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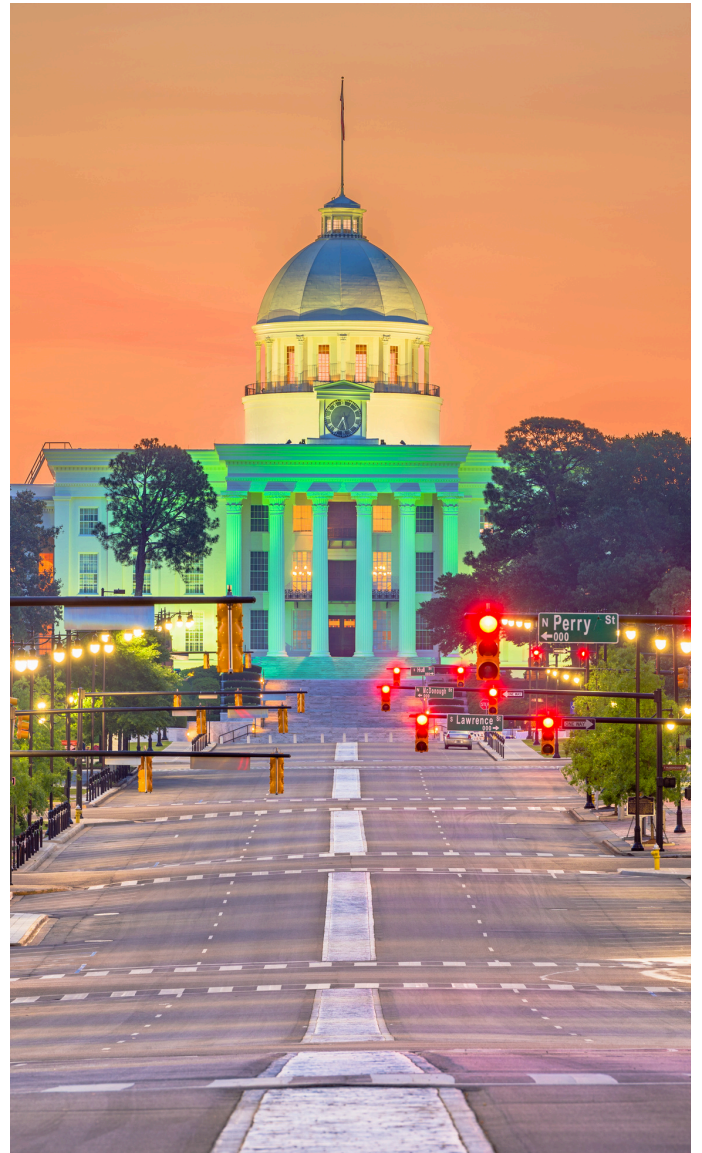
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From the Editor-in-Chief

Those of you who have been a part of this community for a while may remember our magazine, *First Draft*, published from 1993 until 2010. (You can still find digitized editions on our website [here](#).) You may also be familiar with the book reviews we regularly publish, a key component of our mission to support and celebrate the literary culture of Alabama. In this special issue of *First Draft*, we have selected reviews of 11 of the best books to come out of our state over the last year or so, presented in the order in which we published them on our website.

There is something for nearly every reader on these pages, whether you are a fan of memoirs or nonfiction, looking for a book to read to a child in your life, a lover of historical fiction, or a poet at heart...the list goes on. I hope you will find a new book to add to your reading list or a new perspective on a book you have read before. I also hope you will check out our archive of book reviews [here](#) next. In 2024, we published over 80 reviews of books we found reason to claim as Alabama's (with more to come before 2025). To say it was hard to choose which books would appear here is an understatement; Alabama's cup truly runs over with literary talent and creativity.

Thank you for reading, and thank you to all our writers, reviewers, members, and supporters. The work we do would not be possible (or as much fun) without you.

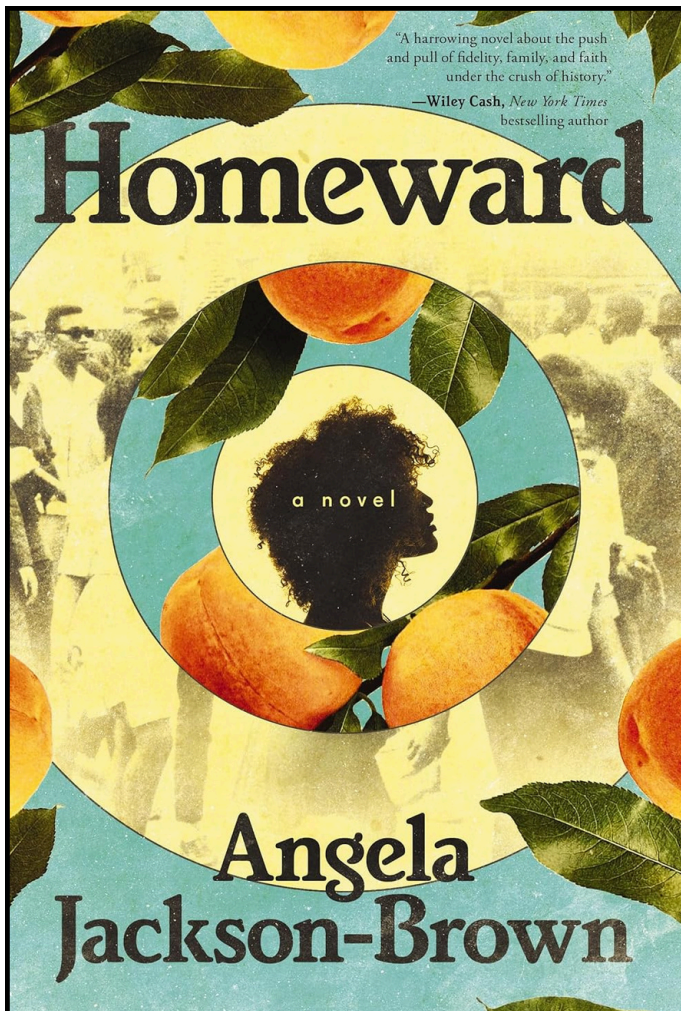
Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jordan Mahaffey". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Jordan Mahaffey

Editor-in-Chief

jordan@writersforum.org



Angela Jackson-Brown, *Homeward*

Reviewed by Cheryl Carpenter

In the first chapter of *Travels with Charley: In Search of America*, John Steinbeck reminds those readers who would follow him and his dog on the journey that they didn't "invent" sin; sin is old. He goes on to compare a journey to a marriage and notes that "the certain way to be wrong is to think you control it." Awareness of such observations would have done little to alleviate Rose Perkins Bourdon's guilt and shame about sin in Angela Jackson-Brown's *Homeward*. She has returned to her parents' home in Parsons, Georgia, pregnant with a baby conceived while her husband was away serving in the Air Force. Cedric and Opal Perkins have reared their six children to be devout and deeply spiritual, and they are at first outraged by their daughter's infidelity. When Jasper Bourdon arrives from his home in Mississippi to reunite with Rose and claim the baby as his own, however, forgiveness is granted all around. At the end of his leave, Jasper returns to active duty and is deployed to Vietnam, and Rose remains with her family in Parsons.

"...the author combines romance and religion with history and poses philosophical questions that have, like sin, been around for a very long time."



The magnitude of her sin continues to trouble her in spite of having been forgiven by her loved ones, and when Jasper is killed in action and the baby is stillborn, she blames herself. Inconsolable in her grief, she spends her days at the cemetery. Desperate to help her find a way to recover, her parents send her to Atlanta to stay with her sister Ellena, a student at Spelman.

Although Ellena and Rose have been close siblings, Ellena is initially unsuccessful in her attempts to relieve Rose's gloom and convince her sister to leave the house. Her persistence pays off, though, when Rose finally agrees to accompany Ellena to a Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) meeting. Led by a charismatic Jewish man near Rose's age, the group of field workers decides to shake up the quiet Southern town of Parsons by conducting sit-ins at lunch counters and registering people to vote. Simultaneously attracted by the possibility of change and repelled by thoughts of danger to her family, Rose is swept along by Ellena's vision, enthusiasm, and courage.

In a letter at the end of the book, Angela Jackson-Brown explains that her purpose was to remind older readers of the Civil Rights struggle and to introduce the history and influential figures of the era to young readers. This seems an admirable and timely goal. To achieve it, the author combines romance and religion with history and poses philosophical questions that have, like sin, been around for a very long time. Older readers who have perhaps grappled in their time with cruelty and its consequences indeed need to be reminded of personal and societal sin and atonement, and the generations following them need the historical foundation of the 1960s to try their hand at building a more hopeful future for all humanity.

Angela Jackson-Brown, a graduate of Troy University and Auburn University, is an Associate Professor in Creative Writing in Bloomington, Indiana, and a member of the graduate faculty of the Naslund-Mann Graduate School of Writing at Spalding University in Louisville, Kentucky. She is the author of three previous works, *The Light Always Breaks*, *When Stars Rain Down*, and *Drinking from a Bitter Cup*, and a collection of poetry, *House Repairs*.

A native of Mississippi, Cheryl Carpenter has lived in Decatur, Alabama since 1987. She is a retired English teacher.

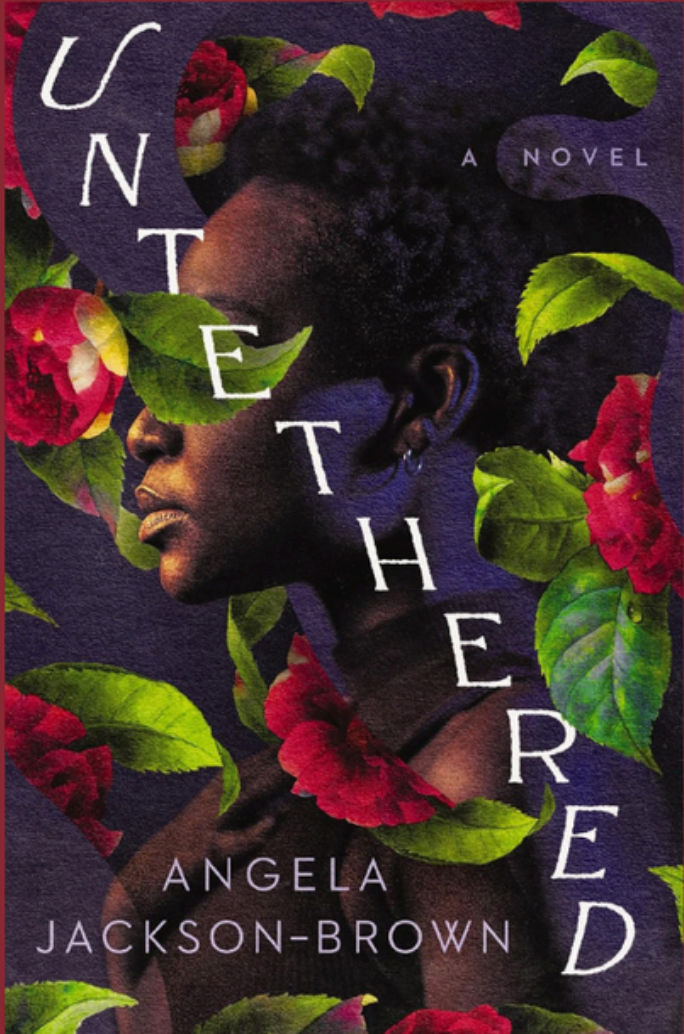


JOIN OUR
BOOK CLUB

Meeting 1: Tuesday, February 11th
Meeting 2: Tuesday, March 11th
Meeting 3: Tuesday, April 8th
With Angela Jackson-Brown!!!
All meetings take place on Zoom, and begin at 7pm


FREE BOOK INCLUDED!*

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UNTETHERED
A NOVEL
ANGELA JACKSON-BROWN

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Reviewed by Edward Journey

Sara Mayfield (1905–1979), an Alabama writer, journalist, and inventor, grew up in a privileged Southern family, forged a career in writing and reporting, and spent seventeen years in a state mental institution. After being released from the mental hospital, at age sixty, she hit the ground running and, in short order, published two widely reviewed biographical studies as well as a historical novel about Mona Lisa and Leonardo da Vinci.

In her excellent new biography, *Odyssey of a Wandering Mind: The Strange Tale of Sara Mayfield*, Author, Jennifer Horne, a writer, editor, teacher, and past Poet Laureate of Alabama, has meticulously researched and documented Mayfield's fascinating life, clearly intending to do right by her subject. Fortunately for Horne, Mayfield kept a diary, starting at age five; the diaries, the letters Sara saved, and her voluminous papers are a part of the University of Alabama's Special Collections. Horne uses these and other documents, clinical studies, and first-person accounts to create a probing portrait of a one-of-a-kind life.

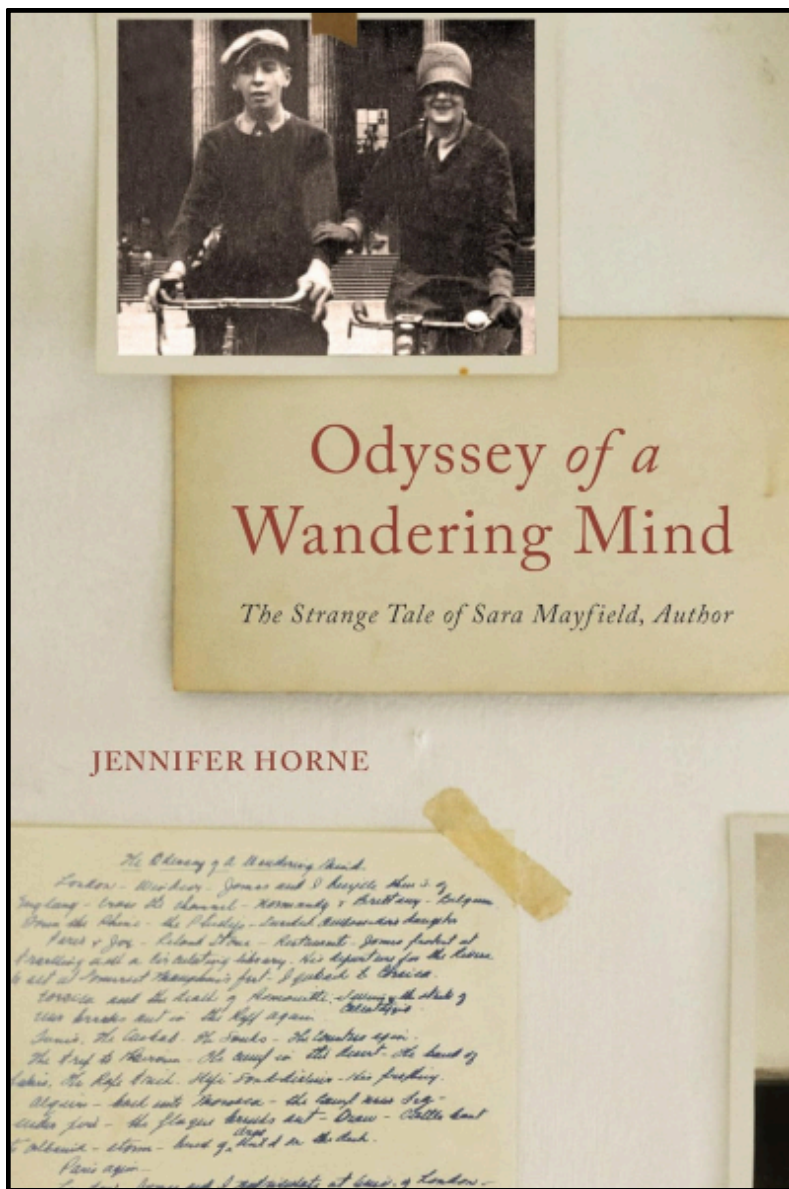
Sara Mayfield was born in Tuscaloosa and her family had a house, Idlewyld, in town as well as farmland across the river. Her growing-up years were spent mostly in Montgomery as the daughter of a justice in the Supreme

Court of Alabama. Among her close childhood friends in Montgomery were Tallulah Bankhead, Sara Haardt, and Zelda Sayre, each of whom later distinguished herself in arts and literature. In addition, Haardt married journalist and critic H. L. Mencken and Sayre married writer F. Scott Fitzgerald. From her earliest years, Sara Mayfield seems to have been in proximity to famous people and people destined for fame. Luminaries of the twentieth century frequently pop up in this account of Sara Mayfield's life.

"By any measure, Sara Mayfield was a woman of accomplishment. Her accomplishments are made more impressive by the fact that much of what she accomplished took place while she was a patient at an understaffed and underfunded state mental facility, Bryce Hospital, in Tuscaloosa."

The Mayfield family was marginally progressive by the standards of the day but still held patrician attitudes toward class and race. The family also respected the tradition of the well-behaved "little lady," a set of inflexible rules for proper behavior that Sara and her friends quietly rebelled against. At age sixteen, Sara seems to have been somewhat traumatized by the possible implication, made by a chaperone while on a school trip to Europe, that her relationship with a school friend might be sexual in nature. For the rest of her life, Sara seems at times to obsess over her attraction to women – even, at one point, attempting to create scientific principles to explain sexual attraction.

Sara had several engagements, a brief marriage, graduated from Goucher College where her friend Sara Haardt was a professor, entered graduate school at the University of Alabama, and traveled extensively. She experimented with something she called "synthetic chemistry," focusing on experiments with cotton, cotton stalks, corn husks, and agrarian waste products.





Jennifer Horne, photo by Don Noble

During the Great Depression, she started an “unemployment colony” on her family’s Tuscaloosa County farm. She moved around, dabbled in theatre, had a job with a distillery, worked with plastics, and freelanced as a reporter and writer in energetic spurts. Sara might have been encouraged to audition for the role of Scarlett in *Gone with the Wind*; her preference would have been to work on the script.

She wrote for various publications and made earnest attempts to become a well-informed reporter and foreign correspondent, traveling as a press correspondent to United Nations conferences in Mexico and San Francisco. While in San Francisco in 1945, she met future President John F. Kennedy. A friend commented that “She didn’t like him; he was, of course, a Yankee and a snob. She sort of pitted him in the same category as Scott Fitzgerald.” Sara was a first-hand witness to the dysfunction of her friend Zelda Sayre’s marriage to F. Scott Fitzgerald and, in contrast, to the strong bond of her friend Sara Haardt’s marriage to H.L. Mencken. When Sara Mencken died young, Sara Mayfield continued her warm friendship and correspondence with H.L. for the rest of his life.

Through much of her life, Sara Mayfield went through periods of mental stress and instability. She was prone to paranoia and at one point became increasingly concerned about Fascist conspiracies among high-ranking conspirators within the United States. After being tricked by her mother and brother into a brief “rest cure” at a Baltimore mental institution, Sara created a narrative spin asserting that it had to do with her alleged asset as an agent of military intelligence. Throughout her life, Sara Mayfield tried to put her spin on things that might lead to people thinking her “mad.”

By any measure, Sara Mayfield was a woman of accomplishment. Her accomplishments are made more impressive by the fact that much of what she accomplished took place while she was a patient at an understaffed and underfunded state mental facility, Bryce Hospital, in Tuscaloosa. Her admission to Bryce occurred at a time when it was relatively easy for family members to admit someone who might have become an “inconvenience.” Her confinement lasted from 1948 to 1965, during which she often remained remarkably lucid, observant, and productive. She was able to do research at the University libraries (they were within walking distance), travel, meet with friends, continue writing and experimenting, and cofound a hospital newspaper, the *Bryce News*. Sara accomplished the rare feat of getting a U.S. patent for a “dry plastic composition” in 1950 while she was a patient at Bryce. Despite the delusions and paranoia that put her there, Sara delivered calm and rational insights into the hospital conditions and her fellow patients and was emboldened to write with frankness in the in-house newspaper. Horne addresses Mayfield’s mental health challenges with sensitivity and a generous benefit of the doubt; at one point, she quotes Anne Rivers Siddons: “I have a theory that Southern madhouses are full of gifted women who were stifled.”

After *Exiles from Paradise* was published, Mayfield was urged to push ahead with her planned book about Tallulah Bankhead's early years. She demurred, saying, "I need a respite from the twenties and the tragedies of my friends." Instead, she turned to a project she had been working on for decades. Published in 1974, *Mona Lisa: The Woman in the Portrait* was a historical fiction biography of Lisa del Giocondo, the Renaissance-era subject of Leonardo da Vinci's most famous painting.

Sara Mayfield, like so many of her friends and contemporaries, has largely been forgotten. With *Odyssey of a Wandering Mind*, we are fortunate that Jennifer Horne has documented the astonishing story of a life "fully felt and deeply experienced" with such grace and agility. Horne explores "where the gaps are, the quiet, shadowed places."

Edward Journey, a retired university professor and theatre professional living in Birmingham, regularly shares his essays in the online journal "Professional Southerner" (www.professionalsoutherner.com).

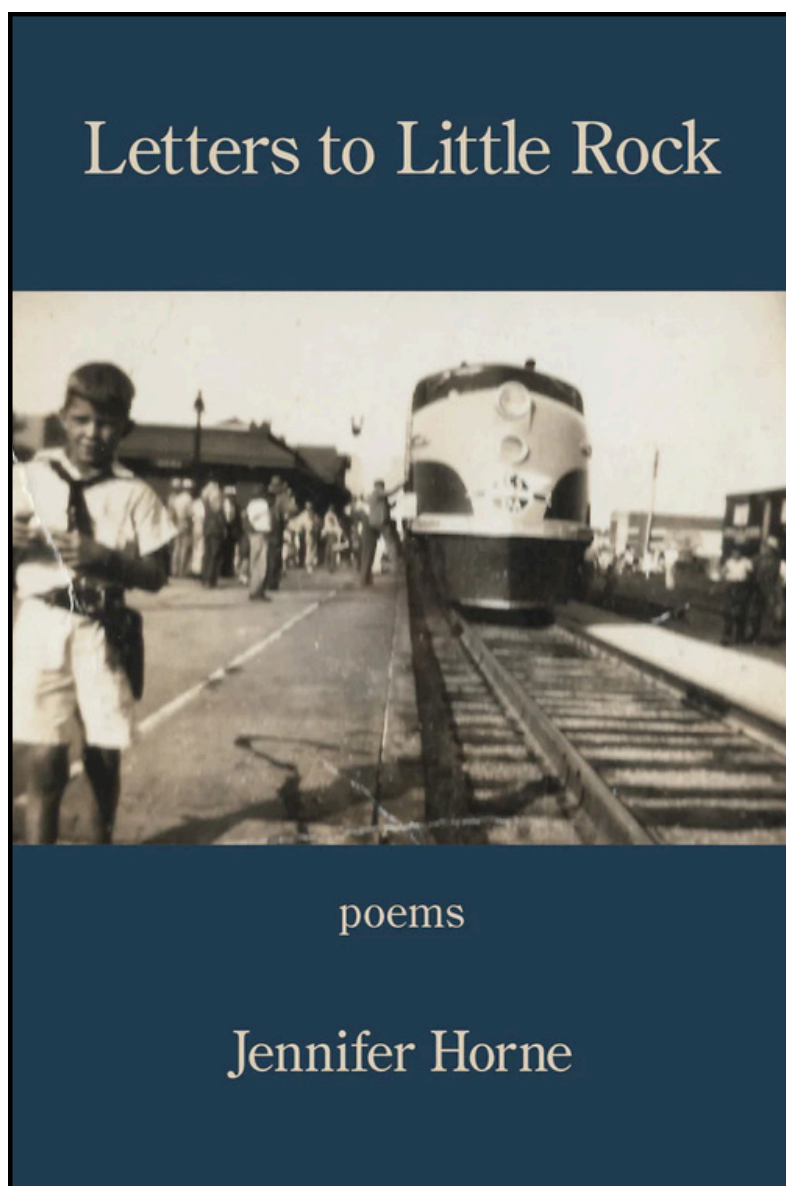
NEW FROM
AUTHOR

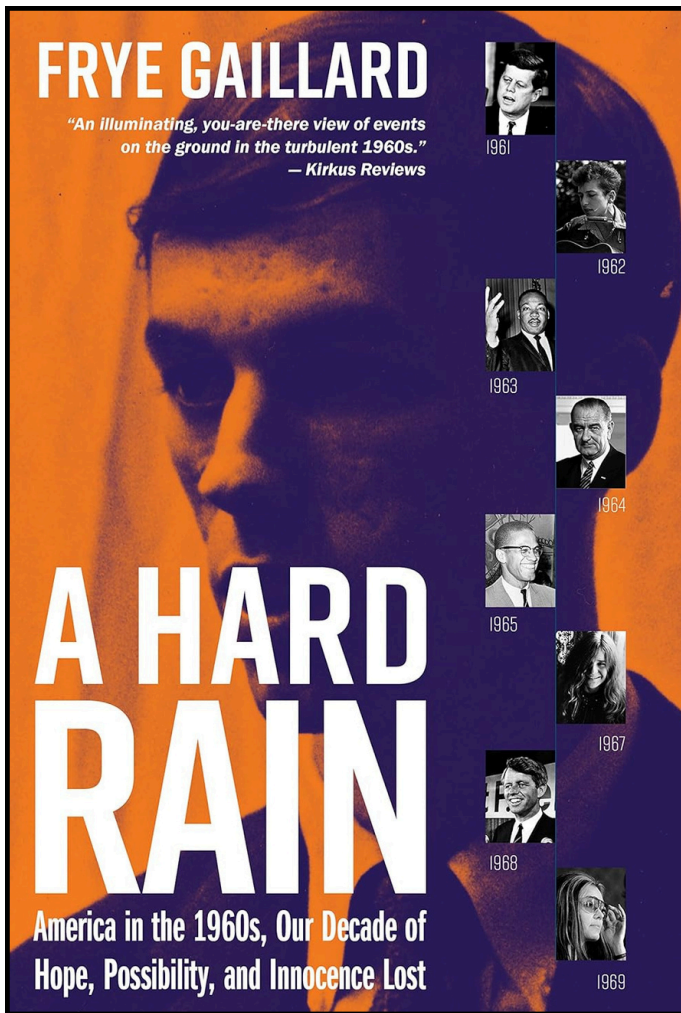
"Jennifer Horne's *Letters to Little Rock* is an empathic yet unsentimental document of grief that doubles as a celebration of her father. Do not think somber. Poem after poem strikes a match that reveals a life lived well. Horne's particular brilliance is to set a tone and hold to it step by step, with both wit and wisdom, and in various modes that surprise and delight. My happiness depends on finding, rarely, such marvelous books."

— **Rodney Jones, winner of Kingsley Tufts Prize and National Book Critics Circle Award**

Jennifer Horne's fourth book of poems, *Letters to Little Rock*, commemorates a beloved father through a variety of poem-letters addressed to him after his death that trace his life from an impoverished childhood in Caddo Gap, Arkansas, to a comfortable adulthood as a lawyer in Little Rock. Written in a variety of poetic forms which articulate yet struggle to control grief, the book explores the timeless, sorrowful fact that despite all the love, all the shared experiences, one cannot fully know one's parent. Near the end of the book, she asks, "Why didn't I understand? / Why didn't you tell me? ... / Why didn't you show me? ... / Why didn't you let me? ... / Why / didn't I see?"

— **Ann Fisher-Wirth, author of *Paradise Is Jagged* and coeditor of *The Eco-poetry Anthology: Volume II***





Reviewed by Edward Journey

I was seven years old in 1962 when the Cuban Missile Crisis happened. I did not quite understand what was going on, but I was aware of the somber tones of the newscasters, the hushed tones of the grown-ups, and the tension around me. In my admittedly tricky memory, I have always remembered those days as grey and overcast.

Since then, I have studied the Cuban Missile Crisis, but it has never come into focus as clearly as it does in Frye Gaillard's succinct description in *A Hard Rain: America in the 1960s, Our Decade of Hope, Possibility, and Innocence Lost*. The whole book is like that, bringing clarity to the decade of the 1960s with probing research, personal experiences, and a sharply thorough overview.

As more distance separates us from the events of the 1960s, its considerable accomplishments and milestones seem to be discounted by some. Gaillard finds the links and makes the connections as he reminds us why that American decade is still so important. *A Hard Rain*, first published in 2018, has been reissued by the University of Georgia Press under its NewSouth Books imprint. Now, several years after its original publication and with a presidential election

looming, it feels more timely than ever in our divided nation. The issues that roiled us then are still roiling us now, and the stakes seem even higher. Gaillard, a Mobile native, has been a reporter and writer for the past half century, covering historical events, popular culture, and his personal takes on his life and times in dozens of books. He is former writer-in-residence at the University of South Alabama.

“A Hard Rain is a masterful book, a reflection of a lifetime of astute observation and pondering.”

In the preface, Gaillard references defining moments of the 1960s in which “we seemed on the brink of a different kind of greatness, rooted not only in our national might, but in our capacity for introspection.” He examines the decade year by year, providing the momentous events and tempering the narrative with reminders of what was going on simultaneously. He provides many examples of popular culture, especially music, illuminating and fueling the events of the day. As a college student, young activist, and reporter, Gaillard had the opportunity to meet many of the personalities he covers, and to interview others in later years.

A Hard Rain is a masterful book, a reflection of a lifetime of astute observation and pondering. Practically forgotten people or events take on new life and relevance in these pages. Civil rights is ever-present in the book as it transforms from a regional to a national movement after Lyndon Johnson shepherded the Civil Rights Act through Congress in 1964. As the decade moves on, Gaillard documents the other movements that followed in the wake of civil rights – feminism, gay rights, anti-war, the environment. The final chapter, “Redemption,” is a sensitive look at the emerging movement for Native rights. In a Washington hearing, when a member of Congress asks, “What do you Indians want?” Sioux tribal member Alex Chasing Hawk responds, “A leave-us-alone law!”

Gaillard’s stunning segues make the same connections that many readers may be making. His description of the murder of civil rights activist Medgar Evers pivots into Eudora Welty’s *New Yorker* story “Where Is the Voice Coming From?” – a story ignited by Evers’s death. Gaillard points out the startling coincidence that on June 11, 1963, the day that Evers was murdered by a white supremacist in his Jackson, Mississippi, driveway, the following events also occurred: George Wallace stood in the schoolhouse door to “block” segregation at the University of Alabama; John F. Kennedy presented a seminal address on civil rights; and a Buddhist monk, assuming the lotus position, set himself on fire on a busy Saigon intersection to protest the brutality of the Diem regime in South Vietnam.



Frye Gaillard, photo courtesy of *Alabama Heritage*

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Gaillard gracefully traverses the decline of Lyndon Johnson, the rise of George Wallace, and the transformation of the Republican party – formerly the “party of Lincoln” – from Barry Goldwater’s disastrous 1964 run for the presidency to the ascendance of Ronald Reagan and to the Republicans ultimately becoming the party of fear and division that we know today. He follows the “emerging sense of grievance” after the hope and optimism at the beginning of the decade.

A Hard Rain traces the growing American involvement in Vietnam along with the growing antiwar movement. In a choice that is typical of Gaillard's fresh take on '60s history, he includes excerpts from James Simon Kunen's "The Strawberry Statement," the candid comments of a nineteen-year-old Columbia undergrad participating in the university's 1968 sit-ins and campus takeovers. "I am not having good times here," Kunen writes, musing on the possibility that he's there "to be cool or to meet people or to meet girls (as distinct from people) or to get out of crew or to be arrested"; he admits to the possibility that he might be there "to precipitate some change at the University."

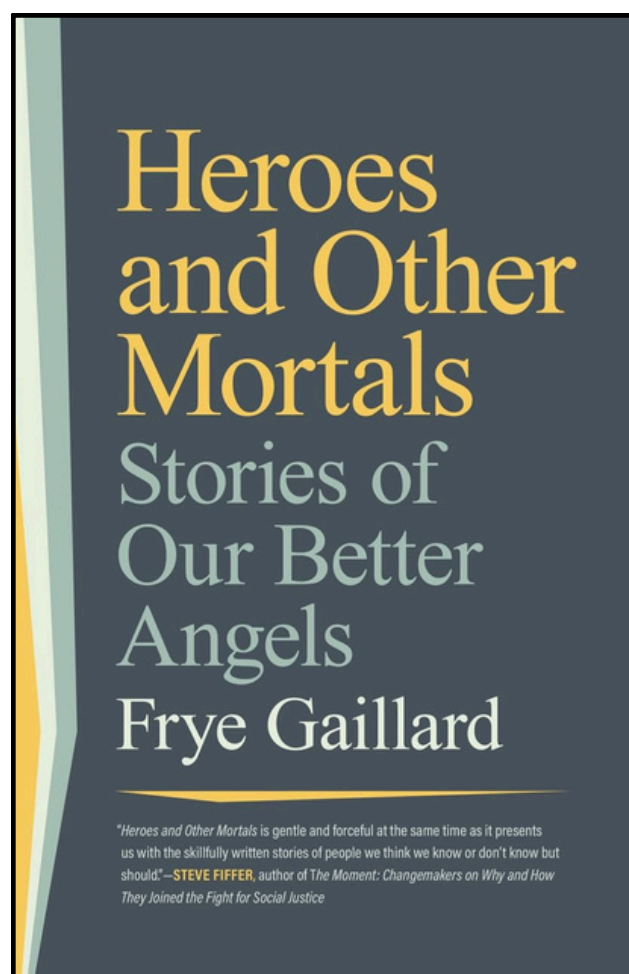
Activist H. Rap Brown announced in the '60s that violence is "as American as apple pie." In the crucible year of 1968, with assassinations, widespread protests, riots, and general unrest, Gaillard reminds the reader of that transcendent moment on Christmas Eve when Apollo 8 astronauts, orbiting the moon, read the creation story from Genesis. That was also the mission in which astronaut Bill Anders's Earthrise photo, perhaps "the most influential environmental photograph ever taken," was revealed. A friend of Apollo 8 commander Frank Borman said, "You have bailed out 1968."

Gaillard's narrative flow and intertextual weaving of the 1960s capture a decade that is integral to the identity of the nation. His personal insights add valuable perspective to not only the years in which he came of age but to the years in which we currently live. In the early sixties, our bogeyman was Russia's Nikita Krushchev and his threat to "bury" us; today, our bogeyman is just as likely to be homegrown.

Edward Journey, a retired university professor and theatre professional living in Birmingham, regularly shares his essays in the online journal "Professional Southerner" (www.professionalsoutherner.com).

NEW FROM AUTHOR

"By blending interviews and stories of well-known figures like Archbishop Desmond Tutu, Sidney Poitier, Vine Deloria, Mikhail Gorbachev, and Jane Goodall with lesser-known heroes like Rabbi Abraham Heschel (who marched from Selma to Montgomery), Regina Benjamin (a Black doctor who was integral to the grassroots efforts of Katrina recovery), Kathy Mattea (who wrote powerful songs about coal mining and its real effects on the people of Appalachia), and Elyn Saks (who pioneered modern mental illness treatments while dealing with her own schizophrenia), Gaillard celebrates the people who have tried to make things better."



NATASHA TRETHERWEY



THE HOUSE OF BEING

Reviewed by Steve Harrison

Natasha Trethewey's new book is a prose meditation on memory, violence, and language. The title comes from her father's reminders that, as Martin Heidegger observed, "Language is the house of being." Trethewey explores the ways in which the boundaries of personal identity and social justice are determined by words: what is said, how it is said, and what is left out. *The House of Being* extends those boundaries, and the details of Trethewey's life illuminate some of the enduring problems in American society: racism, institutionalized discrimination, and domestic violence.

These are familiar themes for Trethewey. In *Domestic Work* (1999), the poem "Domestic Work, 1937" begins, "All week she's cleaned / Someone else's house," and then goes on to describe the pleasure of working for oneself, cleaning one's own house. *Bellocq's Ophelia* (2002) gives a voice to the mixed-race prostitutes of New Orleans who served as subjects for the photographs of Ernest Bellocq in the early 1900s. *Native Guard* (2007), for which Trethewey won the Pulitzer Prize, tells the largely neglected story of the Louisiana Native Guards, African-American regiments that served in the Union army during the Civil War. Many of

these soldiers were former slaves. One of these regiments guarded white Confederate soldiers who were held prisoner in a fort on Ship Island, which lies only ten miles south of Trethewey's childhood home in Gulfport, Mississippi.

The House of Being gives a deeply affectionate picture of Trethewey's grandmother Leretta, with whom Trethewey and her parents lived during Trethewey's early childhood. Leretta comes across as an immensely capable woman. She had run her own beauty parlor, worked in private homes and in a drapery factory, and by the time of Trethewey's birth, had become an independent seamstress, making curtains in her living room so that she could take care of Natasha during the day. It was in Leretta's home that Trethewey first found an assortment of fascinating books. And after her mother's second marriage, this one to an abusive husband, Trethewey found calm and stability there during her school vacations.

It was also in Gulfport that Trethewey's experiences of violence began. Hurricane Camille made a direct hit on the Mississippi Gulf Coast in 1969, destroying numerous homes in her grandmother's neighborhood. Trethewey, child of a white father and a Black mother, encountered racial hatred early. Klansmen burned a cross in her grandmother's driveway, and when she read the World Book Encyclopedia's entry for "Races of Man," it named three: Caucasoid, Mongoloid, and Negroid. These stark divisions impelled Trethewey to search for words to describe her own identity. In *The House of Being* she observes, "Writing is a way of creating order out of chaos, of taking charge of one's own story, being the sovereign of the self by pushing back against received knowledge."

"Trethewey explores the ways in which the boundaries of personal identity and social justice are determined by words: what is said, how it is said, and what is left out."

Trethewey, born in 1966, studied at the University of Georgia, Hollins College, and the University of Massachusetts Amherst, where she completed her MFA. Her first teaching job was at Auburn University in Auburn, Alabama; the location meant that she could often visit her grandmother in Gulfport. She later taught at Emory University, and now holds a distinguished professorship at Northwestern University. From 2012 to 2014 she served as Poet Laureate of the United States, and during that tenure appeared regularly on the PBS television series “Where Poetry Lives.”

The House of Being is a slender volume, but profound. It forms part of Trethewey’s ongoing search for language that tells us who we are and how we got here. She writes because “the soul sings for justice, and the song is poetry.”

Steve Harrison grew up in Montgomery, Alabama, attended Auburn University, and worked in the software industry. Since his retirement, he has taught courses in poetry and world literature.

A L S O F R O M SERIES

“In this lyrical meditation about the why of writing poetry, Joy Harjo reflects on significant points of illumination, experience, and questioning from her fifty years as a poet. Composed of intimate vignettes that take us through the author’s life journey as a youth in the late 1960s, a single mother, and a champion of Native nations, this book offers a fresh understanding of how poetry functions as an expression of purpose, spirit, community, and memory—in both the private, individual journey and as a vehicle for prophetic, public witness.”





Reviewed by Kerry Madden-Lunsford

I left my family in California in 2009 when I accepted a job at UAB teaching creative writing as the freelance life was not conducive to mounting college tuitions for our kids. I spent my first night in Birmingham in a new apartment on an air mattress with lawn chairs in the living room and an ironing board as a makeshift coffee table, quite certain I'd made a horrible decision. I couldn't stop crying, so I decided I would drop off a note of sincere apology at the English Department for all their trouble and hit the road back west with air mattress, lawn chairs, and ironing board to my husband and family. Our fifth grader had wanted to stay in LA so she could graduate from the same elementary school where my husband taught, since this kid had been in that school since kindergarten. Our older two children were in college, a freshman and senior at universities on opposite coasts.

But when I woke the next morning, I made coffee and thought I should at least teach for a week. Then I could go home.

In a way, the collection, *Old Enough: Southern Women Artists and Writers on Creativity*, is like coming home to a

celebration of stories of women who had to make impossible choices, live invisible lives, face illnesses, losses, financial struggles, family demands, and in every single essay, we find a home to step inside these wildly beautiful narratives and listen to the 21 stories of writers, painters, sculptors, musicians, quilters, and poets who have fully embraced their lives as creative artists in all fields and experiences.

Or as self-described revolutionary poet Jacqueline Allen Trimble put it in her powerful essay, "I Have Seen the Promised Land and It Is Me," when she writes of becoming even more creative with age: "I am a teller of truth, a witch, an oracle. If I claim a cloak of invisibility, it will be my superpower. Who will see me coming, looking all homey, until they feel the kick of my comfortable stiletto hit their gut?"

The collection, *Old Enough*, opens with a sacred communion at the deathbed of a beloved father who receives his last request – a spoonful of coffee and piece of buttery Cuban bread administered by a loving daughter, exhausted and grieving by what is coming, a kind of last rites rendered with such love.

This essay, "On the Art of Dying" by Carmen Agra Deedy, is only the first in this collection that makes the reader feel as if they are sitting across from trusted, cherished, and often hilarious friends, imparting stories told with urgency, honesty, and vulnerability, laced with wisdom and humor, tinged with deep layers of beauty in the chaos of figuring out how to live a life of creativity, curiosity, and purpose. They don't leave the ugly voices of guilt or self-doubt or fear on the cutting floor either but face it all head-on in these essays about what it's like to postpone, or worse, possibly talk yourself out of a dream.



Carmen Agra Deedy



Some of the contributors to *Old Enough: Southern Women Artists and Writers on Creativity and Aging*. Patti Callahan Henry, Patricia Foster, Jacqueline Allen Trimble, Jeanie Thompson, Wendy Reed, and Lila Quintero Weaver. Photos by Carolyn Sherer.



Cecilia Rodríguez Milanés and Yvonne Wells



Lamar & Horne, *Old Enough*

“Grown-ass Latinas often call each other *vieja*. Just think of it as the women’s equivalent of dude,” writes Cuban author Cecilia Rodríguez Milanés, whose essay “Here’s Looking at You – Fragments of an Older Southern Latinx Woman” describes being exiled to the badlands of Western Pennsylvania for eight years as the only Latinx professor at her university and the sweet relief of coming home to Florida and being addressed in Spanish again by strangers in the grocery store.

Janisse Ray writes with piercing clarity about “growing invisible” in so many ways as a writer and a woman. Ray, author of *Ecology of a Cracker Childhood*, writes in “A Question I Wrestle With,” of the glory years of her career, followed by dry spells, and asks the critical question many of us ponder, carving out a life of creativity and purpose: “What should I do with the last part of my life?”

This book isn’t only for women of a certain age, but instead, it’s for anyone who has imagined a life where asking permission isn’t a requirement to make the most of one’s own precious time. The essays are written by a group of contributors from all walks of life, socioeconomic status, and sexual orientation who have been there, quietly or not, raising children or not, forging their own paths over decades of creating books, songs, paintings, quilts, photography, and much more.

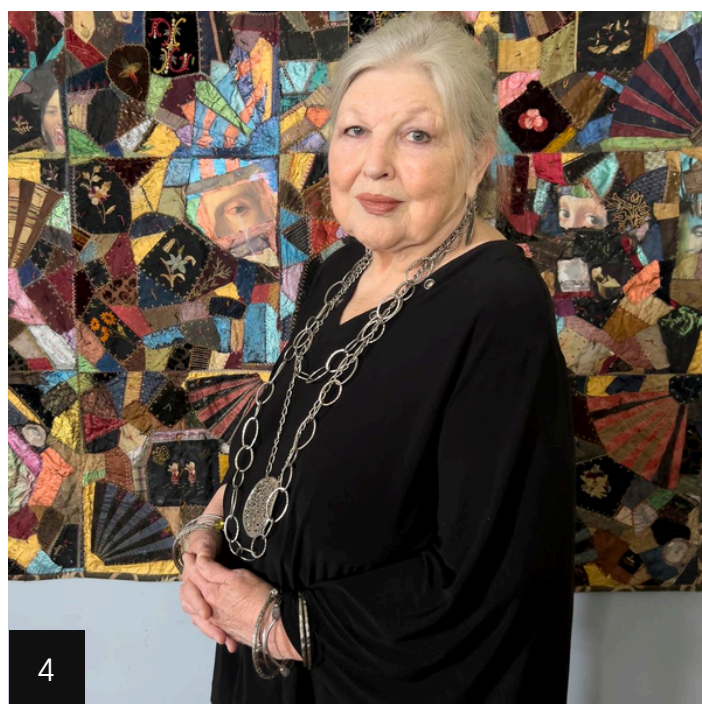
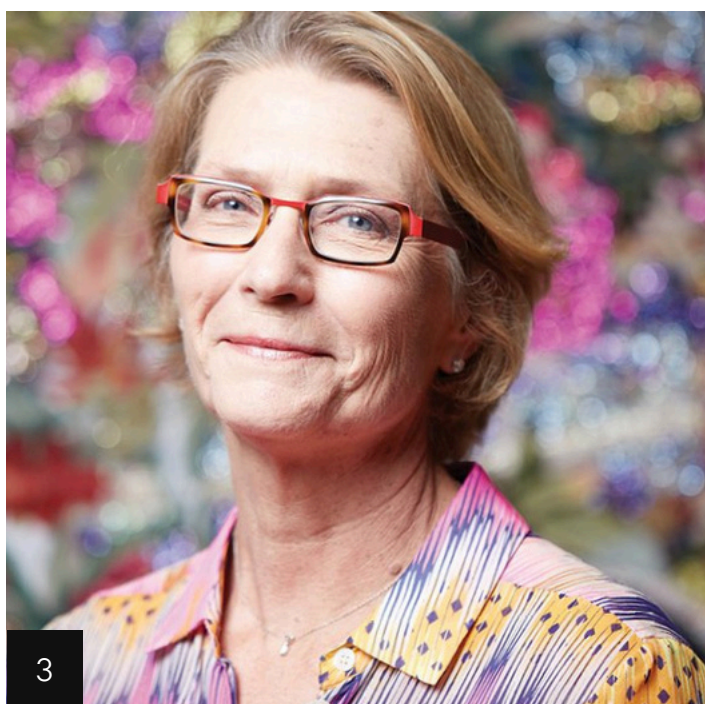
“Whenever possible, put your creativity first; if you don’t, unless you are very disciplined, it will come last.” These are the wise words that so many of us mean to heed with the best of intentions, and artist Patricia Ellisor Gaines reminds us of this in her beautiful essay, “The Mystery of Creativity and the Unmasking of Beauty.”

Angela Jackson-Brown, who decided to focus on raising her son first before embracing writing “with no more excuses,” shares in her essay “Finding the Words: Writing Past the Age of Fifty” how she greets her muse each morning with the words, “Welcome. I am so glad you decided to visit me today.”

“What Do You Want to Be When You Grow Up?” by Patti Callahan Henry takes us back to a long-ago afternoon between a mother and child whose reading time is sacred, and a single question changes everything.

From Jeanie Thompson’s deep dive into the life of Helen Keller through poetry to Patricia Foster’s tender care of her 97-year-old mother to Wendy Reed’s rescue of a ruby-throated hummingbird and her own funny-not-funny medical odyssey in the exam rooms of Alabama to Yvonne Wells’ journey of storytelling quilts to Mary Gauthier’s courageous move to sobriety and to Nashville to be a singer-songwriter at age forty to photographer Carolyn Sherer’s creating and nurturing an LGBTQ community in Alabama for decades as well as the first exhibit of its kind at the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute, “Living in Limbo: Lesbian Families in the Deep South,” to the hauntingly beautiful illustrations of Lila Quintero Weaver’s “Wet Leaves” to Nevin Mercede’s environmental justice work in Central Florida to Anne Strand’s elegy on illness and COVID to Jennifer’s Horne’s essay about summoning the voice of her fierce and funny eight-year-old self in her essay, “Past It,” which sums up the entire book in a way.

1. Mary Gauthier 2. Katie Lamar Jackson 3. Gail Andrews 4. Anne Strand



All these contributors are long past waiting for permission or the right time or divine inspiration to strike. Reading their luminous words is like experiencing the breadth of life's possibilities in one intimate, transcendent evening of conversation. It's like experiencing "everything everywhere all at once," to quote the recent film featuring Michelle Yeoh.

In Sara Garden Armstrong's "A Movement of Time," she writes: "I don't have time to be old; I have too much to do."

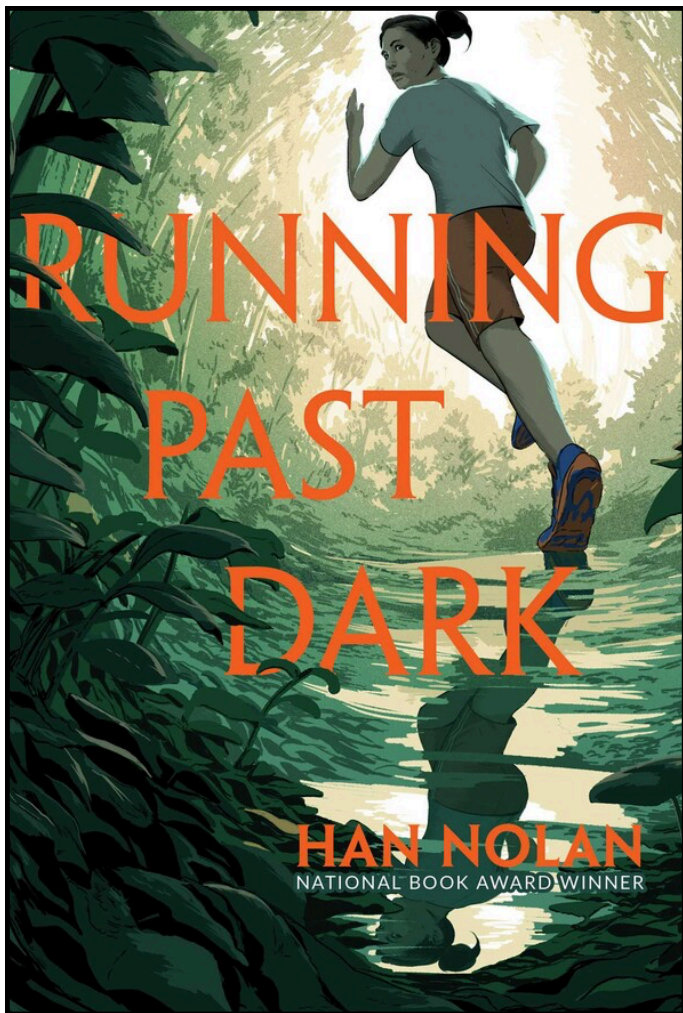
The comedian, Kathleen Madigan, said recently she never could understand how producers insisted on material that catered to the 18-25 male audience because, as Madigan said, "What do they got? They got nothing." Well, the contributors of *Old Enough* have everything, and they worked for every bit of it. Their time is urgent, and their time is now, and they show us how they did it and how they are continuing to do it. This glorious collection of essays is a roadmap, a joyful celebration, and an invitation to ask the universal question when considering time and art and creativity. What are you waiting for?



Sara Garden Armstrong, Janisse Ray, and Nevin Mercede



Kerry Madden-Lunsford is the author of the forthcoming middle-grade novel, *Werewolf Hamlet*, *Charlesbridge Moves*. She wrote the picture book *Ernestine's Milky Way*, *Random House Studios* (originally published by Schwartz & Wade). She also wrote *Maggie Valley Trilogy* for children, which includes *Gentle's Holler*, *Louisiana's Song*, and *Jessie's Mountain*, published by Viking Books for Young Readers. Her first novel, *Offsides*, (*Morrow*) was a *New York Public Library Pick* for the Teen Age. Her book *Up Close Harper Lee* made *Booklist's Ten Top Biographies of 2009* for Youth. Her first picture book, *Nothing Fancy About Kathryn and Charlie*, about Kathryn Tucker Windham and Charlie Lucas, was illustrated by her daughter, Lucy, and published by Mockingbird Publishers. Kerry is a regular contributor to the [LA Times OpEd Page](#). She teaches *Creative Nonfiction*, *Fiction*, and *Writing for Children* in the [Creative Writing Program at UAB](#). The mother of three adult children, she divides her time between Birmingham and Los Angeles.



Reviewed by Lynn Lamere

Han Nolan manages to artfully combine thriller with teenage angst in her book *Running Past Dark*. The novel centers around a unique genre of running, and Nolan's novel keeps a running pace with short chapters and engaging dialogue.

The reader is introduced to a troubled protagonist right away. Scotlyn (Scottie) and her sister Caitlyn (Cait) were inseparable as twins often are, and Scottie is dealing with her twin's recent and sudden death in an automobile accident along with Coach Jory Wilson, a hugely popular high school football coach thanks to his winning record and rapport with his players. Before the accident, Cait had confessed to her sister that Coach Wilson raped her, and when Scottie shares this information with the police, the accusation is leaked and publicized by the local media, making Scottie a scapegoat for the town's grief of its beloved coach.

Told in first person, the reader lives the experiences with Scottie as she deals with her twin's death. Questions remain regarding that fateful afternoon. Why was Cait in the car

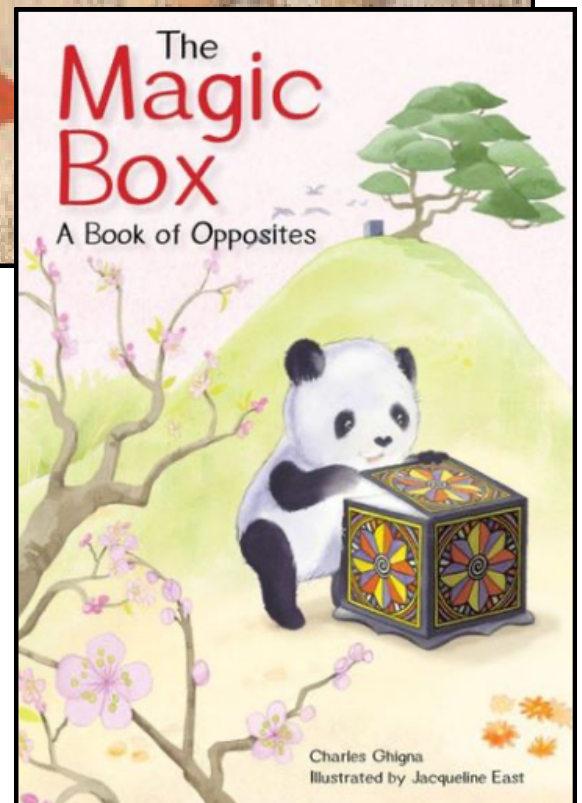
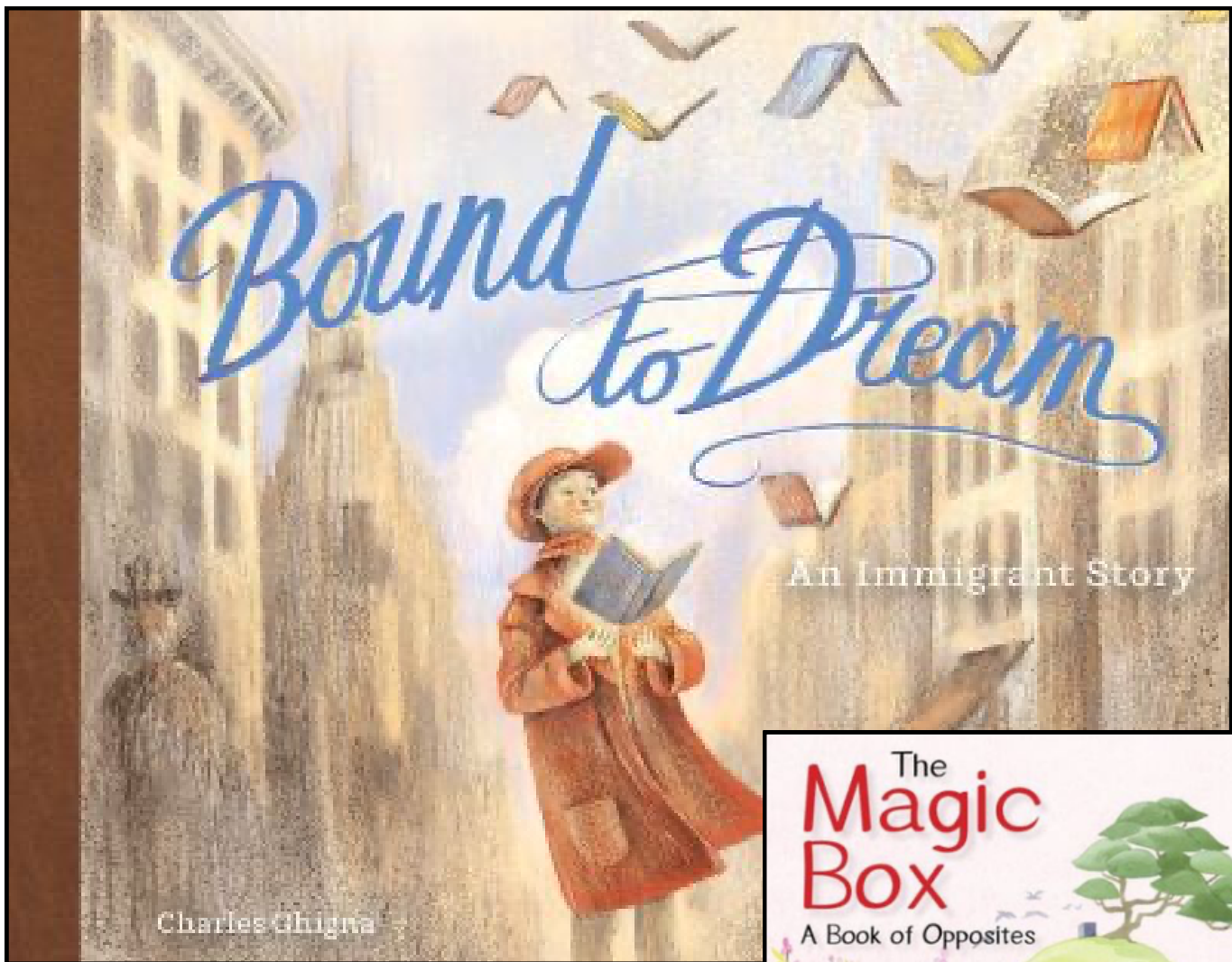
with the coach? Were others involved? Who was driving? The inquiries fuel Scottie's angst. The many plot twists give the novel a thriller vibe as the questions regarding the accident slowly become unraveled and answered. However, even with the death of her sister, she is spared no time for mourning. The home she shares with her mother is vandalized and burglarized. Her classmates' painfully cruel pranks and constant bullying are abysmally addressed by the school administration, making Scottie the scapegoat for the loss of the school's beloved coach.

Help for Scottie is hard to find; she cannot turn to her mother as she is mourning her daughter by self-medicating with alcohol. Nico, Scottie's on-again and off-again boyfriend, provides some support, but he is the last person to see the coach and Cait alive, and it becomes evident he has secrets of his own to share. Yet Scottie finds help ironically—in a lie she tells to save face during homeroom class. There, a teacher befriends Scottie and suggests an outlet for her, Ultimate Running. The sport requires focus and intense training, which is the perfect remedy for Scottie. She finds camaraderie within the diverse running group, one that provides direction as she finds herself all alone dealing with seemingly insurmountable issues.

Nolan's novel will resonate with young adults, which tackles the many issues of high school life and growing up. The humiliation of being bullied and being used as a scapegoat are integrated into the plot. Suicide is broached as the reason for the accident. Alcoholism, and its effect on family, is vividly explored. Also, the importance of high school athletics and the pressure on young adults are examined. But Nolan does not stop there. The topic of systematic sexual assault is even a topic in this fast-paced book.

Through the eyes of Scottie, Nolan provides the reader a glimpse of life as a teenager dealing with major life changes. The book provides hope for other teenagers overwhelmed with the issues of the day. By finding an outlet and focus—ultimate running—Scottie can cope.

Lynn Lamere is a composition instructor at Gulf Coast State College. She grew up in Andalusia, Alabama, and now resides in Miramar Beach, Florida.



Reviewed by Barbara Barcellona Smith

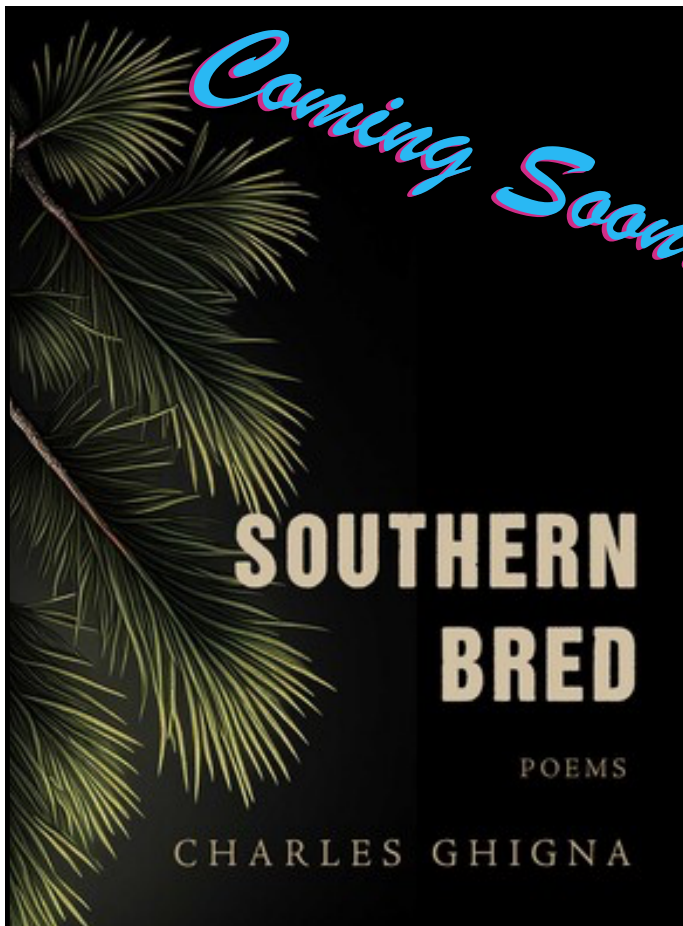
My great pleasure in reviewing author Charles Ghigna's two newest books comes from a mutual respect and admiration for our shared cultural histories. Charles' great-grandfather and my own father both immigrated to America from Italy. Their stories of hardship, grit, and determination contributed to the fabric of our own lives and continue to contribute to the greater fabric of our multicultural society through the stories we write. *Bound to Dream: An Immigrant Story* endears us all to our familial beginnings.

Charles Ghigna was born in New York City and now lives in Homewood, Alabama. He has written over 100 books, including *The Father Goose Treasury of Poetry*, *The Magic Box: A Book of Opposites*, *A Poem Is a Firefly*, and, of course, *Bound to Dream: An Immigrant Story*. His more than 5,000 poems for children and adults have appeared in newspapers, magazines, and anthologies. He speaks at conferences, schools, libraries, and literary events throughout the U.S. and overseas.

Embraced by the warm glow of candlelit illustrations, Ghigna transports young readers to the 1800s, where they follow the journey of young Italian immigrant Carlo from the small, forested village where he milked cows and chopped wood by day and honed his love for adventure and far-away places by night, reading the soft, leathery books he cherished in his small hands. His journey continues as Carlo, older now, bravely embarks across the great Atlantic for a better life in New York. Charles Ghigna's eloquent and transformative words gorgeously and hauntingly capture the immigrant sentiment.



Charles Ghigna



Charles Ghigna, *Bound to Dream*

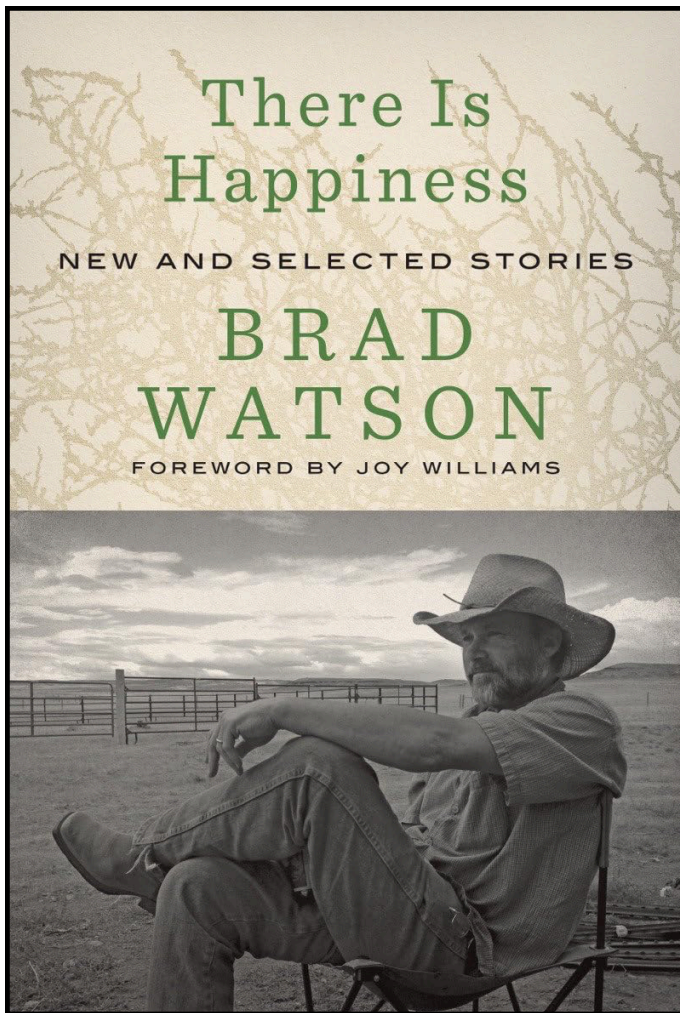
His heartfelt, true story allows children to feel everything from Carlo's excitement and hope for a better future, to his fear and language-restricted loneliness in a new country, and finally to his victory in perseverance as he finds a job learning the beautiful art of bookbinding. Ghigna masterfully shares his Italian history, heritage, and culture. *Bound to Dream: An Immigrant Story* teaches children to bravely pursue their dreams, all the while emphasizing our humanly embedded desire to belong.

"Charles Ghigna's newest books, *Bound to Dream: An Immigrant Story* and *The Magic Box: A Book of Opposites*, triumph in the telling as he masterfully reaches young and early readers alike with poignant elegance and fanciful frivolity."

Equally enchanting, Charles Ghigna captivates early readers with *The Magic Box: A Book of Opposites*. Children delight in following along with Pandora the Panda as she curiously discovers the joys of Days and Nights, the wonders of Big and Small, and the sensations of Hot and Cold! Ghigna cleverly creates an easy learning rhythm with help from the ever-endearing perfect example of opposites – Black and White Pandora! Illustrator Jacqueline East takes a tough concept and draws it easy with her whimsical strokes of colorful genius, putting into visual form the abstract reality of opposites. Young readers can see, feel, and even hear East's illustrations come to life in Ghigna's cleverly written tale of two sides.

Charles Ghigna's newest books, *Bound to Dream: An Immigrant Story* and *The Magic Box: A Book of Opposites*, triumph in the telling as he masterfully reaches young and early readers alike with poignant elegance and fanciful frivolity. Carlo's endearing immigrant story and Pandora's enchanting adventures prove two meaningful and worthy reads for the family this fall.

Barbara Barcellona Smith is the author of *Let's Eat Snails!*



Reviewed by Edward Journey

The astonishing fiction of Brad Watson is available in a new collection, *There Is Happiness: New and Selected Stories*. For readers familiar with Watson's work, the collection includes eight favorite stories published in two previous short story collections – *Last Days of the Dog-Men* (1996) and *Aliens in the Prime of Their Lives* (2010) – and ten new stories.

In addition to his short story collections, Watson, who was born in Meridian, Mississippi, wrote two novels, *The Heaven of Mercury* (2002) and *Miss Jane* (2016), which further illustrate the brilliant and thrilling expanse of his imagination. After receiving a Master of Fine Arts degree in creative writing from the University of Alabama, Brad Watson taught creative writing at various institutions including the University of Alabama, Harvard, and the University of Wyoming. It was recently announced that Watson, who died in 2020, will be inducted into the 2025 class of the Alabama Writers Hall of Fame.

Readers new to Watson's oeuvre will be stunned by the range, humanity, and oddities of *There Is Happiness*. They will find a writer in full command of his skills and unique

vision. And there are plenty of those sublime and heart-breaking dogs; no writer captures the generous and faithful canine personality as generously and faithfully as Brad Watson. Readers who have followed his creative evolution as each new novel or collection appeared will appreciate this opportunity to revisit and to see what came later. There is no contemporary fiction writer whose new work I anticipated more than Watson's.

"Dying for Dolly," the first story in the new collection, starts and ends in prison and never escapes the confines of Alabama. Even so, I was left with the sense of an epic range in a straightforward story of a man who begins his personal rehabilitation by performing onstage with Dolly Parton but is drawn irresistibly back to an out-of-control and manipulating woman (despite Dolly's earnest warning that "That girl's got problems"). The final story, "There Is Happiness," is a fever dream that begins with a horrible car accident with three victims – one dead, one maimed, and one missing – and follows a serial killer who sees marriage and family as "an oppressive, state-sanctioned bondage."

Watson creates visions of alienation and connection which can turn on a phrase. An escaped leopard lurks in the trees with the "godlike invisibility of observation." A family, faced with a distraught father, sits "paralyzed by his grief and our white, Southern, Protestant inability to deal with emotions." A man lounging on his lawn, four months after his wife "died" (she left him, actually), muses that "This is the predatory season for women, when men lie pale and naked in their yards like dazed birds." A grieving widow cannot believe that her husband's death "was God's will, that he had singled out Pops like an assassin." Three women who bonded over miscarriages smoke "self-consciously, like people in the movies" and watch a girl dance gracefully, "like those big girls who were always so good at modern dance in high school." An ex-husband ponders how a once-dazzling couple devolved into two people "trying like craven saints to feel nothing."

The longest story in the book, “Aliens in the Prime of Their Lives,” is the hallucinatory examination of a young married couple, manipulated by aliens in human form, and pulled into a mystifying world of unforeseen wonders and dreams unrequited. Watson finds the humor and humanity in stories of lonely, trapped, and desperate people who are longing, occasionally resilient, or have “realized that they were negligible.”

The dog stories stand out for the ways in which the canine perspective puts human foibles in sharp focus. It is hard to stress enough how wonderful these dogs are as seen through Watson’s sharp eyes. A seeing eye dog waits patiently at a broken traffic light, intently using all of his senses to protect his human charge. A sweet and nervous dog experiences grief and anxiety as she watches her constantly bickering couple break apart. A widow and her beloved, dying dog share an elaborate last meal and a barking dog gets lost in his barking, losing track of why he was barking to begin with.

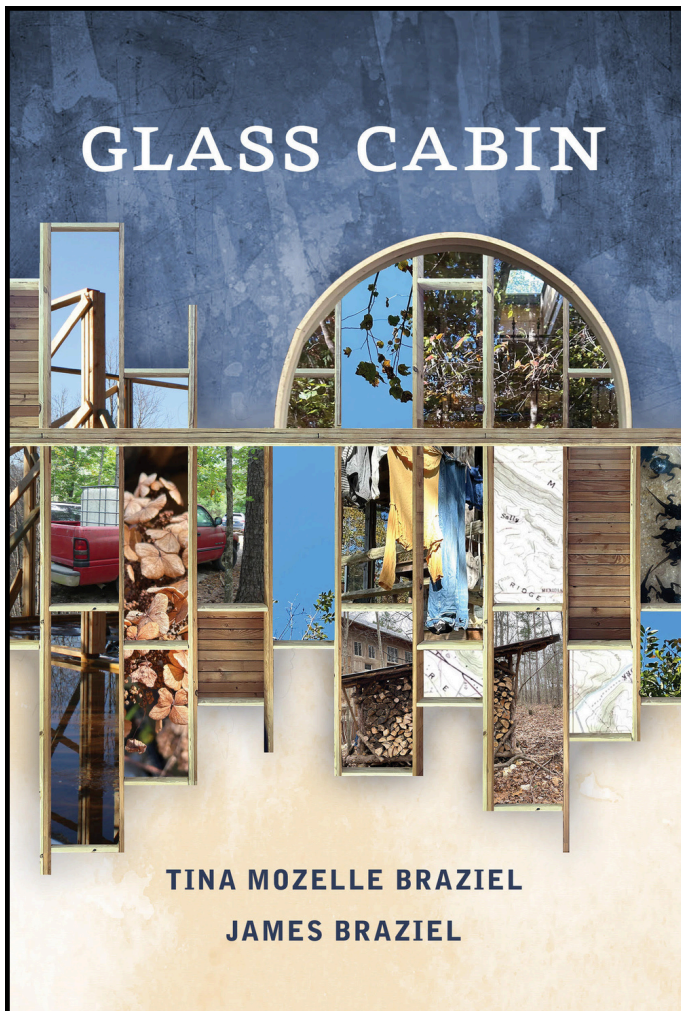
Two stories “in progress” are a reminder that this collection is posthumous. Toward the end of “The Zookeeper and the Leopard,” a “Watson note to self” is included in which the author notes how this section of the novel will be expanded in revision. It is an honor for the reader to be privy to that small hint of the writer’s process and vision. “Crazy Horse,” another story in progress, seems complete as is.

The stories of *There Is Happiness* capture lives that are drowning in the everyday, striving to transcend the morass. With that first collection, *Last Days of the Dog-Men*, Watson set a prodigious standard with a vision that was unique and true. He continued to meet and surpass that standard in the works that followed. *There Is Happiness* is an enduring record of a fearless writer whose work should be treasured.

Edward Journey, a retired university professor and theatre professional living in Birmingham, regularly shares his essays in the online journal “Professional Southerner” (www.professionalsoutherner.com).



The Alabama Writers’ Forum and the Alabama Center for the Book at the University of Alabama invite you to join us on March 7th, 2025 as we induct Brad Watson, Ace Atkins, Frye Gaillard, Joy Harjo, Janice Harrington, Robert McCammon, and Sue Brannan Walker into the Alabama Writers Hall of Fame.



Reviewed by Foster Dickson

Often, when we pick up a book, it's easy to assume that the title could just be figurative, some image or turn of phrase meant to shape our thinking as we approach the work. But in the case of *Glass Cabin*, the title is about as literal as literal can be. This work is a hybrid collection of poetry and prose about a husband and wife who . . . build a glass cabin. Of course, there's more to it than that – in substance and in style – and it is pleasing to share that the writing inside is as complex and nuanced as the title is clear and blunt.

Any home construction project, even a small one, will test a marriage or serious relationship, so knowing that Tina Mozelle Braziel and James (Jim) Braziel worked on this one for thirteen years should result in respect and admiration. And even more so because their experience yielded not only the house, but also this wonderful collection that speaks to us in their alternating voices. To open, Jim explains the circumstances that brought him to a rural site outside of Birmingham in the spring of 2011. Tina soon joins in this labor of “building their home out of secondhand tin, tornado-snapped power poles, and church glass on a waterless ridge.” We meet James's son, as well, and are

carried somewhat ephemerally through the process of the two poets making themselves a home in a place with its own difficulties, natural and manmade.



Photos by Andrea Mabry and Jennifer Alsbrook-Turner. With permission of The Board of Trustees of The University of Alabama for The University of Alabama at Birmingham.



The majority of *Glass Cabin*'s pages contain poems, some by Jim, others by Tina, and a few by both. Most are relatively short lyrics in open forms, while interspersed prose passages nudge the narrative forward, too. Some poems reach back into the poets' lives before they met, and others describe on-site experiences. (A handful could be called love poems, of course.) As we move through, we get to know these two, where they come from and who they are, while getting glimpses of the cutting and hammering, hauling in water, hoping the truck doesn't give out, avoiding insects, and combating rain. In "How to Make a Clearing," early in the collection, Jim gives an account of those challenges and how to meet them. Later, in "Hatches" and "Stair Calculator," Tina narrates the process of making sure that hinges and stairs function properly. Among these construction details, we find literary allusions to Thoreau and Larry Brown and to modern Alabama: poet Ashley M. Jones and the 280 Boogie (in Waverly). For handy reference, there is a glossary in the back for folks who may require a little explanation.

***"We...are carried somewhat ephemerally
through the process of the two poets
making themselves a home in a place with
its own difficulties, natural and manmade."***

Setting aside the substance for a moment to say a word about the style, the writing in *Glass Cabin* is not only interesting, it's well-crafted. The authors commingle clarity and subtlety quite well here. For example, in the poem "Weathermyth," Jim's opening line reads, "My world now is a glass cabin I'm building with my wife," while down the page, we find: "The gods either get you / or they don't. You're either here or you're no longer." Something to ground us, something to think about. In Tina's poem "Right Now," we find descriptions of their work, from "saw screams, spraying sawdust / down my shirt" and "sweat bees stinging / my elbows" to "I'm going under the house to pee / in the bucket." These images, which are clear enough in and of themselves, are listed using irregular line breaks, which seem to mimic the pauses of a winded speaker whose determination keeps her going. All in all, we find in the collection an array of disparate observations, ideas, and emotions brought to us in varied literary forms yet still unified within a group of common themes: home, place, family, love, community, and the work it takes to have and keep those things.

Foster Dickson is a writer, editor, and teacher in Montgomery, Alabama.

Tina Mozelle Braziel and James Braziel, *Glass Cabin*

The book moves through engaging stories of birds and their complex, beautiful, and sometimes quirky behaviors, which increasingly guided her life. When her path led to Madison, Wisconsin, for doctoral studies in natural resources, a fortuitous course assignment to regularly go birding in Warner Park revealed she had a “wall in [her] brain separating nature from anything human.” Birds to the rescue; observing a phoebe taught her to bust down that wall and see interconnections at every turn.

When Warner Park was threatened by development, O’Kane used her avian lessons to fight like hell for its preservation. She found that the bird behavior of mobbing – showing up in large numbers to fend off a threatening predator – works well against a prowling cat in the yard, and against overly-ambitious developers at a City Council meeting.



Trish O’Kane

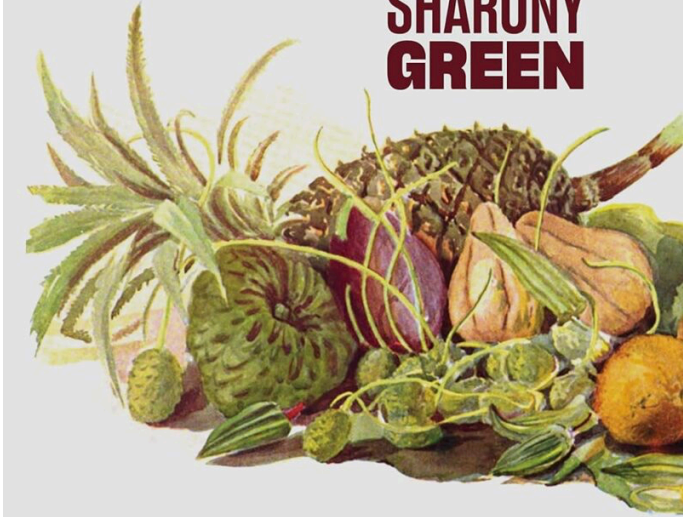
Birding to Change the World will draw you into the beauty and wonder of bird life but be prepared to go deeper. O’Kane’s reflections and compelling life stories will move you beyond what she calls “green feel-goodism” to speak up, show up, and tirelessly toil to save the natural world and, thus, ourselves.

Dr. Bill Deutsch is a Research Fellow, Emeritus at the Auburn University School of Fisheries, Aquaculture and Aquatic Sciences. He is the author of Alabama Rivers: A Celebration & Challenge and Ancient Life in Alabama: The Fossils, the Finders & Why It Matters (www.alabamarocksanddrivers.com).

THE CHASE AND RUINS

ZORA NEALE
HURSTON
IN HONDURAS

SHARONY
GREEN



Reviewed by Jason Gordy Walker

Zora Neale Hurston, known the world over for *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, struggled to maintain literary relevance after the Harlem Renaissance. Disappointed in her friend Langston Hughes—who had planned to additionally credit their typist for their collaborative play *Mule Bone*, against the wishes of Hurston, whose life was the basis for it—this great writer, respected as much for her anthropological work as her fiction, left the U.S. for Honduras in 1947. Her goal? To find a lost Mayan ruin while writing her last novel, *Seraph on the Suwanee*. Sharony Green, an associate professor at the University of Alabama and a poet, children’s book author, and composer of other critical and historical texts such as *Remember Me to Miss Louisa: Hidden Black-White Intimacies in Antebellum America*, has penned a highly researched, engaging account of Hurston’s expedition. Unlike some books of history, Green’s prose doesn’t dry up; it moves quickly, and it entertains as often as it informs.

One of the book’s epigraphs, quoted from Hurston, summarizes her experience: “Except for the waters of the Gulf being a most godly blue, the voyage was uneventful.”

Although Hurston’s adventure left her expectations unfulfilled, it nevertheless helped her grow as a writer and a person. In Honduras, she had space to focus on her novel, away from the stress of U.S. racism and the petty conflicts of her literary circles. Green notes that, with *Seraph*, Hurston aimed to write a novel that would “make it big in Hollywood...”; surprisingly, this novel’s main characters are poor whites—more specifically, as Hurston biographer Valerie Boyd put it, “the Florida crackers of the swamps and turpentine camps.” Green states that “[t]his tactic was...her way of contesting the rules that said African Americans should never write about white people.” In short, Hurston wanted to make some money, restore her reputation, and challenge herself to write about a new subject. As was often the case for Hurston, her friends and colleagues accused her of catering too much to white America. Although *Seraph* was not focused on the people of Honduras, it gave Hurston an excuse to go somewhere where she could strengthen her creative energy and experience new landscapes.

“Well worth several reads, Green’s book sways the reader into a deeper appreciation of an often misunderstood and underappreciated American genius, one of the best to have ever emerged from Alabama, Zora Neale Hurston.”

Hurston failed to discover the Mayan ruins, but Green reports: “She knew the ruins she longed to see existed.” Modern scientists did not locate the “pyramids, mounds, and long plazas that had presumably sat untouched for centuries” until 2015. If Hurston had found the ruins, or even a single ruin, one can imagine her career may have ended on a lighter note. Instead, when she returned to the States, she was falsely accused of molesting a boy and arrested by New York police. Fortunately, the charges were dropped, but the debacle had an overwhelming effect on Hurston. She felt betrayed “not only by Black people but by the United States.”

In Honduras, she could express her privilege as a U.S. citizen, and she had a power advantage over the locals. Not so much in her home country. To escape the drama that made her want to die, she traveled with a boat captain to the Bahamas. She started a new novel, *The Lives of Barney Turk*, about a white man who traveled to Honduras from Florida. The novel was never published and disappeared entirely. Hurston died penniless, utterly alone, unknown to almost everyone around her. Years later, writers like Alice Walker promoted her work. Since then, her reputation has flourished, though she could still be better known in Alabama, where she was born.

In addition to providing piercing insight into Hurston's life during her Honduras excursion and its aftermath, Green amply describes the banana trade in Central America, Mayan history, Hurston's Florida, and the history of race relations in America. The bibliography section is extensive and an important resource for students and academics specializing in Zora Neale



Sharony Green

Hurston or African American studies in general. Green integrates archival sources from the Newberry Library, the George A. Smathers Libraries at the University of Florida, and the map collection at the Library of Congress. The photographs and maps Green includes—a young Zora wearing a white blouse with a black scarf, a map tracing her movements from Mobile, Alabama to Honduras, and an elegant photo of Mazapan, La Ceiba, Honduras—enhance the text's validity, adding plenty of context to the large amount already available.

With *The Chase and Ruins: Zora Neale Hurston in Honduras*, Sharony Green has given us a hyper-specific scholarly text that ought to be studied by current and future researchers and casual Hurston fans alike. Although this era of Hurston's life may be deemed slight compared to her peak during the Harlem Renaissance, the reader will undoubtedly gain fresh insights into Hurston, the author, and Hurston, the woman. Well worth several reads, Green's book sways the reader into a deeper appreciation of an often misunderstood and underappreciated American genius, one of the best to have ever emerged from Alabama, Zora Neale Hurston.

Jason Gordy Walker is a poet, translator, and prose writer who lives in Alabama. His reviews and interviews have appeared or are forthcoming in Birmingham Poetry Review, Poetry Northwest, and elsewhere. He has received scholarships from the New York State Summer Writers Institute, among other institutions, and holds an MFA from the University of Florida.



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