tallasseehatchee Creek." There is also murder of the spirit, as in the domestic violence of "Looking for Cane Creek Furnace."

Throughout the subsequent poems, ranging in form from blank verse narratives, to couplets, to ballad-style quatrains, stories from the news or from a person speaking or singing are presented in the context of man-made activities and structures (such as working at a furnace) which violate nature. Nature itself remains a persistent witness and force of reclamation. Much of York's writing is an interplay of voices, but there are also extended metaphors, as in the poem "Radiotherapy," in which prayers for healing are like static-ridden radio signals. Iron and blood are frequent elements in the poems of this book, which is a kind of crucible of the South's troubled history. The last poem, appropriately "Iron," ends with an image of children and on a note of hope, of beginning again.

Murder Ballads is a first book, but not a work of apprenticeship. Rather, it is the debut of a poet fully in control of his themes and his craft.

Mark Dawson, a former editor of Black Warrior Review, has poems in The Antioch Review, North American Review, Colorado Review, and others.



In the Sanctuary of the South

by Ramona L. Hyman

Epic Press, 2005

\$9.95, Paperback

Ramona L. Hyman's latest collection presents a chorus of separate voices which express a shared legacy of loss, suffering, and injustice. Hyman's own lyrical voice deftly adapts to the rhythms and idiom of the blues, spirituals, and gospel music—cultural traditions that her individual speakers

observe and enact like sacred rituals. Immersed in the violent historical consequences of racism (the Scottsboro Boys trial, Medgar Evers' murder, the slaughter of the four little girls in Birmingham), each persona commemorates the absence of dehumanized victims through recollected or re-imagined accounts.

In "Psalms: For the Blues I," Beale Street, birthplace of the Memphis blues, emerges as the central setting. Rather than elevate this region to the status of heroic myth, Hyman apostrophizes the blues as a bygone ideal, then nominates a series of heirs: Beale Street, W.C. Handy—the Father of the Blues—and, finally, residents remaining after the musical luminaries depart: "The real funky folks / With sorrow and moaning / For living ain't needed around here / No more."

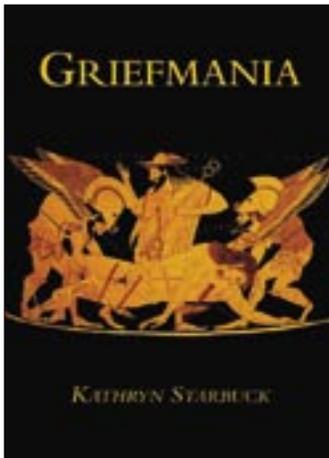
These "funky folks" embrace a more authentic suffering that has defined and sustained the blues. Banished "along the outskirts of the town," they emerge, briefly, from the margins of official history. In Part II, the speaker shifts the focus of the Blues from "musicology books" to a more appropriate, physical process rooted in the community: "It's calluses for hands / Chicken, pig feet, and biscuits / On a Tuesday morning for food."

Many poems are condensed to forceful character profiles: pallbearers confront an innocent woman's murder; a mother recalls her involvement in the Civil Rights Movement; a beauty parlor customer recalls her distant relative.

In these sketches, Hyman paints a landscape of the South that appears abstract on the surface but on closer inspection reveals immediate detail. "This South I" displays the "secret ambiguity" of a Southern canvas comprised of the pain and pride of family ancestors who "Wave to me as if / I am their own / It is a choral of waves / Miscegenated voices..."

There is an almost audible pause here, underscoring a collective summons that requires a reciprocal gesture on the speaker's part to complete the "call and response." Likewise, Hyman has responded to the call of her own art, inviting us to engage with a voice that is personal and communal, anguished and celebratory.

Gavin Spence teaches English at Chattahoochee Valley Community College.



Griefmania

by Kathryn Starbuck

Sheep Meadow Press, 2006
\$13.95, Paperback

When Kathy Starbuck lost her beloved husband, poet George Starbuck, and her mother, father, and brother “in quick succession,” she feared she might not live through it. She ran from death, as she describes it, like a vole from a hawk.

Starbuck’s family had suffered from great loss before. Her maiden name, the Greek *Dertimanis*, literally means “griefmania” and was given to the family after the gruesome impaling by Ottoman Turks of her ancestors, prosperous shepherd brothers in the Peloponnesus who refused to turn over their landholdings.

But great loss does not necessarily result in great poetry. As Randall Jarrell writes in “90 North,” “. . .nothing comes from nothing, / The darkness from the darkness. Pain comes from the darkness / And we call it wisdom. It is pain.” Starbuck, however, has performed a delicate and difficult alchemy, transmuting the leaden weight of grief into truly golden poems.

In the sixth section of the book, a prose memoir, Starbuck describes surviving her losses and writing a series of poems that eventually resolved themselves into the five poetic sections of this book, the four lost family members and herself. The last poem of the book, “Floating with Charon,” has the speaker literally sitting with four sets of ashes and asking them what she should do with them: “Listen up, family. Today’s / the day I decide where to / settle you. So here’s your / perfect chance to give me / direction.” But “They all stayed quiet and Quaker-like.”

That conversational tone is one mode in which Starbuck writes, but the book shows a wide range of verbal agility. In some of the poems the syntax is as gnarled as an old olive tree, in others as cleanly spare as an operating room. Language and form vary by section, as though suited to each person, but from beginning to end Starbuck’s bold, clear, singular voice rings out.

The poems in this book recount a near-mythical journey through the Hades of grief back into life. Even though many of the poems are about death, the book ultimately is a powerful celebration of life, courage, survival.

A reviewer rarely gets a chance to say this: If you read only one book of poems this year, read this one.

Jennifer Horne is the poetry reviews editor for First Draft. Her interview with Kathryn Starbuck for WUAL radio can be heard at <http://www.apr.org/alabamalife.html>.



First Man

The Life of Neil A. Armstrong

by James R. Hansen

Simon and Schuster, 2006
\$18, Paperback

For years, astronaut Neil Armstrong avoided publicity and accolades available to the greatest explorer of the twentieth century. As the first man to walk on the Moon, Armstrong could have parlayed his reluctant fame into whatever he coveted. Instead, the astronaut sought refuge teaching engineer-

ing at the University of Cincinnati.

Auburn University history professor and former NASA historian James R. Hansen finally convinced Armstrong that the astronaut’s role in the race between the Americans and the Soviets to the Moon should be recorded with technical accuracy and meticulous explanation. That Hansen had a NASA background reassured Armstrong that a book on his life would focus more so on engineering and other technical aspects of space exploration rather than notions of romantic Buck Rogers adventures.

Hansen tells of Armstrong’s brushes with death: flying a jet fighter with half of a wing missing during the Korean War; regaining control of a space capsule tumbling end over end on *Gemini VIII* during NASA’s first docking attempt; or perhaps Armstrong’s finest hour, when he flew the lunar landing module the *Eagle* to a new landing spot after discovering that the lunar spacecraft had overshot its designated target on the Moon’s surface.

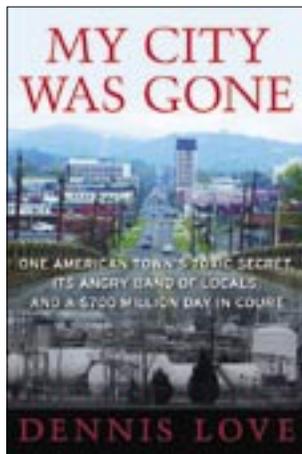
Hansen’s description of those nerve-wracking lunar moments is absolutely riveting. The author also bursts a myth about the *Eagle* landing: the crew had enough fuel to fly for another fifty seconds, setting the record straight regarding erroneous reports that the lunar lander had only seconds of fuel left when it touched down.

Perhaps most disconcerting is the chapter focusing on the behind the scenes “lobbying” of Buzz Aldrin to be the first out of the *Eagle* after landing. Aldrin was the pilot on *Apollo 11*, though Armstrong was in charge as the commander. Aldrin insisted that he thought he should be the first astronaut on the Moon, citing the protocol of Gemini missions when the commander stayed with the space capsule while the pilot performed the EVA or “space walk.”

While some in NASA agreed with Aldrin, Hansen writes that the space agency’s top brass had already deemed Armstrong as more the prototype of a hero.

“Neil was Neil. Calm, quiet, and absolute confidence,” said NASA’s Director of Flight Operations Chris Kraft. “He was the Lindbergh type. He had no ego.”

Edward Reynolds is a journalist in Birmingham.



My City Was Gone:
One American Town's Toxic Secret, Its Angry Band of Locals, and a \$700 Million Day in Court

by *Dennis Love*

HarperCollins, 2006

\$25.95, Hardcover

Anniston native Dennis Love writes in his book, *My City Was Gone*, that he is in conflict. He loves his hometown, but he does not want to live there because of

the pollution from the Monsanto Chemical Plant (later Solutia) and the chemical weapons stored at Anniston Army Depot. His book is about a place and its people in conflict.

Anniston was envisioned by its founders in the late 1800s as a Utopia, a place of economic prosperity. Love grew up during the 1960s in such a "perfect" environment. Ironically, the city's emphasis on industry and economy also led to severe pollution and a higher-than-normal death rate from cancer.

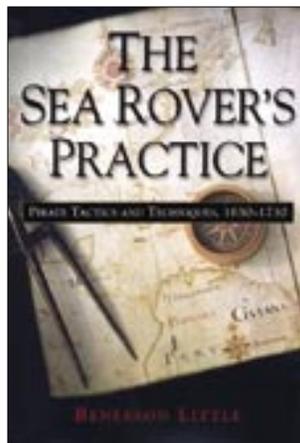
Even while growing up, Love writes, he and other townspeople enjoyed the economic boost that the chemical plant and the Depot brought to Anniston, but they hated the pollution. Hardly anyone realized the danger of the production of polychlorinated biphenyls, or PCBs, until the 1990s. It was then that a discovery was made of a corporate cover-up, and it was then that a decision was made about the destruction of the stored chemical weapons.

Love details the circumstances and the people involved in these events, focusing on those that led up to a \$700 million corporate settlement, the largest in United States history, resolved in 2003.

Love, who often visited his family from his new home in Sacramento, California, tells the story by relating the conflicts of three other men: David Baker, an Anniston native who became a union organizer in New York and then educated the black community about PCBs; Hoyt "Chip" Howell, Anniston's mayor and a leading businessman who aided the political process that allowed the Army to burn its chemical weapons; and Donald Stewart, the lawyer who took personal and financial risks to bring the PCB settlement to fruition and then was accused of reaping more than his share of that settlement.

Love relates this story in his characteristic animated style. In addition to *My City Was Gone*, Love is the co-author of *Blind Faith: The Miraculous Journey of Lula Hardaway*, *Stevie Wonder's Mother*. Love is a former journalist and holds numerous writing awards.

Sherry Kughn is a writer for the Anniston Star. Her book, The Heart Tree for Empty Nesters, is forthcoming this spring.



The Sea Rover's Practice
Pirate Tactics and Techniques, 1630-1730

by *Benerson Little*

Potomac Books, 2006

\$17.95, Paperback

'Tis my modest opinion that no man can fly pirate colors who's not willing to sell his friend, his sweetheart, or his mother.

—Humble Bellows in the movie *The Crimson Pirate*.

I was raised on books and movies. I'm talking about *real* movies, the kind you saw on thirty-foot-high screens, long before television came along. I'm talking about *real* books, the kind filled with adventure and illustrations and blood and no sex at all, save for the ever-present promise.

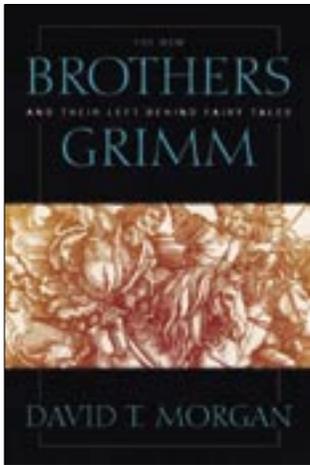
The Crimson Pirate, starring a twinkle-eyed and athletic Burt Lancaster, helped define what we kids of the early 1950s knew about pirates. Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* made me believe that a person in pirate times really could survive on a deserted island and live to tell about it.

The newly-published *The Sea Rover's Practice: Pirate Tactics and Techniques, 1630-1730*, documents the *real* story about pirates, and it's not a pretty picture. *Real* pirates were primarily thieves, cutthroats, rapists, ravagers, torturers. And no matter how romantic Captain Kidd and Bluebeard and Burt Lancaster and Johnny Depp seem on screen and within pages, the reality of their day-to-day lives is quite hair-raising. In other words, it's nice to romanticize these characters, but you wouldn't want to be hijacked, shackled, and keelhaunched by one of them.

Still, *The Sea Rover's Practice* is delightful and frightful and scholarly all at the same time. An hour of entertainment can be stolen just reading the index, appendix, notes, and bibliography. The reader is enthralled with the detail of it all, but the facts themselves make one grateful that it was all in fun when you were a kid playing in the backyard and pretending to steal from the rich (and murder them, too!) and give to the poor (keeping some for one's self, of course).

This book tells me more about pirates and their ilk than I could ever absorb. But it's one heck of a reference guide. If I specialized in historic fiction or history, or if I were a filmmaker delving into the subject, I'd be compelled to keep *The Sea Rover's Practice* handy at all times. I wouldn't want to embarrass myself by calling a privateer a buccaneer, or a freebooter a pirate. *Aarghh!*

Jim Reed is editor of the Birmingham Arts Journal and president of the Alabama Writers' Conclave.



The New Brothers Grimm
and Their Left Behind
Fairy Tales

by David T. Morgan

Mercer University Press, 2006
\$20, Paperback

Evangelists peddling fetching end-time wares are as ancient as any fraud. From early writings leap prophecies down to the day and hour. Always, come the hour, the saved assemble not along heavenly boulevards but in pilgrimage resembling

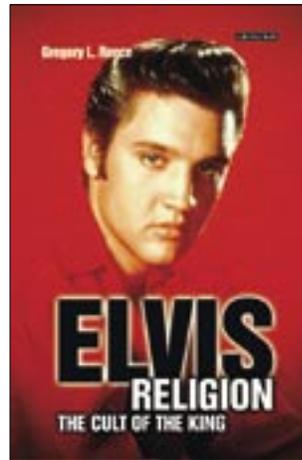
Monty Python's Flying Circus, as prognostications of one doomsday prophet replace another's down the ages. Today's well-heeled "Rapture" launderers, jerking the saved right out of their clothes, are co-authors of the Left Behind opus, Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins.

David Morgan offers here an in-depth historical analysis, naming these best-sellers heirs of the Brothers Grimm. In choosing the fairy tale for the Left Behind genre, Grimms' especially, Morgan speaks to their popularity and to Grimms' characteristic tales of the worst and cleverest. Yet Left Behind plots plod for knowing less of humanity and more of God-as-psycho-pathic, threatening all but the strictest believers with intricately devised, long-planned horrors—Dante, Blake—with the literary power and grace of fourth graders.

In his history of "rapture," Morgan asserts that the Left Behind books were never intended as fiction, but—like Grimms' tales—they confirm fates, in this instance, punishment for flunking fundamentalism. Fairy tales are potent with intentionality. Characters outdo themselves according to the extreme traits of their nature. Unforeseeable outcomes are disastrous or delightful. There, similarities end. In Left Behind, there is but one worn outcome: each is in or out of a Kingdom of an Overlord resembling Stalin more than the Prince of Peace.

Morgan articulates the painful storylines of twelve volumes in this series, isolating each by theological points. His scrupulous work makes no pretense at impartiality. Thorough, competent, complete, this is a successful indictment of flimsy relationships among these books, their extra-Biblical legends, and scripture, revealing the diabolical power of an old, familiar sell. Like Grimms' dying Jew killed on the road for money he swore he did not have, whose last words to his killer were prophetic—"The bright sun brings it to light"—Morgan lights up this successful fraud in his concluding words: "... (T)he only thing I see being left behind is the money of millions... The only thing I see rising is the bank account of the new Brothers Grimm."

Louie Skipper, an Episcopal priest, essayist, and author of two books of poems, lives in Montgomery.



Elvis Religion

The Cult of the King

by Gregory L. Reece

I.B. Tauris, 2006
\$15.95, Paperback
\$59.95, Hardcover

As a child growing up in a Southern Baptist seminary town, I knew a little about religion. With our father a graduate student at the local seminary and our mother a member of diverse social and religious organizations, the five of us siblings could quote from the

Bible more quickly than most other kids could sing the ABCs, but the eight-track in my mother's Lincoln Continental was as likely to play Elvis as it was to play gospel, and, often, the two were one in the same.

In *Elvis Religion: The Cult of the King*, Gregory L. Reece pinpoints various symptoms of the human condition as he explores the devotion that many experience for Elvis Aaron Presley, in life and in death known as "the King." Reece's triumph is his understanding of a culmination of time, space, and perspective. Reece describes first hearing the news of Elvis' death with the clarity an earlier generation would use to describe the place, time, and emotion of the first news of John F. Kennedy's assassination. "My first national memory, my first memory of a world-significant event, is...the death of Elvis," he writes.

Always the scholar—and hip to boot—Reece responds to the assertions of other Elvis religion researchers, who claim that Elvis devotion has reached religious status, in terms that reflect both his Southern roots and his extensive religious education. Reece comes to the Elvis table not to partake of the offerings there, but to dissect the claims made by others that Elvis devotion surpasses simple admiration.

In pursuit of holy truth, Reece makes a pilgrimage to Graceland, observes the reincarnation of Elvis as translated by impersonators of various shapes and sizes, and delves into the ubiquitous images that chronicle Elvis' career. Reece finds images of "Elvis, saint and savior, everywhere." Elvis is in the obvious places—movies, music, and various other media. More surprising, though, Reece finds Elvis in places that far surpass the average imagination. En route to Graceland, however, Reece encounters artists, historians, ministers, and fans who prove that Elvis is, in fact, a cultural not religious icon.

Reece develops an appreciation for the fun-loving Elvis fans he meets along the way. Sharing the account of his pilgrimage, Reece debunks certain myths that have grown around the icon, reminding his readers that Elvis and his fans are neither more nor less human than the rest of us.

Treasure Ingels lives and writes in Montevallo.

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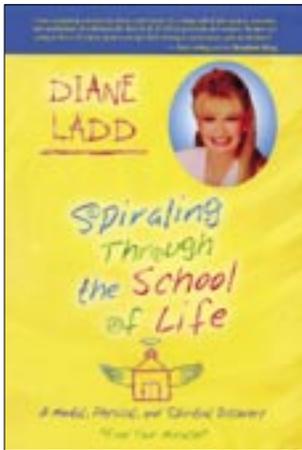


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Spiraling Through the School of Life: A Mental, Physical, and Spiritual Discovery

by Diane Ladd

Hay House, 2006
\$19.95, Hardcover

Some say it's a Southern birthright to share life's lessons in a story. Actress Diane Ladd has taken this to heart in an effort to pass on her own experiences, wisdom, and knowledge in her small but packed book dedicated to "the children of the world." A reader

may need to do for this book what the author says she's done throughout life: "Have a little faith, and kick a little dirt."

Faith permeates Ladd's book, but not the typical Bible Belt form. She begins with a loving account of her relationship to her grandmother, a midwife and healer in rural Mississippi. Before the book comes to a conclusion—but leaves room for a second volume later on—Ladd touches on several faith disciplines that all spiral together into her spiritual belief. While she prays to God and acknowledges Jesus, she also nods to the Universe, karma, fate, and guardian angels.

Ladd explains her concept of a life spiral in the preface of her book, where she says the spiral is often used in science as a symbol of energy. "I believe that we're all circling the tree of life as we evolve," she writes. "What goes up has got to come down; what comes down needs to go back up. The latter is the real tricky part."

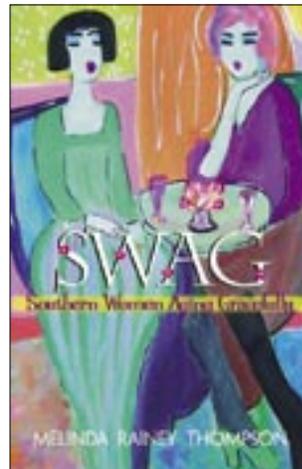
Critical to the upward spiral of one's life is taking responsibility for one's own health and well-being, she writes. Ladd also writes of the work of spirituality in love, loss, parenting, and fitness in body and mind. She speaks of anger as a poison that exacerbates cancer. She addresses life's injustices and forgiveness.

Ladd shares not only from her own up-and-down star-filled life, but she also reveals intimately personal stories that relate to her daughter Laura Dern, first husband Bruce Dern, and a series of others. Dropping names as she goes, the author reveals details of Hollywood lives that have spiraled together with hers on a metaphysical level—even if only briefly or on an intermittent basis.

Outside of the Hollywood life, she reflects on childhood years in Mississippi and Mobile, and how her cousin, Tennessee Williams, fits into her family. She speaks of losing her first child in a drowning accident, her three Oscar nominations, and making movies with Laura.

Regarding the metaphysical, Ladd acknowledges that the reader may think her book is just a bunch of "woo-woo" stories, as she calls them. But her honesty and willingness to believe—despite the reader's belief—is refreshing and appealing.

Bethany A. Giles writes from her home in Sheffield.



SWAG: Southern Women Aging Gracefully

by Melinda Rainey Thompson

John F. Blair, 2006
\$14.95, Paperback

How many times a day do e-mail in-boxes fill with forwarded messages from a well-meaning mother/sister/aunt who wants to share enjoyment of some lament or celebration of women?

Of course, only the most interesting of subject-lines are clicked to open. Only the best of those opened are forwarded or saved for later. Just such e-mails from Melinda Rainey Thompson's SWAG Newsletter have been assembled into her first book, *SWAG: Southern Women Aging Gracefully*.

Thompson, who lives in Birmingham, says her book was an accident, since the SWAG newsletter began only for the amusement of herself and about twenty friends—that was 5,000 subscribers ago.

The book is divided into sections relating to such things as how a woman dresses at home vs. in public (Southern Vanity), our relationship to the outdoors (Outside the Screen Door), our relationships with men, family issues (A Full Nest), how Southerners cook and share meals (Did You Have Enough to Eat?), and various oddities about real people (Southern Eccentrics and Eccentricities).

If you can identify with (or wonder about) the necessity of red lipstick, what makes the perfect glass of sweet tea, or why an otherwise law-abiding woman would find an occasion to steal magnolia leaves, then there will be some knowing sighs, a few dewy eyes, and certainly some belly laughs.

Interspersed with the two-to-four-page columns are lists and quick bits of advice such as "Things You Should Never Do Without Professional Help," "SWAG's Checklist for Obsessive Behavior," and "Rules for Burying a SWAG." Other insights also appear in quick panels: "Things Parents Actually Say to their Children in Restaurants," "6:00 p.m. Conversation Between Homemaker and Husband," and "Letter to My Son's Kindergarten Teacher."

Also among the book's wisdoms are numerous references to the healing power of a well-timed glass of wine, piece of chocolate, or talk with a friend.

Since this book is written by a gracefully-aging, degreed, middle-class woman of a certain social and economic standing, there are no stories here of roughing it at the flea market or pinching the most out of a grocery budget. But the sheer volume of otherwise universally female tales still make SWAG well worth reading and passing on to other women—Southern or not.

Bethany A. Giles



An Ornament to the City
Old Mobile Ironwork

by John S. Sledge; photography by Sheila Hagler

The University of Georgia Press, 2006
\$34.95, Hardcover

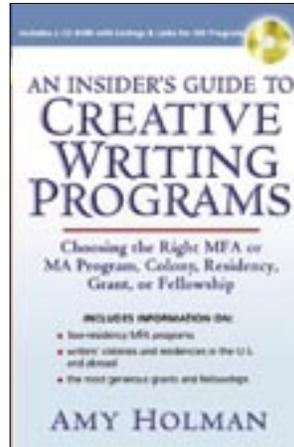
In a contemporary physical environment that looks evermore willfully homogenized, John Sledge's *An Ornament to the City* vividly recounts a time in America when citizens in one community, Mobile, Alabama, sought to create something distinctive for both pragmatic and aesthetic reasons. This book treats readers to an overview of ornamental cast iron in nineteenth century American architecture to give context to the author's discussion of ironwork in Mobile. Inevitably, the discussion falls into three periods: its popularity prior to 1861 and the Civil War, postwar trade, and its legacy following a loss of popularity in the early twentieth century.

Throughout the text, the luminous black and white photographs by Sheila Hagler bare witness to the charm of ironwork's shadowed patterns that, as Sledge recounts, so captivated visitors to the city, including President Woodrow Wilson in 1913. Hagler's images are well positioned to vie with the equally evocative architectural work of fellow Southerner Clarence John Laughlin, albeit with a somewhat sunnier disposition.

From rich primary sources preserved in Mobile, Sledge has fashioned a tale of love and loss, woven together with the touch of a true cultural historian. Supported by extensive research, the book is factually informative, creating the first ever narrative history of Mobile's ornamental ironwork and by extension an important text for the history of American nineteenth century decorative arts.

As an a historical preservationist, Sledge is well positioned to recount the very fascinating final chapter of the losses, slow recognition, and eventual true appreciation of the glories of Mobile's proud tradition of ornamental ironwork.

Paul W. Richelson, Assistant Director/Chief Curator at the Mobile Museum of Art, has authored several catalogues on historical Mobile artists Louise Lyons Heustis and Roderick Dempster McKenzie.



An Insider's Guide to Creative Writing Programs: Choosing the Right MFA or MA Program, Colony, Residency, Grant, or Fellowship

by Amy Holman

Prentice Hall Press, 2006
\$18.95, Paperback

Amy Holman, a poet and literary consultant in Brooklyn, New York, has spent the last twenty years teaching creative writing at conferences and graduate schools.

Using her travels and expertise, she's edited a guide to approximately 300 creative writing programs in the United States and abroad. Her stated goals are to offer a little history about each program and discuss the "basics" in each program—costs, requirements, and geographics. Her intention is to give the reader enough information to allow a student to determine which program is best suited to that individual's needs.

Well-organized, the book offers informed answers to the most asked questions about writing. Topics include: is an MFA worth the time, money, and effort involved; the differences between MA and MFA in writing programs; which programs have earned the best reputations and why; which programs offer financial aid, both in the form of teaching fellowships and grants; putting together a successful application; and which programs are most likely to help the student achieve long-range plans. Holman interviews directors of writing programs, recent graduates, and visiting writers in order to give a balanced overview of as many programs as possible.

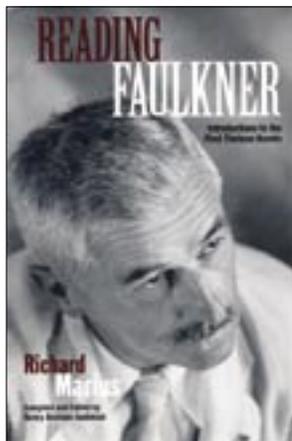
Holman praises The University of Alabama's MFA program as "one of the most respected in this country" and for its willingness to "adapt itself to accommodate the changing passions of both its faculty and students."

The book and the accompanying CD-ROM cover 153 creative writing programs, eighty-one colonies and residencies, and seventy-four grants and fellowships. The CD-ROM directly links the user to the Web sites and/or e-mail addresses of all the programs featured in the book. The CD-ROM is searchable by genre, state, country, and, where applicable, degree offered and type of program.

Holman, who regularly teaches at the New School, Bread Loaf Writer's Conference, and Hudson Valley Writers' Center, remains objective in her research. Her essays on writing and the writing business have been published by Poets & Writers and the AWP JobLetter. Her poetry won the Dream Horse Press National Chapbook Competition and was selected for The Best American Poetry 1999.

Holman's book is highly recommended as a resource for novice writers and both academic and public libraries.

Pam Kingsbury



Reading Faulkner
 Introductions to the First
 Thirteen Novels
 by Richard Marius;
 compiled and edited by Nancy
 Grisham Anderson

The University of Tennessee
 Press, 2006
 \$35, Hardcover

A posthumous book, *Reading
 Faulkner: Introductions to the
 First Thirteen Novels* consists of
 lecture notes for a Faulkner class

that the Tennessee-raised novelist and Renaissance scholar Richard Marius (d. 1999) was asked to teach at Harvard in the late nineties. The book is more than a happy accident, though. The product of a long, rich dialogue between one gifted author and another, it offers first-time readers of Faulkner an accessible, engaging, and useful exploration of Faulkner’s major themes and characters in the context not only of modern literature and history but of classical and Biblical mythology and Renaissance literature. Longtime Faulknerians and Faulknerholics will enjoy following the play of Marius’ ideas. They will also benefit from the book’s attention to a Darwinian element in Faulkner, neglected by most commentators.

Reading Faulkner gets off to a good start with Marius’ down-to-earth admission that he will probably have to answer many of his Harvard students’ questions with the words “Damned if I know.” This is followed by a description of his first encounter with Faulkner as a teenager reading “A Rose for Emily” in the woods and feeling the “most prodigious and disagreeable thrill of horror” of his young life. Nancy Grisham Anderson’s description (in her preface) of Marius’ loss of faith as a college freshman helps explain how this “thrill of horror” turned into a lifelong fascination: as an adult, Marius began to read Faulkner as a post-Christian, post-World War I tragedian who responded to the collapse of his culture’s values by creating experimental texts that probe the limits of time, consciousness, and human sympathy. This vision of Faulkner will help new readers make sense of the darkness and obscurity in Faulkner that they are apt to interpret as sheer unintelligibility. Marius’ insights as a southerner further illuminate Faulkner’s unorthodox narrative procedures.

While *Reading Faulkner* does, understandably, contain some outdated readings and interpretive errors, on the whole Marius’ spirited conversation with Faulkner constitutes a welcome addition to a critical canon that keeps expanding, but where non-specialists are less and less likely to feel at home.

Bart H. Welling, the author of a number of articles on Faulkner, is an assistant professor of English and Environmental Center Fellow at the University of North Florida in Jacksonville.

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Words From the Front

A few days after Christmas, the Alabama Writers' Forum staff heard from Sgt. Danial C. Miller, 23, presently serving with the U. S. Army in Iraq. Sgt. Miller studied creative writing in high school and won both poetry and drama awards in the Forum's 2001 Alabama High School Literary Arts Awards Competition. Sgt. Miller wrote that he has been keeping a journal while serving in Iraq. In lieu of my column in this issue, I'd like to share with you two entries from Danial Miller's journal, used here with his permission.

—Jeanie Thompson

OCTOBER 1, 2006

I am starting this journal today—should've started it quite a while ago as I have been here a month. I have an interesting story to tell already. War is much different than I thought. I've learned a lot about assuming and the weight that it can carry. I hope to look back some years from now over my experiences here in Iraq and remember how I have helped the world to become a better place. Eighteen months of my life will have been dedicated to this war effort, and I plan to make a positive difference.

OCTOBER 17, 2006

Ramadan has been hell. The morning starts off good. I am changed out to guard and search at the pedestrian gate since another soldier became ill, and I want to contribute more. We receive an intel brief that there may be a mortar attack at 0700, so prepare. Minutes later mortars come in at near 0600. They were an hour early.

I went outside the gate later around 1200. I had promised the day before to pay some local Iraqi children ten dollars to clean up all the surrounding trash from the day before. The kids picked up the trash, put it into garbage bags, and dumped them on the other side of the railroad tracks so we couldn't see it from the gate. That was not my goal. I wanted these kids to earn money instead of begging for it and to show them what it means to take pride in the area they live in by keeping it clean. Also, an old tire sat beside the road and needed to be moved since other convoys might think it contained an IED (Improvised Explosive Device).

One of the kids came to me with the skin scraped off the bottom of his two middle fingers and palm on his right hand. I cleaned it with alcohol and wrapped it in a bandage for him. Two of the boy's brothers were with him, one holding the



Sgt. Danial C. Miller offers aid to an Iraqi boy.

boy's hand and reassuring the injured boy in Arabic that the burning from the alcohol was cleaning his wound.

As I wrapped it, I was squatting with my back to the village about 500 meters away. Somebody took a shot at me. I heard the bullet whiz by me. It had to be a sniper because he waited until the child was behind me so he would not hit the kid. But maybe the sniper did not care if he killed local children. Many of the insurgents are from surrounding countries, I've read, and don't really care about the kids and women of Iraq.

I snatched up the boy and put him behind the barrier, then grabbed the binoculars and looked around. My heart raced like never before, and I surprised myself when I grabbed the binoculars. I always thought I'd take cover, possibly hide behind a barrier or something. But instead something inside of me burned at the thought of someone else wanting me dead, and I hoped to see the sniper who took a shot at me. The surrounding Kurdish soldiers scanned the area, but neither of us could distinguish anybody with weapons.

It angered me more than anything. He missed me by about five feet to my right, and I wondered what kind of person could calculate a kid as a casualty if he were hit.

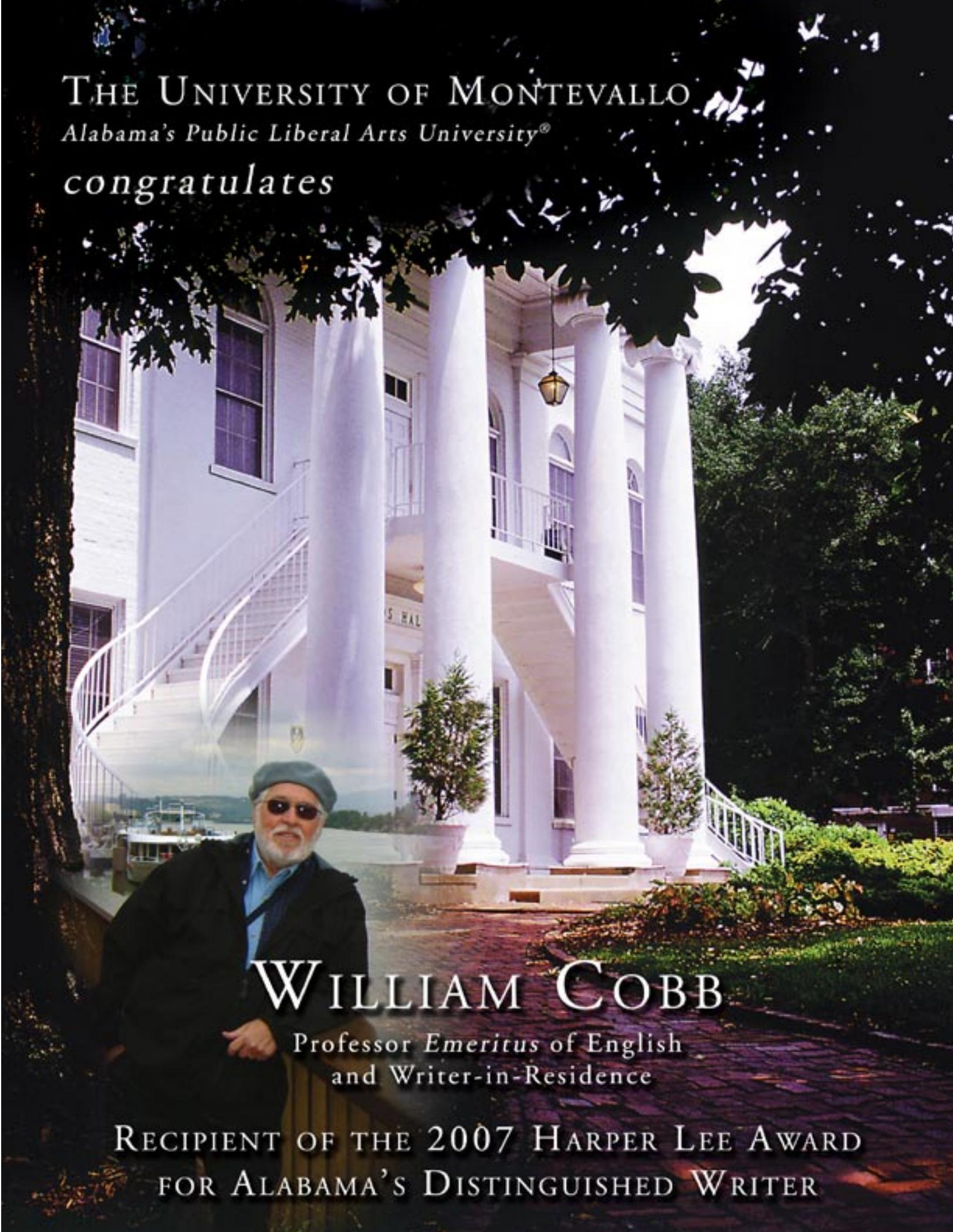
I got very little sleep that night. I finally got to sleep at 0130 and then got woken up at 0230 to the sound of all the indirect, incoming mortar fire. After an hour I was able to sleep for an hour before waking up for duty at 0430. I've often debated the reasoning of my presence here, but I rely on my faith in the good heartedness of the human soul as motivation to keep hope.

Sgt. Danial C. Miller

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