

FIRST DRAFT

THE JOURNAL OF THE ALABAMA WRITERS' FORUM • SPRING 2009

RICK BRAGG

**2009 Harper Lee
Award Recipient**

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The Alabama Writers' Forum *Sustaining a Viable Literary Community*

...it is precisely by processing the raw materials of my Southern experience into universal esthetic that I am most likely to come to terms with my humanity...

—Albert Murray

Albert Murray spoke these words on April 16, 1983, at the University of Alabama in Tuscaloosa. That same fall, I entered Ramsay High School in Birmingham. A typical freshman—awkward, a little quiet, mastering an infuriating attitude that often required parental adjustment—I would not come to appreciate Albert Murray's dialogue with and about the South for many years. But what I did have was a love for writing. I kept journals, wrote poems, crafted silly and improbable stories, all of which I showed to maybe three people. At that time, I thought of writing only as a hobby. That hobby turned into a passion, and that passion turned into a pursuit.

In the summer of 1994, my life changed. I moved to Morgantown, West Virginia, to attend graduate school. There, during that first cold winter in the Appalachians, I delved deeper than ever into studying and learning the craft of writing, sitting down daily and wrangling with the language, with ideas, and often failing. I searched out models, creative outlets. I began for the first time to set my stories in Birmingham, or, rather, my stories began to set themselves in Birmingham. The "raw material" Albert Murray had spoken about was beginning to demand a presence in my writing. Then, in a bookstore in West Virginia, I came across their one and only copy of *First Draft*. It was black and white then, and the paper was not what it is now, but it was about Alabama. It was about home. I bought it, read it, and subscribed to it. *First Draft* became my conduit to a community I had not known existed.

The Alabama Writers' Forum became an invaluable part of my life. Through *First Draft*, I was introduced to writers, some I'd heard of and some I had not, and I learned about conferences taking place in the state. More importantly, Alabama became more than just a source of material; it became a place that contained people dedicated to writing, dedicated to appreciating the stories Alabama (and her residents) had to offer, and dedicated to providing basic nuts and bolts type information about the literary community.

Having served nearly three terms as a member of the Board of Directors, I feel especially honored and positioned to praise the Forum for the work it has done and continues to do. The Forum has evolved over the years, yet it has never neglected its fundamental imperative to promote and aid the literary community of Alabama, no matter how scattered that community might be. Over the years, I have been privileged to see firsthand how delighted students are when they receive writing awards at the annual Alabama High School Literary Arts Awards and Scholarship Competition event. I also hear from a variety of people how impressed and touched they are by the writing programs the Forum conducts with the Department of Youth Services. I have even had creative writing students tell me they had no idea that the literary terrain of Alabama was so expansive.

Simply put, the voice of the Alabama Writers' Forum is vital in more ways than any survey could ever measure. *First Draft*, the Forum's various programs, and the other support offered to the literary community serves not just members but the entire citizenry. The Alabama Writers' Forum is an invaluable and much-needed asset to the state of Alabama, and one that I am sure instills pride in every Alabamian who happens to discover it.

Daryl W. Brown

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 / Caroline Marshall Draughon 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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A KIND OF STURDY POETRY

Rick Bragg Wins 2009 Harper Lee Award

by Don Noble

Rick Bragg is the twelfth winner of the Harper Lee Award for Alabama's Distinguished Writer of the Year, the state's highest literary honor, but this May will mark a kind of new beginning. The award has gone to three distinguished poets, one dramatist, five fiction writers, and two writers—Albert Murray and Wayne Greenhaw—who publish fine nonfiction as well as fiction. Bragg will be the first to receive the award exclusively for his work in creative nonfiction, or what is now being called literary nonfiction.

Bragg's nonfiction is in fact often so lyrical, so poetic, that there are whole passages—the first page of *All Over But the Shoutin'*, for example—that drift over the line into what can be best understood as a kind of sturdy poetry.

And Bragg has written a whole lot of it. Best known for his "Calhoun County Trilogy"—*All Over But the Shoutin'*, *Ava's Man*, and, recently, *The Prince of Frogtown*, Bragg is also the author of *I Am a Soldier, Too: The Jessica Lynch Story* and a collection of shorter pieces, *Somebody Told Me*.

These volumes have brought Bragg extraordinary sales and acclaim. *All Over But the Shoutin'* and *Ava's Man*, were best sellers, with the former now approaching a million copies. *The Prince of Frogtown* has appeared on the best seller extended list, and it will be out in paper this spring.

From where comes the extraordinary appeal of these memoir/family histories? Besides the "pretty" writing, the answer is that these books speak to people, to their own lives and hardships, and not just to Southerners. An Irish reader, who grew up poor, told Bragg he identified the Southern mill owners with British oppressors. It is not so far a stretch. Bragg appeals to any reader who worked with his hands or is recently descended from people who did.

Like the fine memoir *A Childhood* by Harry Crews, the authenticity of Bragg's work comes from the experience of pain and deprivation in his childhood.

Bragg was born in Piedmont Hospital July 26, 1959. His mother had been that evening to the Midway Drive-in to see *The Ten Commandments*. (I offer this bit of information as lagniappe. It's hard to tell what effect that may have had on the baby.)

Bragg attended public schools in Calhoun and Cherokee Counties and then high school in Jacksonville, graduating in 1977. In his own words, he had "distinguished himself not at all." He had taken no college prep courses, describes his academic work as "solid, but uninspired...wretched in math, fair in science." At graduation he had "no plans and no prospects."

Although Bragg would take a number of classes at Jacksonville State University and even edit the school paper, *The Chanticleer*; it is more accurate to say Bragg is an autodidact, learning to interview, research and write, more and more clearly and elegantly, at each paper he worked for, and there were a great many of them on the road up.

Beginning with a part-time job at *The Jacksonville News*, a weekly, as a sports writer, Bragg moved to the *Daily Home* in Talladega, worked more than once for *The Anniston Star*, and then *The Birmingham News*, *St. Petersburg Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, and *The New York Times*.

As his career matured, the prizes rolled in. Bragg has accumulated about forty writing prizes, some of them predictable, such as those from the Alabama Sportswriters Association, the Alabama Press Association, the Associated Press, and the American Society of Newspaper Editors Distinguished Writing Award, and others less predictable, but indicative of the wide range of Bragg's interests. He has been a finalist for a Grammy, having written the liner notes for a Hank Williams album, and was twice a finalist for a James Beard Award, given for writing about food.

In 1992, while with the *St. Petersburg*



Rick Bragg

ZACH RIGGINS

Times, Bragg won a year at Harvard as a Nieman Fellow and then, with *The New York Times*, he won the coveted Pulitzer Prize for what the judges called his “elegantly written stories on contemporary America,” especially his stories on the Oklahoma City bombing and the Susan Smith murders.

Having lived in New York, New Orleans, and Miami, covered the unrest in Haiti and life among the soldiers in Saudi Arabia during Operation Desert Shield, and having won most of the prizes for the short form, he moved on to full-time, book-length publishing.

In 2003 Bragg resigned from *The New York Times* and accepted his present position, Professor of Writing at the University of Alabama, where the students are inspired not so much by carefully crafted lectures on writing and the “theory” of writing as by his rich, anecdotal commentaries about his career, his very careful editing of their work, and, of course, his example.

In 2004, Bragg received the Clarence Cason Award, Alabama’s highest award for nonfiction, joining a dozen other winners which include fellow Pulitzer recipients Diane McWhorter, Cynthia Tucker, Hank Klibanoff, Howell Raines, and E. O. Wilson as well as Albert Murray, Bailey Thomson, Wayne Greenhaw, Wayne Flynt, and Winston Groom.

Of Bragg’s five books, the motivation for two seems obvious. *Somebody Told Me* is a journalism collection, and the Jessica Lynch book was a job of work, beautifully done, but still contractual, so to speak.

The motivations for the investigations into his own family are more complicated and varied.

The memoir *All Over But the Shoutin’*, he says, was a way to honor his mother. “She really did go eighteen years without a new dress so that her children could have a little more,” he said. “She really did wait to eat until we had finished, so that her children would have the best, the most, of what there was.” It was “to preserve that courage and that sacrifice and that love...and to write a kind of love story for his people and his region” that Bragg wrote this memoir.

During the events of *All Over But the Shoutin’*, Bragg was present, and could often write from memory. He never had even met his maternal grandfather, Charlie Bundrum,

The Swimming Hole

This was our place. From a running start, I could leap clear across it, heart like a piston, arms flailing for distance, legs like shock absorbers as I finally, finally touched down. This is where I learned to take a punch and not cry, how to dodge a rock, sharpen a knife, cuss, and spit. Here, with decrepit cowboy hats and oil-stained BAMA caps on our burr heads and the gravel of the streambed sifting through our toes, we daydreamed about Corvettes we would drive, wondered if we would all die in Vietnam and where that was, and solemnly divined why you should never, ever pee on an electric fence.

Rick Bragg,
from *The Prince of Frogtown*

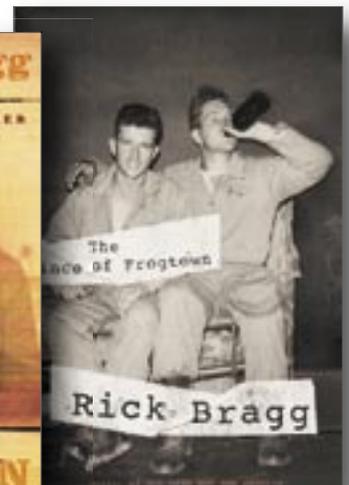
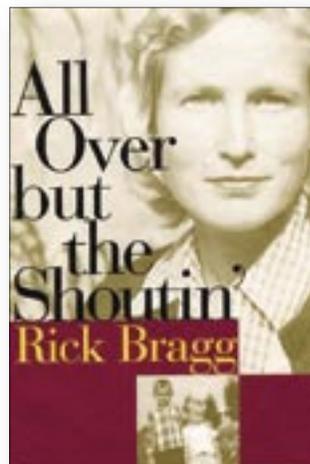
who died before he was born, so in researching the life of Charlie, the whiskey-maker, roofer, and brawler, for *Ava’s Man*, Bragg “built himself a grandfather.”

Bragg’s most recent book, *The Prince of Frogtown*, is perhaps the most complexly motivated. In May of 2005 Bragg married Dianne Wells Calhoun, the mother of three boys, the youngest of whom was still at home, and so, overnight, Bragg became a father, and that got him to thinking about his own father. Bragg realized, somewhat guiltily, that he had “used” his alcoholic, rather violent, and unreliable father Charles Bragg “as an anvil to pound out my mother’s story. It was all true, but it was not all he was. It was just all I knew.” He determined to know more, to get a more balanced picture of the father he did not know very well, so he again travelled the roads of Calhoun County, finding old friends of his dad and beginning by asking them, “Tell me one good story about my daddy.”

The stories from friends accumulated. Bragg’s mother was slowly persuaded to revisit, emotionally, those painful but exciting years of her courtship and early married days

to the Prince, and Bragg resurrected his dad almost as much from nothing as he had done with his grandmother Ava’s man.

Now the Calhoun County cycle is complete. What next? Well, Bragg has determined he will not again haunt the alleys and cafés of Jacksonville for family stories. He will not continue to worry about whether he has offended some aunt or old family friend who might tap him on the shoulder and say.



“You the one who wrote that book?” Bragg will write novels. He says “storytelling is storytelling,” but he craves the freedom of deciding himself “who wins and loses and lives and dies.”

His first novel will be, of course, set in the foothills of Appalachia, where Bragg need do no more research. He already knows how people there speak and what they eat and wear. Someday, though, he vows he will write novels “about pirates and Aztec sacrifice and any damn thing I want. Just not right now.”

Bragg’s work has been recognized many times, true, but his pleasure at learning he had been selected as the Harper Lee Award winner topped them all. Bragg, usually honored among journalists, admits to a special thrill at being in “the company of poets.” Bragg professes to be in love “with the power of Harper Lee’s book” and is honored to have his name and the name of Ms. Lee “in the same breath.” Bragg says, “It makes me feel like I should get me a better suit.”



JENNIFER HORNE

Editor’s note: Rick Bragg will receive the 2009 Harper Lee Award at the Alabama Writers Symposium Awards Luncheon in Monroeville on Friday, May 1, noon-2 p.m. For reservations or more information, visit www.writerssymposium.org or phone 251-575-8223.

Don Noble is host of the Alabama Public Television literary interview show Bookmark. His latest book is A State of Laughter: Comic Fiction from Alabama.

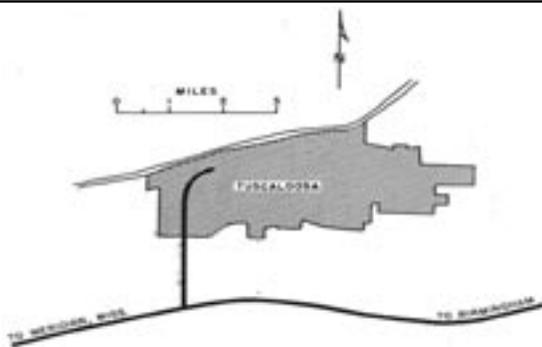
RICK BRAGG

BOOKS

- The Prince of Frogtown*, Alfred A. Knopf, 2008
I Am a Soldier, Too: The Jessica Lynch Story, Alfred A. Knopf, 2003
Ava’s Man, Alfred A. Knopf, 2001
Somebody Told Me: The Newspaper Stories of Rick Bragg, The University of Alabama Press, 2000
All Over but the Shoutin’, Pantheon, 1997

MAJOR AWARDS

- Harper Lee Award for Alabama’s Distinguished Writer of the Year, 2009
 Clarence Cason Award, 2004
 Pulitzer Prize in Journalism, 1996
 American Society of Newspaper Editors Distinguished Writing Award, 1996
 Nieman Fellow, 1992



BLACK WARRIOR REVIEW

A preeminent literary journal founded in 1974 at the University of Alabama, *Black Warrior Review* publishes contemporary fiction, poetry, nonfiction, comics, and art by Pulitzer Prize and National Book Award winners alongside work by new and emerging voices, in addition to a featured poetry chapbook solicited by the editors.

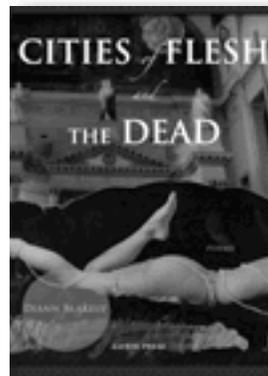
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Cities of Flesh and The Dead

by Diann Blakely

“An imaginer who hits the bull’s-eye with every detail, intonation, and emotional twitch, Blakely’s fullness of language quietly and firmly dazzles as she moves among epochs, personae and geographies. She is a master of evoking the bounties of loss while embracing the wayward joys of what is unaccountably found.”

—Baron Wormser, judge
Alice Fay diCastagnola Award



“Attentive, careful, and self-reflexive, these poems create a palimpsest of the contemporary South, where the present is always complicated by the haunting voices of the past.”

—Sarah Kennedy
from the introduction

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ALABAMA ADAPTATIONS

Turning Homegrown Stories Into Major Motion Pictures

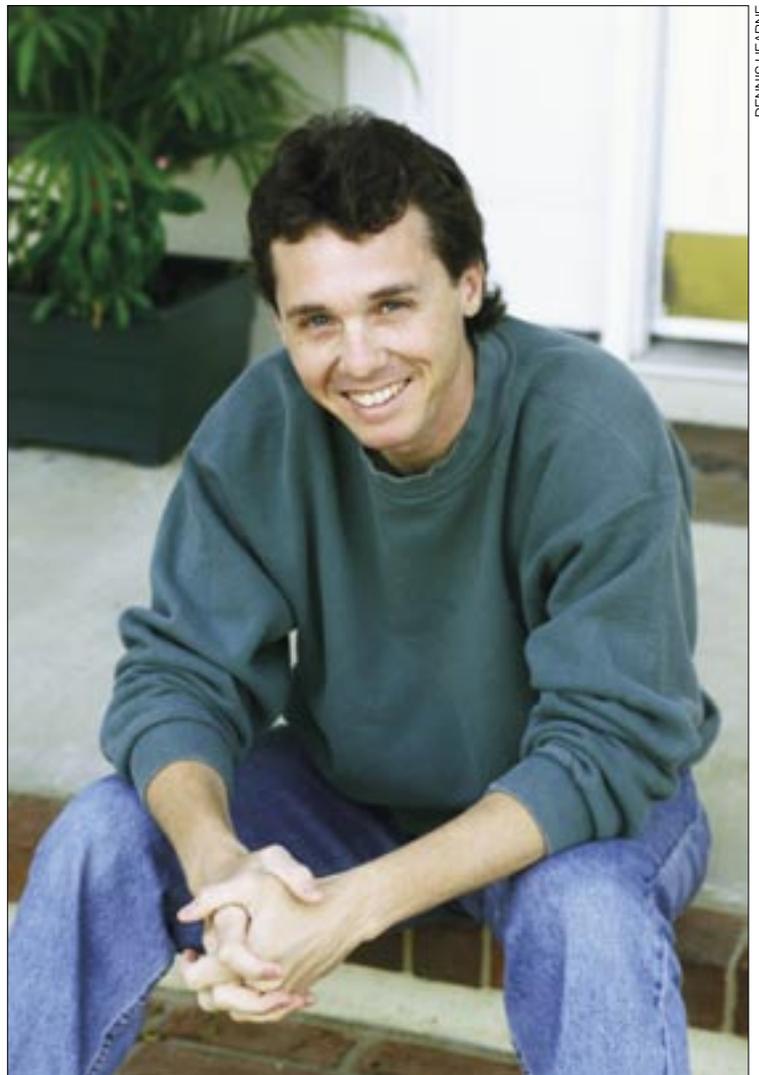
by *Glenny Brock*

Frank Turner Hollon spends a great deal of time avoiding questions about the strange books he has written. At least that's what it says in the author's note at the back of *Life Is a Strange Place*, his 2003 novel recently adapted for the big screen. But when I reach him by phone at his day job—a law practice in Baldwin County, Alabama—the easygoing author doesn't seem the least bit reluctant to describe the peculiar process of having his book made into a movie.

"In the five years from the time the book was published to when the filming started, it must have changed fifty times," Hollon says. "When it comes to the Hollywood part of it, it's all out of the writer's hands anyway. A lot of people think that the way it works is they make a movie of your book and then you get rich and you sell a million copies, but it doesn't work that way in reality."

The film will be called *Barry Munday*, named for the thirty-three-year-old sex-crazed antihero at the book's center, whom readers meet as he's on the make with a sixteen-year-old girl. Munday doesn't get too far with the teen, however, before absurdity intervenes. Barry wakes up in a hospital room where he learns he has lost his testicles. He later realizes that his hair is thinning, he hates his job, he doesn't like his only friend, and he will never be a father.

Life Is a Strange Place is just one of several books written by Alabama authors or with Alabama connections that moviegoers might see in theaters in the next few years. Others include *Alabama Moon*, adapted from Watt Key's novel of the same name, and *Birdland*, based on a story by Michael Knight. Montgomery-based NewSouth books recently announced the sale of film rights to three of its titles: *Grievances* by



Frank Turner Hollon

Mark Ethridge, *On the Hills of God* by Ibrahim Fawal, and *The Wrong Side of Murder Creek: A White Southerner in the Freedom Movement* by Bob Zellner with Constance Curry. While it's exciting for so much literature from Alabama to generate interest in Hollywood, the moviemaking process takes time, and, oddly, it doesn't always result in a feature presentation.

"When somebody tells a writer they're going to make a movie out of his book, all that means in the beginning is that they've optioned it," Hollon says. "You've just entered this long, long process that goes from option to screenplay to financing to filming to distributing. Then you sell the rights overseas. It's almost a miracle to get to the end of this thing and actually have a movie made that anyone will actually see."

At this point, Hollon is optimistic about *Barry Munday*, however. *Life Is a Strange Place* came out in 2003, and Chris D'Arienzo wrote the screenplay in 2005. Filming was completed last summer and the production team will add the soundtrack before they begin shopping the film around to festivals. Barry Munday is played by Patrick Wilson, who starred in this year's sci-fi thriller *Watchmen* and played Joe Pitt in the HBO

adaptation of Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*. Judy Greer (Kitty from TV's *Arrested Development*) stars opposite Wilson, and the supporting cast is also full of notable names—Chloë Sevigny, Colin Hanks, Malcolm McDowell, Cybil Shepard, and Billy Dee Williams. D'Arizenzo also directed the film, and, according to Hollon, the screenwriter stayed true to the spirit of *Life Is a Strange Place*.

"That seventy-five percent of the movie is directly from the book is really surprising, and I'm so glad about it," Hollon says. "You know, at first I was worried. I thought, 'They're going to turn this into an R-rated movie that's just going to appeal to seventeen-year-olds. It's going to be totally focused on this guy losing his testicles.' But it didn't turn out like that. It didn't turn out like that because the people working on it really get it. They get that it's actually a love story with sweetness underneath it. It's just happening in this crazy world. It's really the story of this guy growing up."

The screenplay for *Alabama Moon* also closely follows the novel from which it was adapted, but the big difference is that the same man who wrote the

book also handled the big-screen treatment. When Faulkner Productions (a Canadian company founded and owned by Tuscaloosa native Lee Faulkner) first optioned the book, the company hired a screenwriter to develop the screenplay. "When they got that back and wanted to make some changes, they hired me," says author Watt Key.

Alabama Moon is set in the South Alabama swamplands, a coastal wilderness that resembles what Point Clear must have looked like during Key's childhood and not too different from where he and his wife now live on the Alabama River Delta. It's an unusual coming-of-age story about a boy named Moon. For the ten years that have comprised his life, Moon has always lived in a shelter in the forest with his father, a hardscrabble Vietnam vet with a grudge against the government. The two males keep to themselves, hunting, trapping, or catching all of their own food and making due with whatever they find in the woods. Except for the occasional trip to the nearest general store, Moon has no contact with other people. When his father dies suddenly, Moon decides to follow his father's final instructions: Travel to Alaska to find other survivalists. The boy sets out the only way he knows how—walking. But, of course, he doesn't get too far before being caught up in a world that requires a different set of survival skills than those that Pap taught him.

Alabama Moon is Key's debut novel, and the screenplay was the first he's ever written. "Once they got me involved, I studied screenplays and basically taught myself," Key says. "I was very excited to do it, but, of course, once it was done, the director could still change it, the producer could still change it. On a project like this, the producer looks at it in part from a business perspective and the director turns it in to what he thinks the project should look like artistically."

John Goodman and Jimmy Bennett in a scene from *Alabama Moon*, the movie adapted from Watt Key's novel of the same name

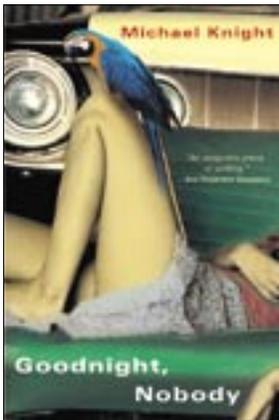
PHOTO COURTESY OF FAULKNER PRODUCTIONS



Tim McCanlies directed *Alabama Moon*. Playing the title character will be Jimmy Bennett, who plays Young Kirk in the upcoming *Star Trek* film. Other cast members include Clint Howard, a mainstay of films directed by his brother Ron, Gary Grubbs from television's *The O.C.*, and Golden Globe and Emmy award-winner John Goodman. Producer Lee Faulker says the movie is in post-production now. He expects it to be finished by June 2009. Key visited the movie set in Louisiana (that *Alabama Moon* couldn't be filmed in Alabama is another story) during the filming.

"Being the writer, it's pretty unusual to be on the set, but I got to be good friends with the producer, and I got to know the director pretty well, so I was able to go down there," he says. "As the writer on the set, you realize pretty quickly that everybody there has a job to do but you. They're running a business. I realized it was my job to get back to writing novels."

"I would do another screenplay, but I would only do it for my own material," Key says.



Actor/director/producer Robert Duvall optioned "Birdland," a story from Michael Knight's collection *Goodnight, Nobody*.

Likewise, fiction writer Michael Knight, who wrote the screenplay for the film adaptation of his own story, "Birdland" from his collection *Goodnight, Nobody*, doubts whether he would take on the challenge of writing one for somebody else. I ask Knight, who teaches in the Creative Writing program at the University of Tennessee at Knoxville, if he had ever written a screenplay at all before *Birdland*.

"No, and in fact, I did not want to write this one," he says, laughing. "I didn't want to waste a year of Robert Duvall's

life while I tried to figure out how to write a screenplay."

In 2006, veteran actor Robert Duvall was working as the executive producer and star of the western miniseries *Broken Trail*. A longtime friend of Knight was working on the production, too, and he gave Duvall a copy of "Birdland" to read.

"My friend called and said to me, 'He's interested in the story and is going to call you tomorrow. Will you be available?' And I said, 'If Robert Duvall is actually going to call, then yes, I think I'll be available,'" Knight remembers.

Duvall did call Knight the next day and the two men had a long conversation. According to Knight, Duvall reassured him, expressing confidence in the potential of the project while Knight made his first foray into screenwriting.

"When I started working with the production company, they said, 'We'll be patient.' So I took a year and some change and started studying, drafting it as I went along, the same way I would with fiction."

Knight started his learning by reading dozens of screenplays—as many as he could get his hands on. He learned the difference between a shooting script and a screenplay. "I started with movies that I loved and just went from there," he says. "I was seeing, one, how different stories work as movies, how a twelve or fifteen or twenty-page thing can become a feature-length film. Two, I was seeing how scriptwriters and screenwriters have to change so many things—rearrange chronologically, take things out, add new material—all while trying to keep the heart of the story. Even the function of scenes is different in screenwriting than in fiction."

Knight says that one of his early drafts was a really good read, but it wouldn't have made a good movie. "Birdland" is a love story, if a somewhat far-fetched one, about the romance that evolves between an ornithologist named Ludmilla Haggarsdottir but referred to as "the Blonde," and Raymond French, the former classics student from whom she rents a room in the sleepy town of Elbow, Alabama.

The Blonde has come to Elbow to research a group of parrots, a flock descended from pet birds once released by a millionaire philanthropist from Pawtucket, Rhode Island. Amid bouts of research, she takes up the only pastime there is in Elbow besides bird-watching—watching the Alabama Crimson Tide play football. The birds sometimes mimic the football fans, including the unrepentant rednecks. They shout, "Stick him like a man, you fat country bastard!" and worse.

French woos her by telling stories of Greek mythology, but the Blonde begins to wonder why she's even in Alabama. The result of their romance is the story's sweet denouement.

The option for "Birdland" will come up for renewal in March. Nothing is certain at this point, but Duvall's production company contacted Knight in January to let him know that the company would likely renew the option. As it happens, Duvall actually began his movie career in an adaptation of a book by an Alabama author. He played Arthur "Boo" Radley in *To Kill a Mockingbird* in 1962. This synchronicity bolsters Knight's belief that the film has a strong chance of being made.

"Robert Duvall actually said in an interview—I think it may have been in *Variety*—that he liked the idea of book-ending his career with another film about race in Alabama."

If these writers' experiences are any indication, Alabama authors have a lot of Hollywood appeal. But the only way to have your big-screen dreams realized is to keep to what should be business as usual for an aspiring writer: Face the blank page and fill it with a strong story.

Glenny Brock is the editor-in-chief of Birmingham Weekly and a frequent contributor to the blog Mixed Media, online at www.bhamweekly.com.



LIESA COLE

Scripts from Scratch



Daniel Wallace

Birmingham-born Daniel Wallace had never read a screenplay before he received the one for *Big Fish*, the movie adapted from his novel of the same name. But in the past few years, he's read dozens of original screenplays while serving as a judge for the Sidewrite contest sponsored by the Sidewalk Moving Picture Festival in Birmingham.

The annual contest is open to Alabama screenwriters exclusively. Entrants are eligible for a grand prize

that includes a cast-iron award sculpture, designed by resident artists at Birmingham's Sloss Furnaces, plus film editing software such as Final Cut Pro and other prizes. Each submission is also eligible for the Sidewrite Production Prize. Winning in that category means that the screenplay will actually be produced as a movie to be shown at the following year's Sidewalk Festival.

Wallace explains some of his personal criteria for the judging process: "The fundamental question I ask is: 'Is the story clear?' There are formatting devices that you use writing scripts that you don't necessarily use in fiction or any other kind of writing. You can't write anything that you can't see or hear. Those are the only two senses that you can use, and you have to use them to create a compelling story."

In screenplays, writers must strive for compression of incident. According to Wallace, a screenplay of fifteen to twenty pages translates into about fifteen minutes. Submissions to Sidewrite must be fifteen pages or less.

"You really have to understand what you're doing with a screenplay," Wallace says. "Clarity and a compelling story will yield a blueprint for a strong movie, but it's a very different process than writing fiction. In fact, even a well written screenplay isn't always producible."

The Sidewalk Web site emphasizes this point with the following warning: "Remember, for the Production Prize, the fewer the locations and number of explosions the better!"

Understanding the parameters can make the process that much more valuable for aspiring moviemakers.

"I think it's a really great way for people to learn how to write a screenplay," Wallace says.

In addition to the Sidewrite films, the annual festival showcases numerous movies written and directed by Alabamians. Sidewalk always includes at least two ninety-minute screenings of locally made short films, and several films by Alabamians are included in the competitive lineup of documentaries and full-length features. The 2008 festival included *Six Blocks Wide*, a narrative feature written by Birmingham writer Teresa Thorne; *'Bama Girl*, a documentary about the first African-American contestant for homecoming queen at the University of Alabama; and *The Dhamma Brothers*, a documentary about a Buddhist meditation instruction program in a Bessemer, Alabama, prison.

To learn more about the Sidewrite contest and the annual Sidewalk Moving Picture Festival, visit www.sidewalkfest.com.

Glenny Brock

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- Chris Jones, *Variety*

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Constructive Critiques

The Value of Writing Groups

by Carolyn Haines

Writing is a solitary business, and one of the pleasures of this very difficult lifestyle can be a critique group—a regular gathering of other writers who’ve signed onto the idea of improving their writing and the work of each member. For one evening on a regular basis, the solitary work is shared, much as I imagine musicians collaborate on a song.

For nearly sixteen years, I met every other week with the Deep South Writers Salon (DSWS), a group of talented Mobile-area writers. I was incredibly lucky in this endeavor. The original members—all of them women, but there have been males in the DSWS—were generous writers who put their hearts into the work of each member.

We met every other week at someone’s house. The meals became a friendly competition. Sometimes the meetings lasted late into the night, and along with developing writing techniques, we also developed strong and lasting friendships.

I knew nothing about how a critique group should function when we started out. I did know how it shouldn’t. Writing programs are notorious for cruel commentary and eviscerating public critiques. I’d experienced a few of those as a student, and that type of behavior isn’t conducive to finishing a book or developing a better writer.

I’d been teaching non-credit courses on writing to adults, and I had the terrific good fortune of knowing the people I asked to join DSWS. I knew their abilities, their work ethic, their behavior in class, and their dedication to writing. Six of us agreed to give a critique group a try. There was no formal discussion of “rules.” We were all in agreement that

comments would be designed to improve the work, not demonstrate the wit or cleverness of the commentator.

This is something I insist upon today in my fiction classes at the University of South Alabama. I encourage students to critique each other’s work, but they must come up with suggestions to improve the writing they’re critiquing. It cannot end at mere negative comments.

This rule works to the advantage of both the giver and receiver of the critique, for it requires the giver to put serious thought into the work, and the receiver is left with a thread of hope that all is not lost. It’s a matter of investing in someone else’s work—time, energy, and the most precious of all writerly things, thought. In the DSWS we invested in each other’s success.

Criticism—even the kindest, gentlest—is hard to hear. Nobody likes to be

told his baby is ugly. But the truth must be delivered if a writer is to improve. This method of suggesting an alternative strategy, though, takes a lot of the sting out. For instance, it isn’t ever helpful to say that a work is “boring” or “uninteresting.” A far more constructive way to approach this is to say something like, “I think Sally would be a more interesting character if she went to a psychic...or worked in a mental ward.” This may not be the direction the writer takes, but it can be the catalyst for new ways of looking at Sally that will eventually lead to the right answer.

A second, important rule, is that all writing must be typed, doubled-spaced, and handed out to each member of the group for review at the next meeting. Yes, this can be expensive. But you’re asking group members to spend time editing your story. The least you can do is give them the written pages to read and think about. This also provides a handy place where they can write comments.

In the DSWS we used standard publishing formatting. The double-spacing allowed room to comment and made it easy to read, which should be a writer’s goal no matter who is reading his work.

I’ve heard of critique groups that work by reading aloud, and I don’t understand this. My relationship with a reader is the written word. It’s what’s on the page that matters. Reading aloud, while helpful in some ways, is not an effective way to critique.

Remember that positive comments are just as valuable as negative ones. I use plus signs to indicate when a phrase or plot twist or telling detail or line of dialogue really moves me. And I use praise liberally. A spoonful of sugar does help the medicine go down. This isn’t about false praise, but often people get so focused on “fixing” the problems they forget that pointing out what works is just as vital.

We had lively debates in the Deep South Writers Salon meetings. We were fortunate in the mix of interests and personalities. One writer’s strength was plot and logic. Another focused on the nuances of relationships. Another on motive and reaction. Some of us were

JOHN ADAMS, ADAMS IMAGING



Carolyn Haines and Zelda

better with building tension and manipulating the elements of suspense, and thank goodness for the members who could sniff out misspellings and those pesky punctuation inconsistencies.

Working with the DSWS, I had five additional sets of eyes to fine-comb my work before my editor saw the first word. These writers, these friends, found and helped me repair many of the problems that would have made the manuscript harder work for an editor. Trust me, the cleaner the manuscript, the more your editor will love you.

Sometimes the meetings lasted late into the night, and along with developing writing techniques, members also developed strong and lasting friendships.

In the past, editors had the time to work with a young writer to bring her or him along and nurture and encourage that writer. Publishing today is more focused on the bottom line, and editors are buried in production work as well as acquiring manuscripts and editing.

A manuscript, in most instances, has to be ninety percent perfect to sell. I've teamed up (and the writer/editor *are* a team) with wonderful, talented editors, and my books are a reflection of their smart, caring work. But the cleaner the manuscript I give them, the better they can make it. The more polished a manuscript, the better the chance of getting an agent to say yes to representing your novel.

When putting together a critique group, try to find members with diverse writing interests. Good writing is good writing whether it's in the genres of romance, literary, sci-fi, horror, or mystery, and this cross-pollination of focus can be tremendously beneficial. One or two members who are adept at logic and following the thread of a plot can be immensely helpful. (Plot and structure flaws are most often the reason a book is rejected.) Bring in only people whose

work and attitudes you can fully respect.

Keep it to six people. DSWS had more, on occasion, but six is the optimum number. It's helpful to have one or more published authors in your group.

Have fun.

The meetings should be pleasurable. The gathering of DSWS was something I looked forward to.

When I took a full-time teaching job, plus my full-time writing job, plus the care of the twenty-one animals on my farm, I no longer had time to attend the meetings. When I couldn't give DSWS one-hundred percent, I stepped out.

I miss the bi-weekly fellowship, the

feast, the lively debate, the pleasure of reading my friends' work, and the tomfoolery. I owe much of my success to the Deep South Writers Salon members: Rebecca Barrett, Jan Zimlich, Susan Tanner, Stephanie Chisholm, Renee Paul, Pam Batson, Aleta Boudreaux, Thomas Lakeman, Alice Jackson, and Gary and Shannon Walker.

Carolyn Haines, author of the popular Sarah Booth Delaney Delta mysteries, was recently awarded the Richard Wright Award for Literary Excellence and is a past recipient of an Alabama State Council on the Arts writing fellowship.

Finding Your Writing Group

In 1978, I had what I thought was a healthy manuscript of finely-crafted poems. My friends loved them, but they knew nothing about poetry. I felt a need to find a group of fellow writers with whom to share my work, a group of writers to validate all those hours I had spent pounding away on my Underwood portable typewriter. A college dropout, I knew nothing about writing workshops, public readings, or literary festivals. In my sheltered suburban Homewood, I didn't even know another writer.

By chance I ran across a catalog for the Avondale Community School in Birmingham. In its pages, I spied a listing for a poetry workshop led by Marilyn Michael, whom I read was a published poet and a UNC-Chapel Hill graduate. I immediately registered.

Seven women of varying ages and experience had registered for the class. I was the only man. Over the next several weeks, we read and commented on each other's work. During this time, I learned that my manuscript was not quite as good as I thought. I needed to hear this.

As the term drew to a close, we decided to hold a public reading at the school. We actually had a good turnout, and people asked how they could join the class. Marilyn decided that we had formed such a bond that she, too, would like to join us, not as a teacher but as a peer. We left the community school and began to meet weekly at the Spiral Staircase Gallery on Birmingham's Southside. We carried some of that initial audience with us; we eventually published a chapbook, *Persimmon Dry*; and we held another reading to launch the book.

I got lucky. While we didn't always agree on style or form or poetic genre, we were a nurturing group of like-minded writers who could work together.

So how do *you* break your creative isolation to find a writing group? Like me, you may want to check your local community school. Also, universities and community colleges typically have community outreach programs, "continuing education" in other words. Or register for credit. A little more formal education never hurts.

Check with your public library. Where there are books, there are sure to be writers. Your local arts council may have a registry. You can find most anything on Google, Yahoo, or Ask.com. Then there are social networks such as Facebook, MySpace, and LinkedIn. And the Alabama Writers' Forum can also prove a valuable resource. Check our Announcements page at www.writersforum.org.

Most communities have something for both the novice and the experienced writer. The best thing to do is to find a writing group that fits.

*Danny Gamble,
Managing Editor*

IN AND OUT OF THE GAME

Writers Working for Community

by Jim Murphy

Walt Whitman’s declaration in *Song of Myself*, that his ever-roving poetic consciousness stands “Both in and out of the game, and watching and wondering at it,” is probably the natural condition of every writer on earth. The craft involves both intense involvement in the lives of others, through observations, empathies, and cultural immersions of all kinds, and significant detachment from these same neighbors, since it demands our time, attention, and imagination in large portions, and in isolation. We live all together, and read and write, for the most part, entirely alone. And it’s easy to let the nearsightedness of the literary life take over entirely, until whatever bonds link it to the “outside” world are strained, or lost. The figure of the isolated writer, scribbling in a cellar (or attic or professor’s office), a little long of beard and red of eye, squinting maliciously at whomever breaks the peace, is a well-worn literary type. And who’s to say that most mean old men who yell at kids to get off of their lawns don’t do so because they’re inside working on a novel?

To be sure, writers are an independent sort, not quick to join anyone or anything without long and deliberate consideration. Sometimes we seem eccentric in our aloneness, and that’s to be praised when it yields good writing. People cut us a lot of slack in this department, to tell the truth. It’s conventionally accepted that we need time to be alone to do what we do, if we really do it at all. Painters understand. But there comes another time when, in theory, we share what we’ve produced with the community. For our friends the painters, this may be the gallery opening. For us, it’s probably the reading, the signing, the launch reception, the slam, the book festival, the literary yard party, the living room, the blog, or the fire pit (not to leave out the Neanderthal writers among us).

Occasionally, in always very rare and very lucky circumstances, it’s the envelope that travels

to an audience of one—the editor—who brings it into the world through publication. In my experience, I’ve seen that an awful lot of our effort is expended on solely trying to achieve the latter, while we miss too many opportunities to create community of the former kind. It’s not misplaced energy to try to get published, of course. We take it seriously, and the editors of Web sites, journals, and publishing houses create durable, essential communities that carry a great deal of our work forward, and heroically so. But where is community created among writers and readers who aren’t themselves editors, and why is this kind of community important? The following is a personal example, but it may very well be recognizable to many.

“Initiation” is a loaded term on college campuses, or anywhere else strange and secretive societies (such as fraternities, sororities, and/or writers) gather. But it was no less than an initiation into a living, breathing community of writers that took place for me on the campus of the University of Missouri in the early 1990s. Columbia represented, like most college towns, an idyllic cocooning of culture and danger that set the stage for significant “growth experiences” among



MATT ORTON

Author Philip Shirley reads from his short story collection *Oh Don't You Cry for Me* at the 2008 Montevallo Literary Festival.

MATT ORTON



Authors and the audience mingle at the 2008 Montevallo Literary Festival.

Anywhere you
have an audience,
a writer, and a
few people to help
stage the thing,
you create the
conditions where
community can
arise and be
sustained by those
who recognize
its value.

the undergraduates. Looking back, I can clearly see that some of the most meaningful times among these were when the little cocoon would open to something much wider and greater than what the students and professors were doing in class, yet something that reinforced and dramatically brought to life what went on there. I received an education in my Age of Eliot class, in workshop after poetry workshop, and in the many, many times older graduate students would hold forth on this or that significant literary subject.

But I was shocked awake, and into *community*, the night a visiting poet from Ireland came to read and began by strumming a couple of folk songs on guitar. It was like I had been plugged into an electrical socket and could sense in my nerves that a connection did in fact exist between here and there, between our small world and his, and

between the rough little poems we were writing and the more accomplished notes of his. Of course, I was too afraid to have a book signed, but in his visit was a lesson I've never forgotten and an important realization that slowly dawned on me as I took in those poems, for free, in an oak-paneled room at an event put together by other people: I was in the same room as a true-to-life Poet, and I deserved my seat there as much as the next person. The pleasure I took in those lines musically rising and falling in that actual human voice was legitimate, and it was there for me as much as for anyone.

Years later, as I attended more and more readings and

the conditions where community can arise and be sustained by those who recognize its value.

If it works, it allows us to take something significant away that will help carry us through weeks or months of working alone. If it works, it brings something from the prehistoric past (I wasn't kidding about those Neanderthals) into the immediate present and points us toward the future. If it works, it's an emblem of the pure, not-for-profit nature of art, something that everyone, even a dead-broke undergraduate, is entitled to enjoy. If it works, it helps us see and understand why we write, or, more concretely, who we're writing for. It keeps the cellar door open and lets in fresh air. And that's something good for everyone involved.

What I've just described is quite probably the central pleasure of staging literary events, whether readings, slams, festivals, or any other happening that brings readers and writers together. Like most enjoyable things in life, each of these involves hours and hours of tedious, difficult, often frustrating, and virtually thankless labor by some people so that others may fleetingly enjoy it. And, of course, as Yeats said about good poems, the labor that goes into them must be made to seem effortless. How can anyone expect to accomplish this? There's no single path, since each community is unique, but the sidebar shows ten tips that I hope will help as you start to plan. Remember that if even one person connects to the community in a real way, no matter how modest or lavish your event may be, it has been well worth it.



JAMIE MARTIN

Jim Murphy teaches creative writing at the University of Montevallo, where he has served as Director of the Montevallo Literary Festival. He has also served on the board of the Writing Today conference, hosted by Birmingham-Southern College, and the BACHE Visiting Writers Series. He presently serves as a board member of the Alabama Writers' Forum.

Jim Murphy's Top 10 Universal Tips for LITERARY EVENT PLANNERS

1 KNOW YOUR COMMUNITY, or How Not To Bring the Wrong Candyland Author to the Fourth-Graders: Remember your audience and think first about what they would benefit from experiencing. This doesn't mean pandering to them. What will prompt serious thought on their behalf and entertain them at the same time?

2 BIG MONEY DOESN'T NECESSARILY MEAN BIG RESULTS, or How To Avoid the \$8k Opportunity for a Nap: Try to get a personal word of recommendation about a writer's delivery before booking anyone, no matter how famous. Great writers are great for many reasons, and sometimes great presentation is not among these. Remember that hard-working, quality writers and good guests are of all ages and stages of development. Ask around.

3 PROMOTE EFFECTIVELY, or Make Friends with Facebook Now: Online promotion is virtually free and is likely to hit a large portion of your intended audience multiple times. Posters and fliers are somewhat costly, but provide valuable presence for your event in the bricks-and-mortar world. Direct mailings are budget breakers, though if cost is not a factor, a handsome direct mail campaign can work very well.

4 WORK WELL WITH OTHERS, or You're Only as Good as Your Board, Dude: One person cannot plan and execute this event, no matter how small or large it is. Try to choose compatriots who care equally about the cause, who bring complementary areas of expertise to the project, and who can both delegate and take on responsibility as work ebbs and flows.

5 KNOW YOUR FACILITIES, or How I Rocked Shea Stadium in Front of Six Screaming People: Far better to have an SRO crowd in a small (but not overheated!) room than little handfuls here and there, swimming in a big auditorium. Remember to check and double check any audio/video or lighting equipment in advance.

6 DON'T OVERPLAN, or Hurry Up, the 7:14 a.m. Reading Is About To Begin, Y'all!: Remember having to cram for a test, reading chapter after chapter or book after book in a caffeine-blurred haze of physical exhaustion and intellectual nausea? The same unfortunate thing can happen when too many events are squeezed into a small time frame. It's difficult to resist the temptation to do this, but try. It's also a good idea to vary the kind of presentation across the span of your project as well.

7 DON'T MICROMANAGE, or People Will Know How To Flush Without a Sign: While a basic information table or orientation session is very important, there's no need to hand-hold adults as they move through your event. Appoint your staff and yourself as go-to people for all questions and handle them as they arise. We can't anticipate every contingency, and it's a waste of our energy to try, though try we will.

8 PROVIDE REFRESHMENTS, or People Like Books, but They Like Food Even Better: It's easy to forget the simple things, like snacks and drinks, or even meals, for that matter. Try to keep a variety of semi-healthy and junk food options available to suit every taste and try to keep these replenished as needed. You'll need three times as much water as you think and twice as much ice. If you're serving alcohol, it's probably a good idea to wait until after the last of the official business to uncork it.

9 KEEP RECORDS, or Are You Sure Hank Done It This Way?: Financial records should be meticulously kept, of course. But there are other records that will help you as your event matures. Try to formally review what worked and what didn't with your board soon afterward and don't be afraid to change things. On the other hand, preserving successful aspects of the event creates traditions that can come to define it. There's no need to reinvent the wheel each time.

10 ASK OTHERS HOW, or We Enjoy This Stuff. We Really Do!: We're lucky to have many vibrant and diverse Alabama literary happenings on our calendar each year. No matter what you're planning, or thinking of planning, there are friends in our state to help you get it off the ground. The Alabama Writers' Forum is a great place to make contact with them.

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WRITING OUR STORIES Celebrates Its Eleventh Year

Students Read From Three New Anthologies

by Danny Gamble
Photos by Jamie Martin

Writing Our Stories: An Anti-Violence Creative Writing Program, a partnership of the Alabama Department of Youth Services (DYS) and the Alabama Writers' Forum (AWF), celebrated its eleventh anniversary last fall with the release of three new student anthologies of poems, stories, and memoirs.

On October 23, one published writer read his selections from *A Long Time Coming* in the chapel of the DYS Vacca Campus in Birmingham. Seven students from the new class read their favorite poems from the anthology and shared some of their work. Danny Gamble, former teaching writer at Vacca's McNeel School, offered the keynote address.

"Writing is hard work, perhaps the hardest work you've ever done,"

said Gamble. "It takes effort. It takes discipline. It takes patience. It's painfully frustrating. But writing a polished piece for publication is greatly rewarding. When you new student writers sit here next year with *your* book in your hands, you'll know this feeling of accomplishment."

Gamble leaves the program after nine years to assume communication duties at AWF. Award-winning writer Tony Crunk has joined WOS as teaching writer at McNeel School.

DYS Executive Director J. Walter Wood Jr. welcomed the assembled guests to the DYS Mt. Meigs campus on October 30 for the release of *Open the Door II*. "You're published writers now,"



"Writing is hard work, perhaps the hardest work you've ever done," said **Danny Gamble**, former teaching writer and keynote speaker at Vacca.



John Stewart, Superintendent DYS School District; **Nancy Deabler**, cooperating teacher at Lurleen B. Wallace School; **C.D. Mitchell**, visiting writer-in-residence; **Marlin Barton**, teaching writer; **Maureen Womack**, librarian; and **Jarmar Muhammad**, cooperating teacher.



"As I grew up, I came to learn about writing as a refuge and as a gateway," said **Glennie Brock**, *Birmingham Weekly* editor-in-chief and keynote speaker at Chalkville.



(l-r) Sequoyah School cooperating teacher **Janet Dickson**; teaching writer **Priscilla Hancock Cooper**; **Tracy Smitherman**, DYS School District Curriculum and Federal Programs Coordinator; **John Stewart**, DYS Superintendent of Education; and Principal **Cheryl Bufford**.



(back, l-r) Pamela Bowen, secretary for DYS Community Services; McNeel School principal Arthur Tigner; AWF Assistant Director for Writing Our Stories Marlin Barton; teaching writer Tony Crunk; Tim Davis, DYS Deputy Director for Programs and Clients Services. (front, l-r) Former teaching writer Danny Gamble; former cooperating teacher and McNeel School media specialist Linda McQueen; AWF Executive Director Jeanie Thompson; James Thomas, Superintendent of DYS Vacca Campus; and Cheryl Bufford, principal at Sequoyah School.

Wood told the twelve student writers. “That’s something no one can take away from you. You make us proud.”

The Honorable Brian Huff, Presiding Circuit Judge of Family Court in Birmingham, delivered the keynote address. “You can do anything you set your mind to, and this book is proof,” Judge Huff said, addressing the *Open the Door II* writers. “This book gives you young men the inspiration, the realization that you can accomplish your goals. Hold on to this talent, use it, make the most of it.”

According to Marlin Barton, Assistant Director for Writing and Our Stories and teaching writer at Lurleen B. Wallace School at Mt. Meigs, *Open the Door II* is the largest anthology he has published in his eleven years with the program. “Forty students contributed to this book,” he said. “This was a group of most talented students who produced quality work.”

On November 6, *Birmingham Weekly* editor-in-chief Glenny Brock addressed *The Open Window* book release event at the DYS Chalkville Campus. “As I grew up, I came to learn about writing as a refuge and as a gateway,” she said, alluding to a fatal auto accident in which she lost her mother when Brock was eight years

old. “Writing is not a way out of life-crushing events, but it is a way of wrestling with them. I hope to impart to you that what you’ve done is important. There are examples in your anthology of your already using your writing as a refuge and as a gateway. I hope you continue.”

Before introducing her four returning and one remaining student authors, teaching writer Priscilla Hancock Cooper applauded the ten-year relationship between DYS and AWF at Sequoyah School at Chalkville. “This type of program and partnership is so unique, and we appreciate our continuing partnership,” she said.

After she read selections of her newly published poems, an emotional L.M.C. told the new class, “Keep going. Keep writing. You have talent that’s never going to leave. You may be in here now, but you’ll get out. Keep writing then. It’s helped to keep me moving, to keep striving.” Student writers are identified by their initials to comply with DYS policy.

Copies of the new anthologies are available at the Forum for a \$5 shipping and handling fee for each book.

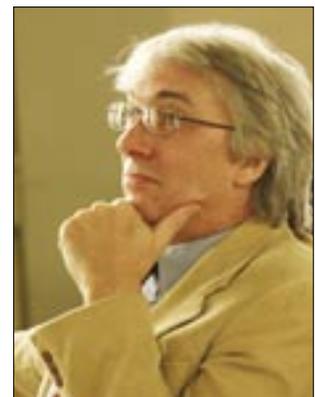
Visit www.writersforum.org/programs/writing or e-mail writersforum@bellsouth.net for more information.



“You’re published writers now. That’s something no one can take away from you,” said DYS Executive Director J. Walter Wood Jr. at the Mt. Meigs ceremony.



“This book gives you young men the inspiration, the realization that you can accomplish your goals. Hold on to this talent, use it, make the most of it,” said the Honorable Brian Huff, Presiding Circuit Judge of Family Court in Birmingham, and keynote speaker at Mt. Meigs.



McNeel School teaching writer Tony Crunk looks on as his students read their work.

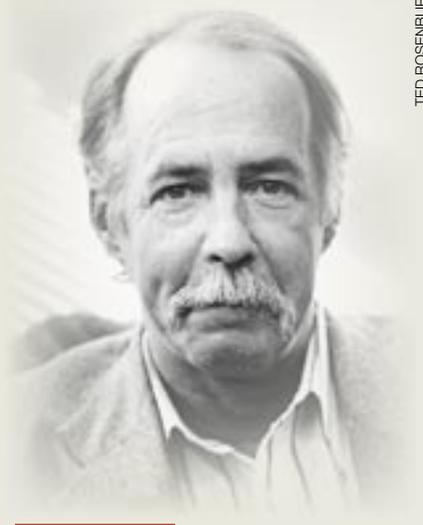
Deep Image, Humor, and the Poetry of **WILLIAM MATTHEWS**

by Philip F. Deaver

I confess to a great admiration for William Matthews.¹ I knew him only a little. I first encountered his poetry in 1980 or so when he came to Murray State University, where I worked at the time. Mark Jarman was in residence then, and Larry Levis, William Stafford, and Stanley Kunitz had visited, and Jarman’s mentor, the great Charles Wright. If up until then poetry on the page had failed me for some reason, I found myself drawn to it by hearing these poets read. Somehow it was possible to understand, when they were reading, where from inside them their poems came. I was and am a fiction writer, and, in those days at Murray, I was wondering where inside me *my* poetry might come from.

I was surprised how readily I responded to Matthews, poem after poem. He read from his fine breakthrough book *Rising and Falling* (1979), new at that time, and I was quite taken by the smart humor and lively intelligence that gave us a quirky and exacting wit that acted as the current of his poems. Matthews was being identified with the Deep Image school² in those times, and his strong metaphors zinged the audience, myself included. I listened in wonder and admiration. I still remember it very well.

Matthews, then, was a young fellow (four years older than me) who looked like a fairly regular college guy of my era who, like me, had grown up in many ways but not all (the boyish fun, the playful laugh—the Ohio kid was still there), and who could write oddly powerful poems



William Matthews

TED ROSENBERG about, among other things, Ted Williams’ “giving” batting practice, the flight of a basketball on its way to the hoop, and jazz. I didn’t know exactly what the Deep Image school of poetry was, but if this was it, I was into it. It turned out that I caught Bill Matthews in a period when the Deep Image school, as a poetry movement, was fading back into the big sea of contemporary poetry. I believe he’d actually grown beyond it, and he wasn’t the only one. I mean this in the kindest way, but the image, and even the wildest metaphor, for him, was growing closer and closer to the core of his poems rather than being a sort of gymnastic event in the last stanza. I’m aware this is an over-simplification of what deep image was in poetry in its time, but I believe it accurately depicts where Matthews was as a poet when I met him in 1980.

Also, famously, Matthews was unusually generous to the writers he met as he traveled around the country doing readings. For me, this was an early clue to his interest in connection. Hence, we made a minor (for him, one among so many, but for me most important) friendship in those days that turned into an intermittent correspondence spanning the approximately seventeen years he had left. I have never lost interest in the quick and lithe movement and edge in his work and in his personal tone that connected his poetry to his audience like a conversation.

Poets.org has a decent short biography of William Matthews for your reference, and at that site also is a summary of the critical responses Matthews received book by book along

the way and then also in summary after he died. He was born in Cincinnati in 1942. The Deep Image school began to surface in 1961, led by Robert Bly (born in 1938) with James Wright (1927) and W. S. Merwin (1927), among many others of the generation just ahead of him. A Bachelors from Yale, an MA from UNC-Chapel Hill, Matthews' career began in 1967 when he started Lillabulero Press with his friend Russell Banks. Matthews published eleven books of poetry during his lifetime. His final book of poems, provided to his publisher Peter Davison only days before he died, was *After All: Last Poems*, obviously retitled posthumously. In 2004, his son, Sebastian Matthews, and Stanley Plumly edited a selected collection of his work titled *Search Party: Collected Poems*. That's roughly the skeleton of the arc.

Jack Hicks is quoted at the poets.org site from his *Carolina Quarterly* essay on *Ruining the New Road* (1970): "(Matthews') voice is unique, personal, but one not heard immediately or sharply. Because he does not knock you down, he requires reading and rereading—and even then his work does not announce itself." This review was actually positive and spoke to the understatement and quiet ironies in this work, neither of which sound like characteristics of the Deep Image school, famous for its long-shot images and flashy metaphors that, practically as a matter of doctrine, gladly risked going too far.

About the collection of Matthews that was current at the time I met him in Kentucky, Peter Stitt wrote in the *Georgia Review*, "The poems of *Rising and Falling* do not glitter or dazzle, but shed a steady light."³

Well, yes, absolutely to the "steady light," but what *did* glitter and dazzle, as most everyone who ever saw him will tell you, was Bill Matthews doing a public reading of his work. There in Kentucky, I thought at first it was simply that I recognized in his voice and persona my home latitude, a northerner—familiar and even friendly tones as he read "Foul Shots: A Clinic."⁴ ". . . Now the instructions / grow spiritual—deep breathing, / relax and concentrate both; aim / for the front of the rim and miss it / deliberately so the ball goes in. / Ignore this part of the clinic / and shoot 200 foul shots / every day. . . ."

Okay, it's about basketball, but then at the end of the poem, he tells us *of course* we won't shoot those 200 shots a year, and we soar with the leap for which the Deep Image school was famous, as he says that those shots we didn't shoot in practice ". . . circle eccentrically / in a sky of stolid orbits / as unlike as you and I are / from the arcs those foul shots / leave behind when they go in."

Typically in the close of a Deep Image poem, the last stanza will evoke symbols that are archetypal, that are triggers for the unconscious, thus releasing the poem from the limits of conscious associations and letting it leap, as Bly said, "into the unknown." In a larger sense, the ending of "Foul Shots: A Clinic" is typical Matthews but atypical deep image and, I believe, signals a phase when Matthews was freeing himself from the limits of any school of poetry, in effect beginning to mainstream himself into a league with our finest contemporary poets. The fading of the Deep Image school resulted from this migration by many of the poets associated with it, most likely as a step in their maturation or evolution as artists.

In the early seventies in his earlier book, *Sleek for the Long Flight* (1972), Matthews had been in a different phase, I think consciously tying himself to Deep Image because it fit with his talent that featured verbal acumen, wide knowledge, and curiosity, and a fast, wild, unusual intelligence for the synthesis that can spark a metaphor. Robert Bly, who in his own individualistic and anti-academic way led in refining the conception of the deep image in poetry, had written a couple of poems that have been used to illustrate how a deep image poem might work. One was titled "Driving Toward the Lac Qui Parle River," and another, one of Bly's political poems, was titled "Driving Through Minnesota During the Hanoi Bombings."⁵

So here are the last few lines of one of the poems in which William Matthews, in his *Sleek for the Long Flight*, apparently consciously sought connection with the Deep Image school, describing a night drive as the speaker, battling sleep, contemplates his shadow. The poem is titled, not by coincidence I am sure, "Driving Along the Housatonic River Alone on a Rainy April Night."⁶

THE SEARCH PARTY

by William Matthews

I wondered if the others felt
as heroic
and as safe: my unmangled family
slept while I slid uncertain feet ahead
behind my flashlight's beam.
Stones, thick roots as twisted as
a ruined body,
what did I fear?
I hoped my batteries
had eight more lives
than the lost child.
I feared I'd find something.

Reader, by now you must be sure
you know just where we are,
deep in symbolic woods.
Irony, self-accusation,
someone else's suffering.
The search is that of art.

You're wrong, though it's
an intelligent mistake.
There was a real lost child.
I don't want to swaddle it
in metaphor.
I'm just a journalist
who can't believe in objectivity.
I'm in these poems
because I'm in my life.
But I digress.

A man four volunteers
to the left of me
made the discovery.
We circled in like waves
returning to the parent shock.
You've read this far, you might as well
have been there too. Your eyes accuse
me of false chase. Come off it,
you're the one who thought it wouldn't
matter what we found.
Though we came with lights
and tongues thick in our heads,
the issue was a human life.
The child was still
alive. Admit you're glad.

Reprinted with permission from *Search Party: Collected Poems* by William Matthews, edited by Sebastian Matthews and Stanley Plumly. Published by Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2004.

AWF

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Continued from page 21

I feel the steering wheel
tug a little, testing.
For as long as that takes
the car is a sack of kittens
weighed down by stones.
The headlights chase a dark ripple
across some birch trunks.
I know it's there, water
hurrying over the shadow of water.

Because the speaker is alone on this drive and is sleepy, his imagination has gone away to think on its own of shadows, and the hand on the steering wheel is only marginally conscious as the car slips along on the wet road. The symbols are flying—shadows, rain, water, stones, sack of kittens. They are from a rainy night dreamscape and combine to create an intrigue of deep image right at the illusion of the edge of consciousness.

My favorite poem from Matthews' early career was "The Search Party,"⁷ with its personal tone and lyrical force that was an early showing of his chops, the poet who would later give us the collections *A Happy Childhood* and *Time and Money*. As with Matthews and "deep image," the matter of Matthews and "humor" is a whole topic unto itself, and his specialty was not the witty line, though they're all over the place in his work, but rather the integration of a humor that seems both cordially social and somehow also contemplative.

Surely you'll agree that "Foul Shots: A Clinic" is both fine and funny, partly because of the mock-jock "hard work" wisdom, partly because of the leap at the end, the gorgeous hyperspeed escape from those oversimplifications into the unknown. But Matthews can do what he wants with a poem. He doesn't need to get all intergalactic deep image in it. The turns of his poems often gel because he suddenly spots and discloses the sad but comic irony. For example, from the "The Bear at the Dump,"⁸ in which the speaker observes a bear happily lunching on a mountain of our garbage: "What a good boy am he." Here Matthews has suddenly spotted himself, and thus all of us, in the bear. Or from "Misgivings"⁹: ". . . Listen, / my wary one, it's far too late / to unlove each other . . ." This line is deadly serious in some way, and also hopeful and even funny, and serves in the poem to reverse field and finally to console. Or from "Mingus at the Showplace,"¹⁰ the first lines: "I was miserable, of course, for I was seventeen / and so I swung into action and wrote a poem . . ." William Matthews never forgot the awkwardness of the adolescent boy, and his humor seemed to actually respect it, honor it, as we sometimes respect an enemy. Finally, from "Search Party": "Reader, by now you must be sure / you know just where we are, / deep in symbolic woods. / Irony, self-accusation, / someone else's suffering. / The search is that of art. / You're wrong, though it's / an intelligent mistake." In this early example, Matthews overtly unveils the good-humored but serious conversation with his reader he conducted his whole artistic life. I believe this openness and perhaps even this fun in communication

was natural to him and explains why his association was real but temporary to the Deep Image school, a poetic idea that risked losing communication and connection on the chance that a purer insight might occur with a leap into the deep unknown.

The success of Matthews from the podium comes from the voice in his work. You know, and he knew, how these lines above would work in a reading. A recent failure in poetry just as Matthews was emerging was its privacy, its oft-noted inaccessibility. Matthews really wanted to connect with his audience. This is the voice I heard at Murray that first time, and now, exactly as we'd hope and expect—happily, because I hate it but he is gone—I do hear that voice in his poems on the page. He lives on for sure in his

work, and I hear him in his short but witty letters as well, often whapped out on a typewriter on stationery redeemed from the center drawer of hotel desks along his way. What a fortuitous development it was for me that his way crossed with mine thirty years ago. This was his influence on me as a writer: I want to affect my reader the way a Matthews poem so dependably and profoundly affects me. And if I can't fully achieve that through study, how close can I get if I'm willing to go to the line and take 200 practice shots a day?

Philip F. Deaver is Associate Professor of English and permanent writer-in-residence at Rollins College and teaches also in the Spalding University Brief Residency

MFA program. His story collection Silent Retreats won the Flannery O'Connor Award for Short Fiction and was recently re-released in paperback (University of Georgia Press, 2008). In 2005 his poetry collection How Men Pray was published by Anhinga Press. He also has an edited anthology of creative nonfiction, Scoring From Second: Writers on Baseball (University of Nebraska, 2007). <http://philipdeaver.com>; <http://lonngpinelimited.blogspot.com>

Endnotes

- ¹ The net has many decent author biographies of William Matthews. For this paper, I used <http://www.poets.org/>.
- ² For more information on the Deep Image school, its predecessors and the Bly/Wright connection, see "Leaping Into the Unknown: The Poetics of Robert Bly's Deep Image" by Kevin Bushell, posted at http://www.english.uiuc.edu/maps/poets/a_f/bly/bushell.html." The Bushell article is most helpful in discussing Robert Bly's key comments about Deep Image, from which most of the formal definitions of it stem.
- ³ The Hicks and Stitt quotes are taken from the reviews of Matthews cited in the <http://www.poets.org/piece>.
- ⁴ Matthews, William. *Rising and Falling*. Boston, MA: Little, Brown and Co., 1979. (p. 25)
- ⁵ Both Bly "Driving . . ." poems are cited in the Kevin Bushell article at http://www.english.uiuc.edu/maps/poets/a_f/bly/bushell.html.
- ⁶ Matthews, William. *Sleek for the Long Flight*. Fredonia, NY: White Pine Press, 1988. (p. 16)
- ⁷ Matthews, William. *Ruining the New Road*. New York, NY: Random House, 1970. (p. VIII)
- ⁸ Matthews, William. *Time and Money*. New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1995. (p. 7)
- ⁹ Matthews, William. *After All: Last Poems*. New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1995. (p. 54)
- ¹⁰ Matthews, William. *Time and Money*. New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1995. (p. 5)

Books By WILLIAM MATTHEWS

POETRY

A Happy Childhood, 1984
After All: Last Poems, 1998
An Oar in the Old Water, 1974
Blues If You Want, 1989
Broken Syllables, 1969
Flood, 1982
Foreseeable Futures, 1987
Rising and Falling, 1979
Ruining the New Road, 1970
Search Party: Collected Poems, 2004
Selected Poems & Translations, 1969-1991, 1992
Sleek for the Long Flight: New Poems, 1972
Stick and Stones, 1975
The Cloud, 1971
Time & Money: New Poems, 1995

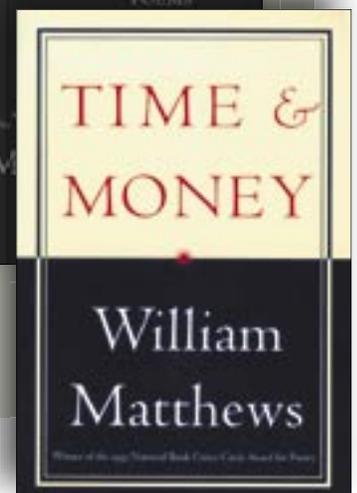
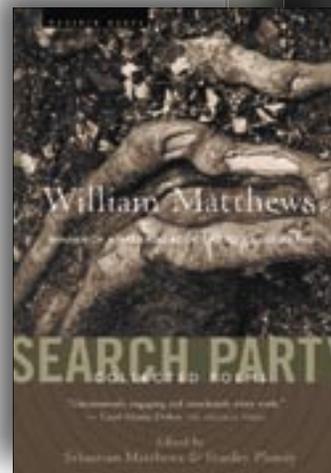
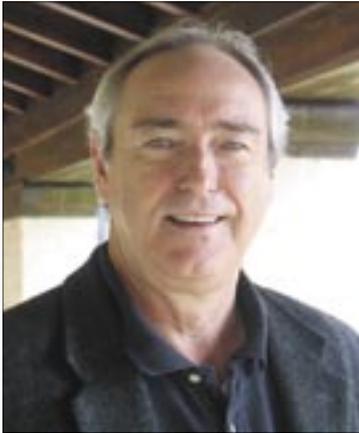
ANTHOLOGY

A World Rich in Anniversaries: Prose Poems, 1979
Removed from Time, 1977
The Mortal City: 100 Epigrams of Martial, 1995

ESSAYS

Curiosities, 1989

KATHERINE STAPLES



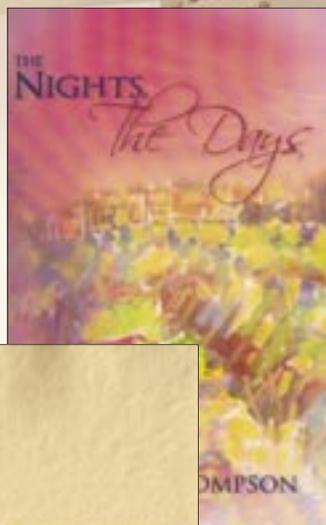
Cheap Books for Discriminating Readers An Introduction to Poetry Chapbooks

by Jennifer Horne

A writer friend calls you up and says, “Great news! I won a chapbook contest!” Congratulations” you respond, embarrassed that you’re not sure what, exactly, a chapbook is. Chap? Book? It sounds British, and it is, but it has nothing to do with a book for chaps.

The term developed, according to most sources, around the sixteenth century to refer to small, inexpensively produced books sold by chapmen, or peddlers, and, like it sounds, the word “chap” is related to the word “cheap.” The books contained songs, stories, poems, political or religious tracts—anything that might appeal to a general reader with a few pennies. These little books continued to thrive in Britain on into the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and made the leap to America in the mid-nineteenth century when they became a reading source for railroad workers and then Civil War soldiers, according to Wayne Miller, writing in the *American Book Review* in 2005.

In current literary publishing, most chapbooks contain poetry, and although chapbooks tend to be shorter than standard books of poems, usually between sixteen and thirty-two pages, the physical object itself can be anything from a



lovingly produced work of art with handmade paper and handset type to the photocopied, stapled product of a single busy weekend. In any format, a chapbook can be a good way for poets to break into book publication, as newer poets can submit a selection of only their best work, and publishers risk less financially. A chapbook organized around a single subject or theme may later become a section of a full-length book.

The “call for manuscripts” and “contests” sections of *Poets and Writers* magazine include several opportunities to submit work to chapbook contests in each issue, and the number of chapbooks published in the U.S. each year seems to be rising. Poets House, which has one of the largest collections of poetry in the country, holds an annual Poetry Publication Showcase from which is compiled their Directory of American Poetry Books, searchable online. In 1990, the first year shown in the database, they listed eighty chapbooks; in 1995, 253; in 2000, 299; in 2005, 386; and in 2007, 474.

Above: Mylar sheets in the *Naked Writing* installation. The installation, along with its chapbook, is available to display in galleries and museums.

As in the rest of the country, chapbook publishing is thriving in Alabama. Alabama Poet Laureate Sue Walker said that after she and co-editor J. William Chambers completed work on *Whatever Remembers Us: An Anthology of Alabama Poetry*, she “wanted to make a further contribution in promoting Alabama writers.” “I thought that an Alabama chapbook publication that would feature the work of an Alabama poet each year might accomplish that goal,” she said.

The first Poet Laureate Competition, sponsored by Walker’s Negative Capability Press, was held in 2008, with Kathleen Thompson’s *The Nights, The Days*, as its first winner. Thompson’s book juxtaposes, page by page, dream poems and journal entries over a period of several months. Somewhat confessional, occasionally surreal, always intriguing, these poems ask the reader to consider the interactions among different states of consciousness and create the powerful effect of having lived through both the dreams and the days of this speaker.

Several Alabama poets have recently published chapbooks in fine press editions. Mark Dawson, a former editor of *Black Warrior Review* and a University of Alabama (UA) MFA in Creative Writing graduate, worked with Aralia Press on his chapbook *Solitary Conversations*. Dawson met his publisher, Michael Peich, at the West Chester University Poetry Conference, a conference founded by Peich, Dana Gioia, and others to focus on form in poetry. Dawson says that he enjoyed the process of working with Peich to choose poems and even help a bit with the final printing because Peich “finds a lot of joy” in the process of making a book. With only five poems, one in rhymed couplets and the other four sonnets, *Solitary Conversations* is a quick read but one that merits repeated visits, as Dawson, with wry humor, delineates the hopeful attempts of a no-longer-quite-young speaker to find love.

Naked Writing, a chapbook by UA creative writing professor Robin Behn, grew out of a collaboration with Chicago

Although chapbooks tend to be shorter than standard books of poems, the physical object itself can be anything from a lovingly produced work of art with handmade paper and handset type to the photocopied, stapled product of a single busy weekend.

artist Mirjana Ugrinov. MC Hyland, a UA graduate with an MFA in both book arts and creative writing, has published Behn’s poems with her DoubleCross Press, using different colors and typefaces to reflect the different voices in which Behn’s poems are written.

In another collaborative project, UA Book Arts professor Steve Miller worked with poet Cade Collum to produce *The Dogs of Havana*, inspired by prints based on Miller’s photographs of stray dogs he encountered while visiting Cuba.

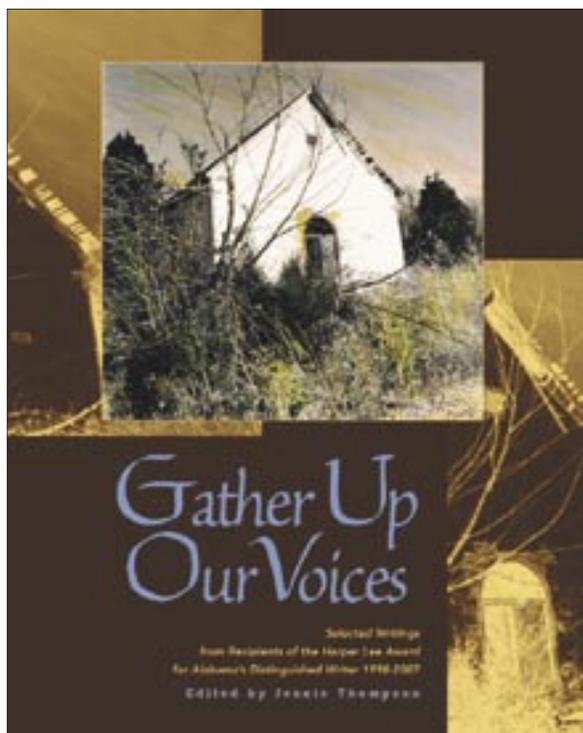
Another UA Creative Writing faculty member, Joel Brouwer, has several chapbooks published or forthcoming from such small presses as the distinctively named Artichoke Yink

WEB SOURCES FOR CHAPBOOK PRESSES AND CONTESTS

- Alabama Writers’ Forum Announcements Page—
www.writersforum.org/announcements
- Aralia Press—www.wcupa.edu/_ACADEMICS/sch_cas/aralia
- Artichoke Yink Press—www.artichokeyinkpress.com
- “Chapbooks Showcase Your Work,” by Rita Moe, *The Writer*, Feb. 2003—www.writermag.com/wrt (abbreviated version; full version, with specific details on chapbook contests, self-publishing, and compilation, can be accessed through many library databases)
- Directory of American Poetry Books—<http://poetshouse.org/directory> (with searchable database)
- Double Cross Press blog—
<http://doublecrosspress.blogspot.com>
- General Contest Information—
www.poetryresourcepage.com/contests/ccontests
- General Contest Information—
www.newpages.com/literary/book_contests
- Limestone Dust Poetry Festival—
www.limestonedustpoetry.org
- Mercy Seat Press—www.mercyseatpress.com
- Negative Capability Press Poet Laureate Competition—
<http://negativecapabilitypress.org>
- New Dawn Unlimited—<http://newdawnunlimited.com>
- Ninth Lab Chapbooks—
<http://wings.buffalo.edu/epc/presses/ninth> (edited by Jake Berry of Florence, Alabama, with free download of e-chapbooks)
- Poets and Writers—www.pw.org/magazine
- Red Hydra Press/Steve Miller—www.redhydra.us
(*Dogs of Havana* is available as a free PDF)
- Red Mountain Chapbook Contest—
<http://redmountainblog.blogspot.com>
- The John and Miriam Morris Chapbook Competition—
<http://alabamapoets.org>
- The University of Alabama Book Arts Program—
www.bookarts.ua.edu
- UU Montgomery, Alabama’s Poetry Café Chapbook—
<http://scars.tv/chapbooks/chap-des2008> (free download of the chapbook)

Press in New York. Brouwer says that the publication process for chapbooks, especially fine press books, can be “elastic and mysterious.” “What I dearly love about chapbooks is that they only come into being if someone loves the project enough to see it through,” he adds. “There’s no money, fame, or ambition

Continued page 26



This anthology features poems, stories, and nonfiction from the first ten winners of Alabama's most prestigious literary award. The 130-page large format paperback with dust jacket also features twenty-five hand-colored black and white photographs by award-winning Alabama photographer Wayne Sides.

Gather Up Our Voices is available for \$30, or as a premium with a \$100 membership in the Alabama Writers' Forum. To order, contact the Forum at writersforum@bellsouth.net or phone toll free 866-901-1117.

All proceeds from the sale of *Gather Up Our Voices* go to support the programs and services of the Alabama Writers' Forum. For more information, visit www.writersforum.org.

Continued from page 25

at stake. People only do it out of joy, and in their own way and time. Someone said that your true character is comprised of what you do when no one's watching. In a sense, I suppose it's also true that one's true art is the art one makes when no one's watching."

New Dawn Unlimited, based in Brierfield, Alabama, publishes chapbooks and is also an active supporter of poetry slams. The chapbook *live, from the emergency room* by Lori Lasseter Hamilton was released in Fall 2008 and is described by the publisher as containing "powerful poems drawn from [the author's] experiences as a rape survivor." Hamilton's strong voice and no-holds-barred attitude are evident throughout the book, as is the power of poetry for healing both the author and her listeners.

Also this past fall, New Dawn published the Alabama State Poetry Society's annual John and Miriam Morris Memorial Chapbook Competition 2007 winner, *Dark Village Haiku* by Jeremy M. Downes of Auburn. *Dark Village Haiku* combines introspective and imagistic longer poems with "fortune cookie" haiku and even one-line poems.

Other recent chapbook publications include Mark Smith Soto's *Waiting Room*, the 2008 winner of the Red Mountain Chapbook Contest; the annual Limestone Dust Poetry Festival contest winner anthology; poet Jake Berry's Ninth Lab e-chapbooks; and *UU Montgomery, Alabama's Poetry Café Chapbook 2008* from Scars Publications. Mercy Street Press in Birmingham publishes several chapbooks a year. Their authors agree "to donate portions of proceeds to a charity of their choice."

Tim Kindseth, who worked at Poets House from 2002 to 2004, wrote in the *American Book Review* in 2005 that it's important to "bear in mind that there isn't, nor can there ever be, any absolute source, a 'Books in Print' for the underground" and that books without ISBNs, and that includes many chapbooks, often fly below the radar of bookstores and reviewing outlets.

So, due to the somewhat fugitive nature of chapbooks, I have probably committed some sins of omission. In the last year, chapbooks by Emma Bolden, Tony Crunk, Mary Kaiser, and Barbara Wiedemann have been reviewed in *First*

DON NOBLE



Draft Reviews Online (www.writersforum.org/books), and we are always happy to receive more chapbooks for review at the offices of the Alabama Writers' Forum.

Jennifer Horne is Poetry Book Reviews Editor for *First Draft Reviews Online*. Her chapbook, *Miss Betty's School of*

Dance, was published in a fine-press limited edition of fifty in 1997 by *Bluestocking Press*, and her full-length book of poems, *Bottle Tree*, will be published in 2010 by *WordTech Editions*.

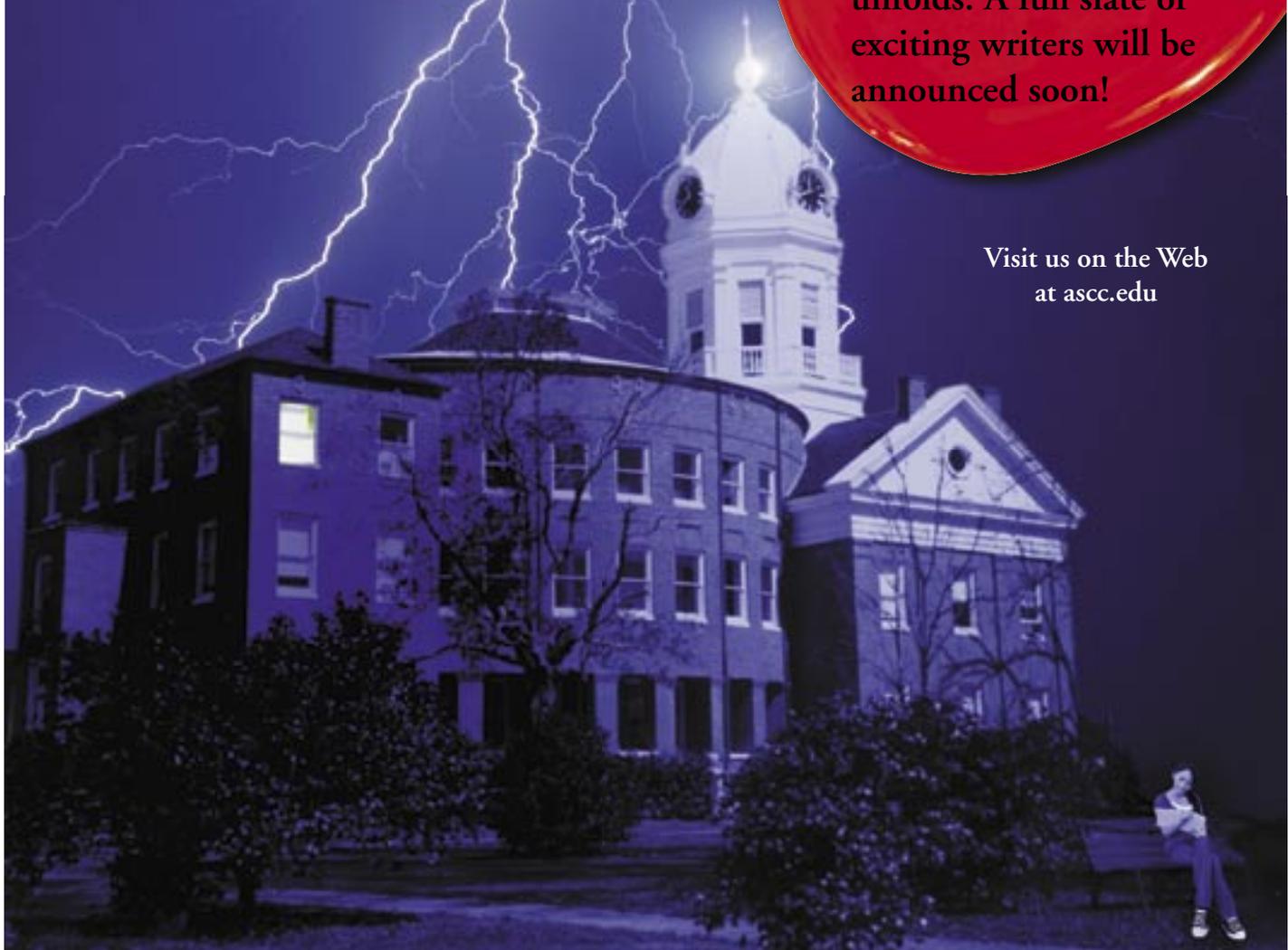
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Greetings, Salutations, & Goodwill

Writing Our Stories

Dear AWF:

Thank you for sharing *A Long Time Coming* with me. Its poetry and prose demonstrate with startling clarity the influence of environment on the thoughts and ideas of these young people. The communities to which the youth will return owe gratitude to the professionals involved in Writing Our Stories for your dedicated efforts at providing fresh, positive environmental influences to these lives. Writing Our Stories offers hope that these young men may experience true and lifelong expression of the poignant sentiments of affection and home contained in *A Long Time Coming*.

Toni Ward
Montevallo, Ala.

First Draft REVIEWS ONLINE

Dear AWF:

I was surprised and delighted when Julia Oliver, an established writer of historical fiction, recently reviewed my novel, *Selma: A Novel of the Civil War* (November 2008).

I have been a member of the Alabama Writers' Forum for many years and have always enjoyed and appreciated the good work done for Alabama by Jeanie Thompson and her staff. The Forum has developed into one of Alabama's treasures.

My thanks to Julia and to all the staff of the Forum and *First Draft* Reviews Online.

Val McGee
Ozark, Ala.

Dear AWF:

Thanks so much for David Wyman's spirited and thorough review of my novel *Dancing with Bears* (November 2008). It's always a pleasure to receive a positive review. It's especially a treat to read a review that's smart, lively, and engaging.

William Borden
Royse City, Tex.
www.williamborden.com

Dear AWF:

Thank you so much for your delightful book review (*Images of America: Bibb County*, December 2008) and your referral for the book signing. I have been to House of Serendipity (in Montevallo) several times and have always loved spending time looking at their books and antique dishes. We enjoyed meeting the other authors and making new friends, and we consider you our new friend also.

Vicky Clemmons
Centreville Historic
Preservation Commission
Centreville, Ala.

First Draft

Dear AWF:

Congratulations on the Fall 2008 issue of *First Draft*. You not only hit a home run—you knocked it out of the park! The cover is most attractive, and the articles are great. Keep up the good work.

Katherine Thompson
Fairhope, Ala.

MISCELLANY

Dear AWF:

Congratulations on the AWF e-newsletter and *First Draft* Reviews Online. Both of these publications are wonderful resources for writers and those who love writing. The e-newsletter prompted me to renew my long overdue membership.

I still look forward to receiving the hard copy of *First Draft*, and I will share it with a poet friend who also is a HUGE Alabama

football fan. You couldn't have offered a better combination in the Fall 2008 issue.

As intimately involved as I am with the Writers' Forum, these publications remind me of the critical role the organization plays in providing information and support to the state's literary community. Keep up the good work!

Priscilla Hancock Cooper
Teaching writer
Writing Our Stories
Birmingham, Ala.

Dear AWF:

It's indeed true that I'm enthusiastic about the Alabama Writers' Forum. Alabama is lucky to have an organization that makes a community of its literary talents and treasures. NewSouth is also thrilled to receive coverage for its many authors (and our press) in *First Draft* and Reviews Online and to participate as we can in Forum activities.

And I love the monthly e-newsletter. Good job, y'all!

Suzanne LaRosa
Publisher, NewSouth Books
Louisville, Ky. / Montgomery, Ala.
www.newsouthbooks.com

Dear AWF:

Thank you for the opportunity to post events under Current Literary Events at writersforum.org. The Christian Writers of Calhoun County gained three new members in one month from referencing the site. As a member of the Forum, I also enjoy the monthly e-newsletter and, of course, the copies of *First Draft*.

I encourage all fifty-five members of CWCC to join. Thanks for all the work you do.

Sherry Kughn
Director, CWCC
Anniston, Ala.

Send your letters to Danny Gamble,
Alabama Writers' Forum,
PO Box 4777,
Montgomery, AL 36103-4777,
or e-mail gambledanny@bellsouth.net.
Subject: *First Draft*.

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Writing and the Community that Nurtures It

Some writers thrive on being alone and would have you believe that they work well in solitude, that they don't require human contact to do their work. But the fact is very few writers can work well in a vacuum without the encouragement, concrete feedback, and help that another considerate writer can provide. Though we wish we could always see the necessary revisions in our own work spring off the page the way others can, we simply can't. Thus a writing community is really part of the writing *process*, not just a social occasion or an excuse to gossip. In this issue of *First Draft* we examine our literary community from the point of view of individual writers, groups of writers who support each other, and larger events like literary festivals where gatherings of people can enjoy a writer in a festive atmosphere.

Carolyn Haines testified to her sixteen-year relationship with the Deep South Writers Salon, and it is clear that the individual writers involved needed each other in a collective sense on a regular basis. This fed their writing. In Danny Gamble's sidebar, we learn of his need for connection to other poets and how he sought out a poetry group. He makes useful recommendations for others to follow who feel this urge.

In Jim Murphy's endorsement of literary events as part of the literary community (in many ways as necessary to the writer as publishing), we learn that these larger literary events play an important role in keeping the literary community's blood circulating and that the "central pleasure of staging literary events" is that they do *create* community.

Finally, in Philip F. Deaver's personal appreciation of the late poet William Matthews, we find one experienced writer taking time to consider another writer's influence at a crucial time in his own formative years. This sort of generous conversation can spark others in which writers reveal how someone else from the tribe, perhaps a little older, slightly more experienced, was encouraging or revealed some truth at just the right time.

Which leads me to the Alabama Book Festival, set for April 18 in Montgomery's Old Alabama Town. Although fine conferences abound in the spring—including Southern Voices in Hoover; Writing Today at Birmingham-Southern; The Montevallo Literary Festival; and the Alabama Writers' Symposium, where the twelfth annual Harper Lee Award for Alabama's Distinguished Writer of the Year will be presented



JAMIE MARTIN

to Rick Bragg, most likely to a standing-room-only crowd—the Book Festival may be the largest critical mass of readers and genres in the state. Under tents set among antique houses, writers read from their books and readers get a chance to mingle with each other and appreciate the April sunshine in a little bit of Alabama history.

How does this help writing? I think it helps writers have something to which they can aspire, and young writers have somewhere to come and see what a "real writer" looks and sounds like. Further, the readers who crave

books to hold and read and *smell*, as Richard Bausch said recently on FACEBOOK, are given a day-long gift of interaction with writers. What better way for writers to be nurtured and kept healthy than when they can be simply, for a day, adored?

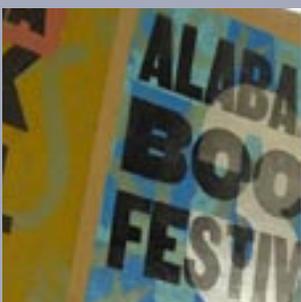
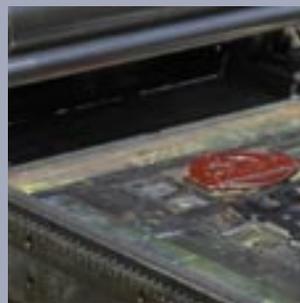
And speaking of FACEBOOK, I'd like to give a shout-out to this amazing network where writers are connecting and reconnecting at an astonishing rate. Though I was reluctant to get on board at first, I have spoken with writers I would probably never have talked to so easily without this equalizing platform. Writers who have long since moved on from Alabama contact us and help us further map the literary legacy of this state.

If you are a writer who feels isolated, there is a world out there ready to receive you. Log onto FACEBOOK and search for someone you've lost touch with from a creative writing class. Buy a ticket to one of the fine conferences in our state and spend some time among the writers and participants.

Don't forget that the Alabama Writers' Forum is your advocate, your ambassador to our state's larger arts community. Located in Haigler House in Old Alabama Town, a few short steps from the Capitol and the Statehouse, the Forum's staff helps make our community's viability known to those who allocate funds and shape our education and arts policy. If you're not a member of this community, we extend our hand. Join us.

Jeanie Thompson is the author of *The Seasons Bear Us*, new from River City Publishing, www.rivercitypublishing.com

Alabama BOOK Festival



Saturday, April 18, 2009

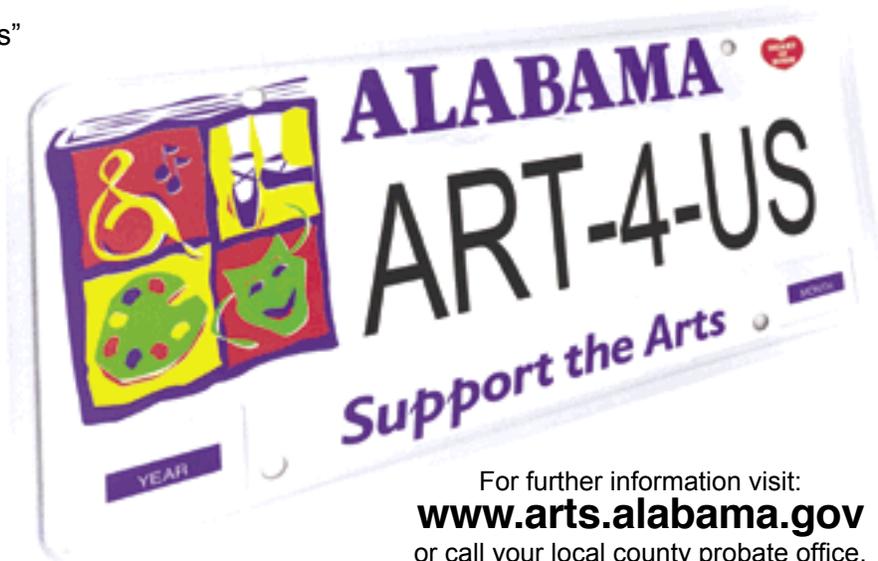
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