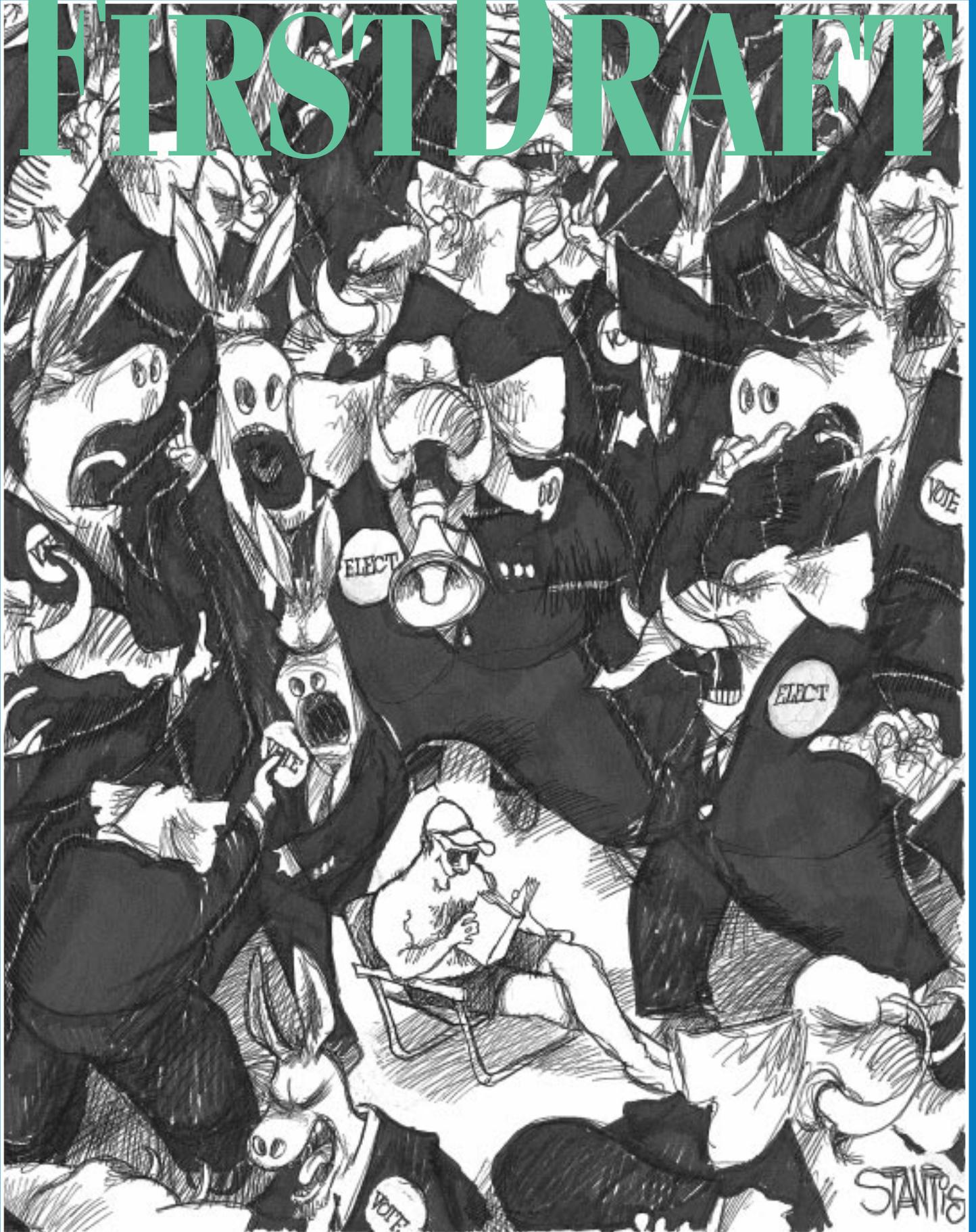


The Journal of the Alabama Writers' Forum

VOL. 7, NO. 2

SUMMER 2000

# FIRST DRAFT



# ALABAMA WRITERS' FORUM

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## FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

When Fannie Flagg delivered the keynote address at the third Annual *Alabama Writers Symposium* in Monroeville, she told the story of the beginning of her writing life. Like many aspiring writers, she attended a writing conference. And like others before her, she sought out one that featured her hero—Eudora Welty. Entering the conference's writing contest, Flagg was thrilled to win and to receive her prize from Welty herself. This is the sort of story that tells well how important it is to follow one's dream... it might just come true.

In her comments about the writing talent that has hailed from Alabama, Flagg lobbed a good shot across the bow of another conference in a neighboring state, saying, "I'm so sick of hearing about Oxford, Mississippi..."

Admittedly, the organizers of what has come to be known as "the Monroeville conference," or simply "Monroeville," want to replicate the literary ambiance and magic pull of Oxford. Whether or not that can be done really doesn't matter, but what is clearly happening is that Alabama writers, with the help of this conference, are gaining a wonderful sense of themselves, their worth, and their place in the worldwide literary community. And one of the best things to come out of the events in Monroeville during these first years is a great sense of *homecoming*.

Respected and renowned poet Sonia Sanchez arrived Saturday morning at the Old Courthouse in downtown Monroeville. As Connie Baggett reported in the *Mobile Register* on May 7, Sanchez was overheard musing about home-coming in the gift shop as she browsed books of participating writers.



Jeanie Thompson

"Coming home is something you can't articulate... It's something in the blood stream—some subtle recollection of birth." At lunch, when Sanchez read from her powerful memoir-in-progress, she said she is giving speeches now that begin "I was born in Birmingham." This internationally known poet spent formative childhood years

in Birmingham with her grandmother and the other deaconesses at the AME Zion church. Sanchez later moved to New York and participated in the Civil Rights Movement, all the time developing as a thinker, a poet, and a fiercely compassionate woman. Her contributions to the field of black studies are unparalleled. And she is from Alabama. Is her name a household word like Charles Barkley or Bear Bryant? No, but if we, in the writing and reading communities, speak it to the young readers and writers we touch, her name will be better known at home. *At home*, where she deserves to be known best.

Events like Monroeville, and the other fine conferences in the state, are helping Alabamians know their home-grown writers better. The Forum applauds Alabama Southern Community College's efforts to put on a conference of this quality with style and great hospitality. (For an armchair visit to this and other literary events around the state this spring, see pages 10-11.)

Alabama's literary community is growing in the way that all good families grow—with strong respect for one another and with a deep, deep love of what we all recognize as our home place, our birth right, and what makes us *us as writers*.

*Jeanie Thompson is Executive Director of The Alabama Writers' Forum.*

*On the cover: Scott Stantis is editorial cartoonist at the Birmingham News.*

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Katie Lamar Smith

*Novelist Fannie Flagg delivered the keynote address at the Alabama Writers Symposium (page 10).*

*First Draft* is a vehicle for communication among writers and those interested in literature/publishing in Alabama and elsewhere. We encourage publication news, events information, and story suggestions. *First Draft* will grow as the needs of writers in Alabama are identified.

Contact The Alabama Writers' Forum, Alabama State Council on the Arts, 201 Monroe Street, Montgomery, Alabama 36130-1800. Phone: 334/242-4076, ext. 233; Fax: 334/240-3269; email:awf1@arts.state.al.us. Website: www.writersforum.org.

# Spend Your Summer with Alabama Authors

BY JAY LAMAR



*You've survived the rapid-fire  
busy-ness of fall, the forced  
march of winter, and the  
flushed excitement of spring.  
Now summer stretches ahead  
like a long sigh.*

SUMMER 2000

Its lovely blank spaces may be two-thirds mirage, but optimists to the end, we cling to the idea of summer—and to our summer reading list: books are as much a part of summer as sand and suntan lotion. However, more than 150,000 books were published in 1998 alone—and 1999 will top that total. So many books, so little time... Where to start?

*First Draft* invited a corps of experts—book reviewers, book sellers, book talkers, book readers all—to offer their suggestions for a summer reading list. Our only requirements were that the books or writers have some connection to Alabama and that the recommended titles be available either now or before the end of the summer. We garnered many thoughtful suggestions of books either currently or soon-to-be in print: many have been reviewed in *First Draft*, some are even in this issue. In one place or another, you're bound to discover something to make your summer seem longer, or maybe shorter, but certainly sweeter.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FROM OPPOSITE ENDS OF THE STATE

Although Over the Transom Books in Fairhope specializes in rare and antique titles, owner Sonny Brewer endorses keeping up with contemporary authors, and especially with good southern writing. He highly recommends *The Long Home* (MacMurray and Beck, 1999) by William Gay, winner of this year's James Michener prize, and he says to watch for Gay's new book, *Provinces of Night* (Doubleday, January 2001). Other books on Brewer's list are *Poachers* (HarperCollins, 2000) by Tom Franklin; *The Pains of April* (Over the Transom, 1999) by Frank Turner Hollon; *Dog Fights* and *Divining Rod* (Plume Books, 1998 and 1999), both by Michael Knight; and *An Exile*, by Madison Jones, now in a beautiful reprint edition from Frederic Bell Publishers of Savannah.

At the other end of the state, in Huntsville, John Shaver of Shaver Books says that his list overlaps some with Brewer's but he would add Howard Bahr's new book, *The Year of Jubilo* (Henry Holt, 2000), and Ellen Gilchrist's brand-new collection, *The Cabal and Other Stories* (Little Brown, 2000). A *Publisher's Weekly* review finds Gilchrist "in fine form in another group of short stories that display her distinctive voice and eccentric voices... this wry and breezy collection touches on all things Southern." Shaver adds that Bahr's first novel, *The Black Flower*, is now available in a new paperback edition from Picador and is also eminently worth reading.

## DON NOBLE'S SUMMER READING, AND YOURS

"A lot of the reading I do is, in a sense, for business, but there is plenty of pleasure in it too. It is a wonderful mix," writes Don Noble, host of Alabama Public Television's *BookMark*. He continues:

"This summer I will be reading Bill Carter's biography of Marcel Proust (Yale University Press, 2000). At 946 pages this will be a big job, but it will be worth it. Proust is important; Carter has done the exhaustive work of research, and this is a physically beautiful book, which has already received impressive reviews.

"Just before his untimely death, Fred Bonnie had rewritten two earlier volumes of stories and reissued them as *Widening the Road* (Livingston University Press, 2000). He also published his first novel, *Thamb Ho Delivers* (Black Belt Press, 2000). Bonnie was, it is sad to say, just hitting his stride, and I am especially curious about these two volumes.

"*The Pains of April*, by Frank Turner Hollon, intrigues me partly because of the unusual publishing story. This first novel, by a Baldwin County attorney, was published in 1999 by Sonny Brewer, owner of Over the Transom bookstore in Fairhope. Done as journal entries, *Pains* is only 103 pages long.

"Ben Erickson of Eutaw, Alabama, is a woodworker, not a lawyer, but he too has a first novel, *A Parting Gift*. *Gift* is published this year by Warner Books, which is impressive in a much more conventional way.

"Rick Bragg did not win the Pulitzer for *All Over But the Shoutin'*. He won it for the journalism in *Somebody Told Me* (UAP, 2000). I have dipped into this book, and the writing is superb.

"After having the opportunity to get to know Helen Norris a little bit, I am especially eager to read her new volume of stories, *One Day in the Life of a Born Again Loser* (UAP, 2000). Norris is a long-time veteran of fiction writing, with seven volumes behind her, but her wit is sharper than ever and there is nothing sentimental or mellow about her. Norris is delightfully clever and "wicked" than she at first seems.

"It was a pleasure to hear Tom Rabbitt read from his new volume of poetry, *Enemies of the State* (Black Belt Press, 2000), and now I want to sit with the book and read it at my leisure. Poems such as 'The Beach at Falmouth Heights' are not fully comprehended in a listen or two.

"I spent a lot of the spring reading books and, for what it's worth, have some recommendations about what others might be looking at this summer. *Abab's Wife* (William Morrow & Co., 1999), by Sena Jeter Naslund, is brilliant. If you don't already know a lot about transcendental philosophy and mid-nineteenth century American culture when you start, you will when you finish. This is an impressive masterpiece of a novel.

"*Sherlock in Love* (David R. Godine Publisher, 1993), also by Naslund, is a bonbon. Told in Watson's voice, the novel tells of Holmes's passion for a woman of mystery worthy of him. It is really fun.

"For those who have not yet read it, I recommend *Mother of Pearl* (Washington Square Press, 2000) by Melinda Haynes. Read it so you can join in the discussion/debate over its strengths and weaknesses.

"Clyde Bolton has done an impressive job of research and storytelling with *Nancy Swimmer: A Story of the Cherokee Nation* (Highland Press, 2000), his story of the Cherokee Nation just before the Trail of Tears.

"*Poachers*, by Tom Franklin, has become a sensation, and rightly so. The story 'Grit' and the novella 'Poachers' are especially strong, convincingly violent.

"Mike Stewart, another Alabama lawyer, has written a first murder mystery, *Sins of the Brothers* (G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1999), set in Monroe County and full of action. Carolyn Haines has kicked off a series set in Mississippi with a female sleuth in *Them Bones* (Bantam Books, 1999). Each in its way is entertaining and worth your time.

"Michael Knight, a bright Mobile native who decided not to become a lawyer, has two first books, a novel, *Divining Rod*, a story of love, adultery, and homicide in the suburbs, and a volume of stories, *Dog Fights*. Knight has hit the literary scene, like Franklin, with a lot of energy and splash and, like Franklin, appears to have a lot of future.

"Bill Cobb of Montevallo is a veteran of the scene but has just published his finest book yet, *A Spring of Souls*, Crane Hill's first novel, published last year. This is a rambunctious book, full of oddnesses and supernatural events as well as a large cast of Southern eccentrics. Take it to the beach. You won't be sorry."

## FROM THE ALABAMA BOOKSMITH

"If your winter and spring authors of choice were Truman Capote, Walker Percy, and Sena Jeter Naslund, are you zipping down to your neighborhood bookseller for your summer Danielle Steel?

"Even if you do relax a bit over the dog days, you'll find something by an Alabama writer for any taste," writes Jake Reiss, owner of one of Birmingham's independent bookstores, Alabama Booksmith. One of the most wonderful things about independent bookstore owners is that they actually read the books they sell, and, as you have already seen and will notice below, they will, on very rare occasions, even publish a particularly worthy manuscript.

"Want a fun book for all seasons?" asks Reiss. "The number one must-have on our list is Black Belt's gorgeous, just-published *Alabama Art* by the artist Nall. In his inimitable fashion, this Salvador Dali protégé has created wondrous portraits of thirteen celebrated Alabama artists and shows off selected samples of their work. The writing of Rick Bragg and Fannie Flagg contributes to the scrumptious ambiance that features William Christenberry, Chip Cooper, Frank Fleming, Mose T, Kathryn Tucker Windham, and many other of our state's most gifted.

"Charles Ghigna only wrote a short piece for *Alabama Art*, but he is totally responsible for the Alabama Library Association 1999 children's book of the year, *Animal Trunk*. Chuck seems to be going artsy, as this beautiful book was done by Abrams, the nation's leading art publisher. See how much fun summer reading can be, and read those silly poems aloud to a child.

"Full disclosure demands that we admit that we published our favorite summer read, *Nancy Swimmer*, by Clyde Bolton. Yes, Clyde Bolton the sports writer. But don't let that deter you from devouring the pages of one of the most exciting titles of the season. *Nancy Swimmer* demonstrates courage and strength few could muster as the Georgia militia exhibit its style of 'ethnic cleansing' with the blessing of President Andrew Jackson. This is an important book in Southern history as well as a page-turner.

“For many in Alabama, summer reading means Anne George, and right on cue, her newest Southern Sisters mystery is due out July 10 (Avon, 2000). *Murder Carries a Torch* is the Agatha winner’s best yet. Patricia Anne’s cousin’s wife funs away with a snake-handling preacher. Do you really need more incentive?

“If summer reading means paperback, two books that created a huge excitement all over the country are now available in trade softcover. Tom Franklin’s *Poachers*, the Edgar-winning, number-one trade paperback in the country, according to America’s independent booksellers, and Melinda Haynes’ blockbuster *New York Times* best-seller, *Mother of Pearl*.

“For those who indeed ease their reading level, many of you gentle readers would consider the quintessential summer trash read to be a mass market novel about stock car racing with a protagonist named Jodell Bob Lee. Let us end this delightful litany with such a book. *White Lightning* (1999) is the first of eight titles in the Rolling Thunder series created by Don Keith, along with Kent Wright, for Tor Publications. Hey, save your snickers for lunch. We enjoyed it. This is a well-crafted set-up by a former Alabama Library Association fiction writer of the year. Don’s *Forever Season* was a literary success. His advance on the eight book Rolling Thunder contract and sales in excess of 100,000 so far, on the first title only may make writers eat their snickers.”

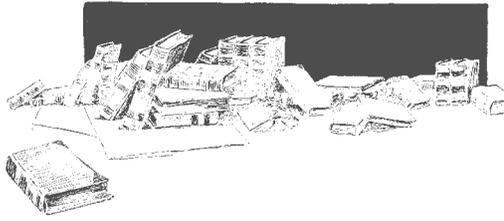
## MONTGOMERY SUGGESTIONS

Cheryl Upchurch of Montgomery’s Capitol Book & News reiterated how challenging it is to come up with a short list of favorites. But she gamely provided her own “firsts” for summer. They include the brand-new *Get a Shot of Rhythm and Blues: The Arthur Alexander Story* (UAP 2000), by Richard Younger and Paul Hemphill’s new *The Ballad of Little River* (Free Press, 2000). For mystery and adventure, she suggests Anne George’s *Murder Carries a Torch* (Avon, 2000), Bolton’s *Nancy Swimmer*, and Haines’ *Them Bones*. Like several of the other readers, she puts Norris’ *One Day in the Life of a Born Again Loser: And Other Stories*, Erickson’s *Parting Gift*, and Bonnie’s *Thanh Ho Delivers* among her literary fiction choices. Nontiction also includes Bragg’s *Somebody Told Me*; and, for sheer fun, *Southern Dogs and Their People*, P. S. Davis and Bobbie Gamble, published by Algonquin this year.

Choices in paperback, Upchurch adds, include a few titles due out this summer. Add *Cleaving* (North Point Press) by Dennis and Vicki Covington; Anne George’s *Murder Shoots the Bull* and *My Last Days as Roy Rogers* (Warner Books, 2000) by Pat Devoto to your beach blanket stack.

In Alabama this summer books are obviously as plentiful as yellow squash. And they are as welcome as shade. Get a basketful, take your pick, and cool your heels with Proust... or Una... or Thanh Ho... or Nancy Swimmer... all good company. 

*Jay Lamar is book review editor for First Draft.*



# REVIEWS

JAY LAMAR, *Editor*

## *Eating The Cheshire Cat*

By Helen Ellis

Scribner, 2000

288 pp. Hardcover, \$23

A waterproof dust jacket is the only touch that would make *Eating The Cheshire Cat* a better beach book.

Cleverly written and a tad bawdy, this first novel by Alabama native Helen Ellis is studded with familiar icons: Crimson Tide football, summer camp in Mentone, randy frat boys, frenzied Tri Deltas. Ellis spares no stereotypes as she weaves an entertaining tale of friendships gone mad and the bittersweetness of revenge.

For readers familiar with the Moon Winx Lodge, Deerlick Creek and Tutwiler Hall, *Eating The Cheshire Cat* will take you down memory lane—with a wry twist. For those who don't know Tuscaloosa from Tunica, the story stands alone as a fable that melts on your tongue like shaved ice.

Sabrina Summers is a small-town Southern beauty with a nutty mother. The cards are clearly stacked against her, but little do you know (until the Homecoming half-time show) just how enflamed her life will become. Bitty Jack Carlson, the homely waif from the wrong side of the tracks, is her polar opposite—scraping together tuition money by icing pornographic sweets at the Fifteenth Street Bakery.

Enter Stewart Steptoe (aka Big Al), the Crimson Tide's lovable elephant mascot. Stewart is a prize catch among the coeds on Sorority Row—but his heart soon belongs to Bitty Jack. When his Big Al costume is commandeered by the revenge-driven Nicole, *Eating The Cheshire Cat* reaches its skyrocketing climax.

Do you follow? If not, that's okay. You need to read this one for yourself, with or without waterproof dust jacket. Helen Ellis is a talented new voice we will be hearing from again.

*Kellee Reinbart is Director of University Relations for The University of Alabama System.*



## *Sins of the Brother*

Mike Stewart

Putnam, 1999

304 pp. Hardcover, \$23.95

Prepare to be dazzled.

*Sins of the Brother*, the tour-de-force first novel by Birmingham lawyer Mike Stewart, starts strong and gets better. The story opens with a murder in a river as murky as the morality of the novel's key players. Lawyer Tom McInnes has recently left a prestigious Mobile law firm to start his own practice. When the self-described "prick" learns of his brother's death, he returns to his childhood home in Cooper's Bend, Alabama.

From the wan mother and the bully of a father, to the wary sheriff, the lying older friend, the seductive girlfriend, and the six-foot-six bodyguard, the characters McInnes interacts with are anything but minor. Relationships evolve and disintegrate; likable people turn out to be not so admirable; repellent people soften up a little. And these are the good guys.

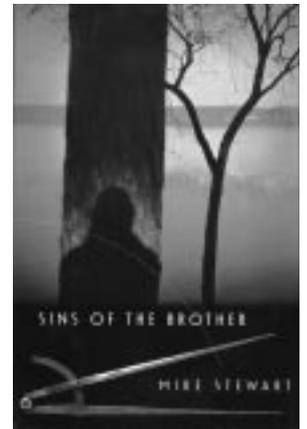
Later we meet the real sociopaths. Eddie Pappas and Mike Gerrard and Rodney are a criminal blend of cold brilliance and animal stupidity. If anyone half as evil as Gerrard really does live openly in Birmingham, and he probably does, watch your back.

Stewart's plot follows the dictum, get your character in trouble, and more trouble, and more trouble. . . McInnes follows the twisted path from his brother's murder into ever-more-tortuous depths. His choices become less and less morally defensible. In the end, he must outwit the genius, out-gut the thugs, and reach his own moral bottom line just to survive.

As good as the characters and plot are, the writing is even better. Stewart's prose is so lean you could label it as fat-free. On a trip north to Birmingham, "the pumped-up, steroidal trees of the Black Belt shrunk to scruffy, undersized pines." Calera is "a rumpled little railroad town." The tightness and the toughness of Stewart's prose are what Hemingway might write for today's market.

*Sins of the Brother* exemplifies a trend in the best of today's novels, a story with tremendous commercial appeal—watch for a movie—that is also a beautifully crafted literary work. Buy it; enjoy it; tell your friends.

*Mary Carol Moran is a writer, publisher, and teacher who lives in Tallahassee, Alabama.*



## *Ray in Reverse*

by Daniel Wallace

Algonquin Books, 2000

225 pp. Cloth, \$21.95

Daniel Wallace has all the words. He is a born storyteller, deft and humane. In fact, he never leaves the rest of us enough words to describe his quirky and compassionate storytelling.

Wallace's first novel, *Big Fish*, was special and touching in its ability to reach and illuminate the essence of the relationship between parents and children. In exact and moving chapters, a son comes to understand his father's humanity in as poignant a recent novel as can be found.

The economy and beauty of the first novel is realized once again in Wallace's new one. In *Big Fish*, a son comes to realize how special his father was. In *Ray in Reverse*, Ray Williams comes to realize how special he never was. Not that the world around Ray wasn't special. He just never realized it. He grew up. He grew away from the time when he was "too young to know how serious the world is."

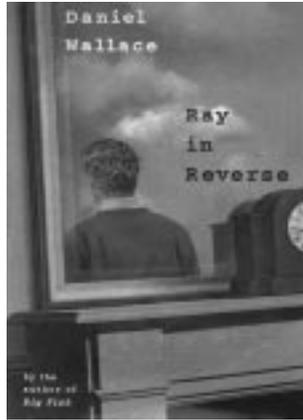
As the book begins, Ray is in heaven, telling of his end to a "Last Words" gathering. What he says are his last words—"I wish"—isn't the whole truth, for Ray's doing and saying the right thing haven't happened in a long time. "How could he have known this was a talent that would be lost over time?" Frustrated, Ray storms off to examine his life in Reverse, looking for clues as to why, at only 50, he died.

Ray's life has been one of regret. His wife, Jenny, returns to him only because he is dying. His son, James, has little in common with him. In fact, James seems to be only the excuse to build a treehouse which will allow his father to escape life.

His family offers little support. Ray's father was "too dull to understand consequence and the meaning, if merely symbolic, of an act." Of his mother he says, "Misery and disenchantment were the special ingredients my mother used in all her meals."

Yet life is bursting at the seams around Ray. He just doesn't know what to do with it. Life is an elephant in his mother's azaleas. Life is sailing cardboard reproductions of works of the great masters over a lake with his Uncle Eddie. Life is his grandfather's 1909 VDB-S penny.

In concise, quirky chapters, Ray's life is related by a writer very much in control of his craft. There may be a sense of the offbeat humor of John Irving and even the tall tales of the old Southwest,



but *Ray in Reverse* is highly original storytelling. Ray might not have gotten much of what he wished for during his life, but his plight is everything a reader could wish of a novel.

*Steven Whitton is Professor of English at Jacksonville State University. He is also the coordinator for the Southern Playwrights Competition and for On the Brink, the conference on emerging Southern writers.*

## *The Ballad of Little River*

Paul Hemphill

The Free Press, 2000

235 pp. Cloth, \$25

## *Leaving Birmingham*

Paul Hemphill

University of Alabama Press

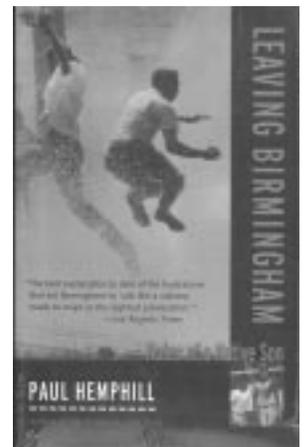
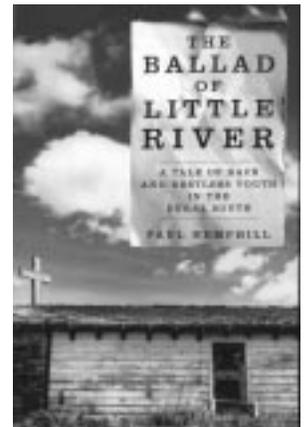
351 pp. Paper, \$18.95

With a poetic touch that echoes early sentiments of James Agee's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, Birmingham native Paul Hemphill attempts to transcend journalism in *The Ballad of Little River*, an account of a church burning and killings between blacks and whites in a rural community in south Alabama.

Hemphill, an Auburn grad now from Atlanta, forges into northern Baldwin and southern Monroe counties, where the first white settlers 200 years ago killed some Creek Indians who retaliated with the largest massacre on U.S. soil at Fort Mims. And the various races have been killing each other since then.

Hemphill paints a hearty picture of an old boy named "Peanut" Ferguson, who made the most of the hardscrabble land around the community of Little River, where violence is hidden only skin-deep. And sometimes that skin is very thin.

In this country, the author tells us "one never knows where death might lurk." For Hemphill, however, his cast of motley characters are observed, as if they are wandering about in a cage—corralled by circumstances far beyond their control. Hemphill is sharp and intellectual in his analysis of this backwoods world. The people unfold and the violence happens as naturally as childbirth.



Rage seethes just beneath the surface and the reader knows this powder keg of emotions is about to blow. Yet as the tension grows, the author allows too much intellectualizing from recalled words of the famous; there are too many references to too many books. In the end, however, we are talking about rural folks in a rural world trying to come to terms with racism and violence, a deeply tormented, very personal religion, and all the poetry is lost in the flames that lick against a black-hot summer night. Throughout the tragedy of unfolding violence, Hemphill's work resonates like the humming of a cicada deep in the night of a lonely south Alabama swamp.

In Hemphill's earlier book, *Leaving Birmingham*, the writer tells about going home to that place with its remembered mean streets and echoes of Bull Connor's police dogs and the four little black girls killed in the bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church. As Hemphill goes back, he remembers not only the headline stories but also his own experiences of growing up in that city with all of its growing pains. Beyond himself, he talks with others who witnessed and were affected by Birmingham's history—feeling their own pains in their own ways. With the deft pen of an artist, he draws his word pictures with great feeling. All of the experiences add up to more than the sum of the parts.

*Wayne Greenhaw's latest book, Beyond the Night: A Remembrance, is in its second printing from Black Belt Press.*

### ***A Parting Gift***

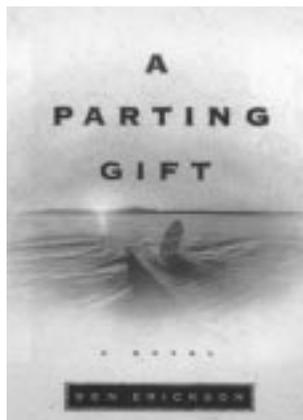
**Ben Erickson**

**Warner Books, 2000**

**274 pp. Hardcover, \$19.95**

*A Parting Gift* by Ben Erickson is a fine novel. It is a moving story of a young man, Josh Bell, growing up, influenced by an old man, William Davis, who tells Josh the story of what it was like when he was a young man growing up. Josh is a senior in high school; he delivers the meals-on-wheels that his mother prepares to elderly men and women who live near him along the eastern shore of Mobile Bay. William Davis is one of their customers and he gradually assumes the role of father to Josh, whose biological father, divorced from his mother, has abandoned him.

Mr. Davis hires Josh to record his memories, his stories, for



him. These stories are of his life but, since memories are tricky things, they will, Mr. Davis claims, hold truth to a higher standard than mere fact. Will Davis is a serene and thoughtful man who has lived a full life and knows he is nearing its end; Josh is a vital, exuberant young man at the start of what we are sure will be an equally full life, “sure” because of the impact of Mr. Davis but also because of the influence of a loving mother and the positive influence of good friends. Josh's youth and Mr. Davis' maturity both respond to the beauties of the day, the season, the year and to the landscape, especially Mobile Bay. Mr. Davis asserts that the world doesn't revolve around individuals; it just revolves, and its revolutions are magnificent and mysterious.

Mr. Davis has lessons to teach but he mainly has stories to tell and if, as he claims, “God is in the details,” it also seems clear that God is in the writing about the details. We are told early on that when an old man dies, a library burns to the ground. Having Josh record his stories is Mr. Davis' way of preserving those stories after his death. And Josh has his own stories to tell, stories that he tells so successfully that Mr. Davis warns him that he won't be happy pumping gas or cooking fries.

Ben Erickson lives in Eutaw, Alabama. He wrote this novel as a present for his son, Bill, upon Bill's graduation from high school. The book has many pleasures: a baseball game at Spring Hill College, crabbing off the wharf, sailing on the Bay, exploring Fort Morgan, condemning the jet skis as a “waste of silence.”

Because *A Parting Gift* is about inter-personal relationships, it is about emotions. A great part of the novel's excellence is in its ability to convey these emotions without ever being sentimental. Publicity suggests a comparison between *A Parting Gift* and *Tuesdays with Morrie*. Don't be fooled. *A Parting Gift* is better than that.

*John H. Hafner is Professor of English at Spring Hill College.*

### ***Somebody Told Me:***

***The Newspaper Stories of Rick Bragg***

**by Rick Bragg**

**University of Alabama Press, 2000**

**344 pp. Cloth, \$24.95**

At the first Alabama Writers Symposium, a fire chief from Pelham seemed an oddity among the authors, teachers, scholars, and literary enthusiasts who had gathered to celebrate Southern writing. He'd paid \$90 to register, and piloted his pickup truck along the ribbons of blacktop and concrete to Monroeville simply because he'd read Pulitzer Prize-winning New York Times reporter Rick Bragg's memoir, *All Over*

*But the Shoutin'*. With a worn brown paper sack under his arm, he waited patiently through the events of the weekend because he knew Bragg's stomping grounds well, and had something he wanted to pass along.

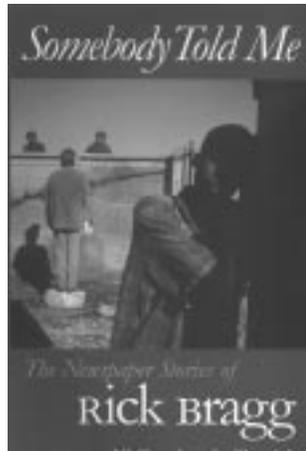
As the symposium drew to a close, the crowd around Bragg's autograph table cleared and the quiet man made his move. He introduced himself and nervously shifted the wrinkled bag from one hand to the other.

"I read in your book about your mama going into labor at the Midway Drive-In after Charlton Heston parted the Red Sea in *The Ten Commandments*, and how they drove off so fast they almost took the speaker with them," he told Bragg. "I went straight to my garage and found this. I collect them, but I want you to have it."

He reached through the opening, where the stiff paper sack had been worn to the consistency of a pillowcase, and pulled out a dull gray drive-in speaker with the word "Midway" stamped on it. He offered it to Bragg tentatively. The author was moved to the edge of tears. He grabbed the man in a tight bear hug, then rubbed his beaming face in disbelief as he admired the gift. "My mama has my Pulitzer Prize," Bragg said, "But I'm keeping this."

Bragg is the sort of writer who knows the sentiment found in an otherwise useless artifact can far outweigh the value of even journalism's top prize. That innate understanding is what makes his stories so vividly human. His new book, *Somebody Told Me*, is a collection of newspaper stories that showcase Bragg's unerring ability to look past the mundane and see the extraordinary, leaving readers to realize that calling the Alabama native a reporter is like calling Georges Seurat a guy who painted for a living. Just as Seurat created vivid colors and images with millions of tiny dots of paint, Bragg takes the minutiae of his subjects' lives and crafts elegant portraits of hope found and hope lost, of horrible acts and the redemption often discovered in their aftermath.

*Somebody Told Me* contains stories written throughout his career, and Bragg takes the reader to places and circumstances well known, such as the Oklahoma City bombing, the unthinkable schoolyard shootings, and the unraveling of Susan Smith, who drove her car into a South Carolina lake and left her two young sons to drown. His intricate conincinnity—a sort of literary pointillism—



offers a perspective found in no other reports from the same news events. He takes the reader to corners of the world they'd likely never see otherwise, and pulls back the drapes on aspects of life one might never consider, like the correctional facility in Hamilton, Alabama, where a graying inmate population consists of once-heinous criminals now living out the pitiful coda of their wasted lives: "Grant Cooper knows he lives in prison, but there are days when he cannot remember why. . . . He used to be a drinker and a drifter who had no control over his rage. . . . Back then, before he needed help going to the bathroom, Mr. Cooper was a dangerous man. . . ."

*Somebody Told Me* is a page turner, but it's not a quick read. The stories therein are meant to be savored, and will likely leave no reader's perspective unchanged. Rick Bragg a mere reporter? I think not. Readers sifting their way through this gold mine might agree "revealer" is a far more fitting description.

*Bill Perkins is editorial page editor of The Dothan Eagle in Dothan, Alabama.*

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# Alabama Writers Symposium and

**W**riters gathered in Monroeville in early May for the third annual Alabama Writers Symposium, which has quickly become recognized as a conference well worth attending for beginning and experienced writers alike (it is also known as a fun meeting!). Read more about it in the Executive Director's letter on the inside front cover.



Katie Lamar Smith

Novelist Fannie Flagg delivered the keynote at the Alabama Writers Symposium in Monroeville, praising Alabama's strong literary community.



Ben Martin

Bert Hitchcock presented the Harper Lee Award for the Distinguished Alabama Writer 2000 to Helen Norris in Monroeville. Speaking of the Harper Lee Award and the sister award for literary scholarship, John Johnson (right), president of Alabama Southern Community College, said, "These two awards are important measures of Alabama's growing literary presence in American letters."



Ben Martin

Harper Lee Award recipient Helen Norris and Eugene Current-Garcia Distinguished Literary Scholar Don Noble enjoy a happy moment.



Ben Martin

Senator Pat Lindsey (D-Butler) talks with a Monroeville conference participant in the library at Alabama Southern.



Ben Martin

Poet Sonia Sanchez was introduced by Priscilla Hancock Cooper at the Saturday luncheon in Monroeville.

*"We are so pleased with the third annual writers symposium and feel that it was the most successful yet. That's our goal, of course, to get better and better. We are always going to have a wealth of great talent to draw from in the state, but we can improve the design of the symposium every year and every year strive to do something innovative."*

**DR. CATHY POWER**

Alabama Southern Community College



Ben Martin

Don Noble talked fiction with novelist Michael Knight in the Monroeville Courthouse.

# Alabama Voices: Spring 2000



Katie Lamar Smith

Poet Natasha Trethewey (right) speaks with Norman and Ruth Brittin of Auburn at the Pebble Hill book signing for *Visions of LaFayette*.



Katie Lamar Smith

*Visions of LaFayette* editor Corey Moss, joined here by his mother, was among the readers celebrating the publication of *LaFayette's* first high school literary magazine.



Randy Shoultz

Tom Franklin talks with students at Eufaula High School. After his visit, Franklin wrote, "I realize how lucky I am to be from a place like Alabama, where such a town as Eufaula can exist."



Nanci Kincaid (back row, center), shown here with members of her Tutwiler Prison writing class, noted that participants produced some "stunning" work.

## ALABAMA VOICES V: WRITERS IN OUR COMMUNITIES

In a greater variety of locations and with more diverse audiences than ever in its five-year history, the Alabama Voices annual series was launched this spring.

Programs included poet Natasha Trethewey's work with young writers at LaFayette High School in Chambers County. The result was *Visions of LaFayette*, a thirty-page booklet that includes photographs and poems by students. A generous Community Grant given by Representative Bill Fuller supported the publication of the magazine.

Mobile native Tom Franklin spent almost a week in April in Eufaula reading from his award-winning collection, *Poachers* (William Morrow, 1999), visiting high school and community college classes, and leading adult writing workshops.

Fiction writer Nanci Kincaid, author of *Crossing Blood* (just re-published in the University of Alabama Press Deep South series), spent four days with inmates at the Tutwiler Prison for Women in Wetumpka. Intense writing workshops included in-class assignments and readings and critiques by the participants.

Summer and fall Alabama Voices programs, which are sponsored by the Alabama Writers' Forum and the Auburn University Center for the Arts & Humanities and funded by the Alabama State Council on the Arts, include a two-day writing workshop for teachers in Walker and Winston Counties by children's writer and educational consultant Rick Shelton. In the fall, he and author Aileen Henderson will visit schools and libraries in both counties to give readings and meet students. In October, Charles Ghigna will visit Selma to lead workshops and give readings.



## THE BACK PAGE

## C. Eric Lincoln: A Remembrance

BY FRYE GAILLARD

There was a symmetry in the life of Eric Lincoln, a final homecoming to the place of his birth to heal old wounds and even, perhaps, to erase a few scars. He was born in 1924 and raised on a tiny three-acre farm in northern Alabama, where his grandfather picked cotton near the community of Athens.

Before he died this summer, he had emerged as one of the leading black scholars of his time, the author of more than twenty academic works, as well as memoirs, a volume of poetry, and a novel, *The Avenue: Clayton City*, which won the Lillian Smith Award in 1988. Over the years, he taught at the leading universities in the world—Duke, Fisk, Dartmouth, the University of Ghana—and was founding president of the Black Academy of Arts and Letters.

His success was driven, at least in part, by the mixed and complicated lessons of his youth. In the segregated world of rural Alabama, he found bits and pieces of heroism and kindness. But he also knew in a time of white supremacy that things didn't always work as they should.

There was one particular memory never far from the surface. On a late autumn day when he was fourteen, his grandfather was dying and his family was broke, so Eric went out to the fields, which were already picked, and scavenged enough cotton for a 40-pound load. He took it



C. Eric Lincoln

to the gin, and made a quick calculation in his head: at nine cents a pound, he would soon have \$3.60 to buy food and other necessities for his family. But when the white man casually flipped him a quarter, and when Lincoln protested, the gin owner hit him across the midsection and left him gasping for air on the floor. For the next fifty years, the pain and humiliation of the moment gave an edge to Lincoln's writings about race. His scholarship was precise, but racial realities were never an abstraction, never lacked a human face, and in his novel, *The Avenue: Clayton City*, there was a passion and an eloquence that made him one of the great writers of his time.

He never seemed bitter. He came home to Alabama several times in the '90s, delivering commencement addresses at Athens College and speaking as a part of the annual Alabama Voices series. He was gracious and warm and moved, he said, by the changes he had seen. In his life and work, he had come a long way from the cotton fields of Athens, but in the welcome he felt when he came back home he found reason to believe—or at least to hope—that the country was slowly making changes as well.

*Award-winning journalist and writer Frye Gaillard profiled Dr. Lincoln in his 1991 book Southern Voices: Profiles and Other Stories.*

## COMING IN THE FALL

The first annual Alabama Center for Literary Arts Conference on the Short Story will be held November 3-4, 2000, at Alabama Southern Community College in Monroeville. Distinguished Alabama writers and scholars will discuss, recognize, and honor the achievements of Alabama writers in this continually important and vital literary form. Activities will include panel discussions, author readings, academic papers, and a workshop for short story writers. A special theme of the conference will be *The Legacy of Truman Capote*, and the

conference will conclude on Saturday with the presentation of the first annual Alabama Center for Literary Arts Truman Capote Award for achievement by an Alabama writer in the field of short fiction.

For additional information, contact Dr. F. Brett Cox, Director, Alabama Center for Literary Arts, Alabama Southern Community College, P.O. Box 2000, Monroeville, AL 36461, (334) 575-3156 ext. 226, bcox@ascc.edu.

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# Bonnie

BY JOHN LOGUE

In the middle seventies, in the formative and still chaotic days of the magazine *Southern Living*, came an unsolicited manuscript in the mail. Subject: gardening. A thing more rare than a camellia blossom in July.

Inside was the brief story of a man in South Alabama, who had introduced the planting of ornamental shrubs in the medians of his small town. A simple narrative without a wasted word. Written by, of all people, a man from Vermont. How on God's green planet had he unearthed an anonymous gardener in deepest Alabama?

At this precise time in its existence, the magazine was withering on the vine from the absence of a gardening writer. This writer couldn't be reached by phone. He didn't have one.

A letter and a plane ticket delivered to the Birmingham airport the (then very thin and pre-mustachioed) person of one Fred Bonnie. One look and Editor Gary McCalla and his man Logue knew: here was a maverick. (The two of them would take a maverick every time, being card-carrying members of the species.)

This Bonnie could write. He'd published a wonderful short story, "Widening the Road," in *Yankee Magazine*. Which is still a wonderful story. Could he garden?

"What did you major in, Fred?" asked Logue, of his years at the University of Vermont.

"I was the most interested student in Chinese history."

"That's perfect. The Chinese can grown any damn thing."

In truth, the young man was a hands-on gardener, sans horticulture degree. They sneaked him past the magazine's founder/publisher, the late Emory Cunningham, who only asked him: "Do you love to garden?" Bonnie didn't have to lie. And he had the gardener's rough hands to prove it.

Now to convince this Bonnie to move his life and love and career to Birmingham, which was not at the time high on the Richter scale of literary happenings. It happens McCalla and Logue are publishing a book in September (*Life at Southern Living*) about those days, and they recently interviewed Bonnie as to his memory of that night of recruitment.

Bonnie said, "Logue was drinking gin and tonic. He found out I had published two short stories. We didn't talk business. We talked about Flannery O'Connor and Eudora Welty. We talked about Truman Capote and William Faulkner and my hero, Erskine Caldwell... Logue asked me, 'Do you think you'd be interested in



Fred Bonnie

moving to Birmingham?' I remembered the grim look of the un-reclaimed Sloss Furnace, and I said, 'Maybe I could do some free-lance work for you.' We talked about Larry McMurtry and Harry Cruise and William Styron and James Dickey, with more gin and tonic... 'How about moving to Birmingham?' I said, 'I'll think about it.' We talked about Thomas Wolfe, and William Price Fox, and Annie Dillard... and it was winding down toward 1 a.m. Logue said, 'How about moving to Birmingham and working for us?' I said, in a rather slurred voice, 'I think that's a damn great idea.'"

So the magazine that has brought good ideas and no little cheer to 2.5 million subscribers brought Fred Bonnie to Alabama. He went on to write six gardening books and countless gardening pieces and infected the building with his unsinkable, raucous humor. He even recruited Dr. John Floyd, a teacher of horticulture at Jefferson State Junior College, who is now the editor of the magazine. And all of that was not the most significant of Fred Bonnie's impact on readers and would-be writers and, in fact, on the body of American and Canadian literature.

Fred left the magazine to work at too many full-time and part-time jobs to name, and taught writing in Birmingham, Tuscaloosa (where he earned an M.F.A.), and Mobile, and he was always committed to the art of the written word. He published the better part of a hundred short stories. The Canadians discovered him first, with such Oberson titles as *Displaced Persons*. A Toronto critic called him "the Canadian Chekhov." His stories followed him from Maine (*Too Hot*) to the Deep South (*Wide Load*), to the holy world of restaurants (*Food Fights*, with Black Belt Press), and, at last, to his first published novel, *Thanh Ho Delivers* (also Black Belt), which revealed the Vietnamese story in his adopted hometown of Birmingham.

Recently, Fred and his wife, Dr. Rhonda Carter, moved from North Carolina back to Alabama, to the small town of Columbiana. Fred (at the tender age of 54) suffered a heart attack and died May 13, on the way home from a book signing in North Carolina. A writer's writer to the last.

Fred Bonnie was as original as his art. To whom else can we turn to hear "Heartbreak Hotel" sung in German? God, how we miss him.

*John Logue, who writes mystery novels, lives in Birmingham.*





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