First Draft

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Lesa Shaul interviews 2026 Harper Lee Award Winner Ace Atkins

Edward Journey on the surprise new release from Harper Lee

ALABAMA AWF WRITERS' FORUM

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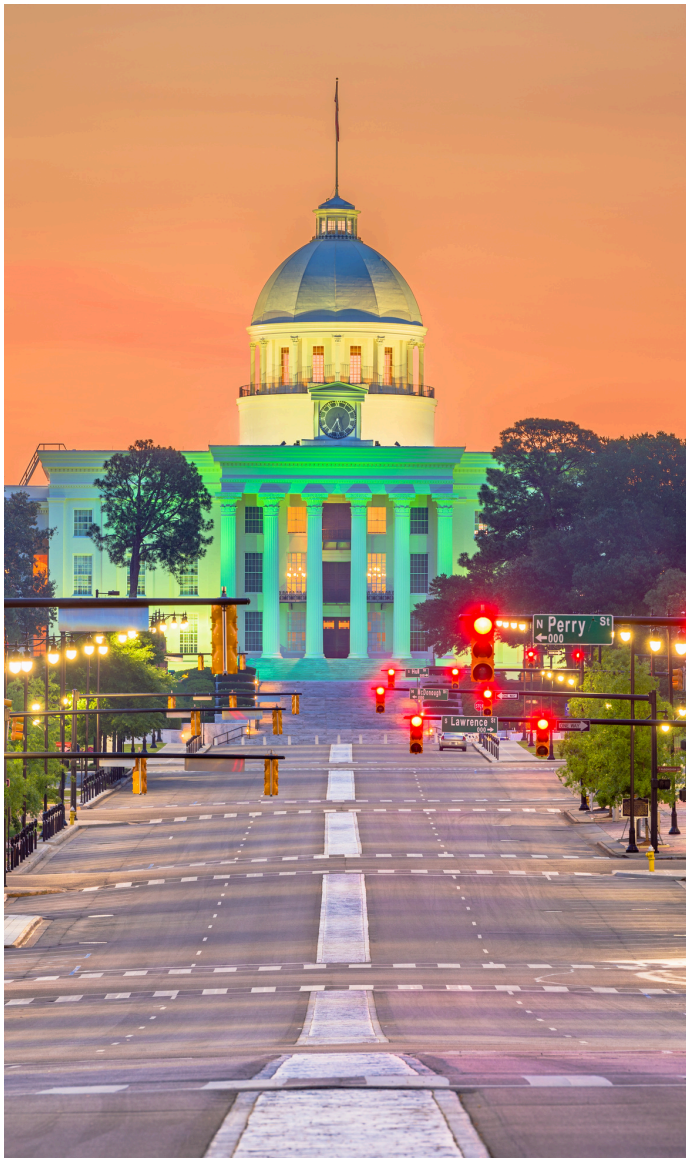
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From the Executive Director

This issue of *First Draft Magazine*, the third since our relaunch, is our most important yet. Our good friend Lesa Shaul catches up with the prolific Ace Atkins – fresh off his induction into the Alabama Writers Hall of Fame – who was recently named the 2026 Harper Lee Award Winner. Tom Spencer, author of the new smash hit *Mystery of the Crooked Man*, recommends his five favorite murder mysteries. And, most importantly, we feature in this issue a work of bona fide journalism as Edward Journey asks the hard questions about the surprise new release from Alabama's "secular saint," Harper Lee.

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Your friend,



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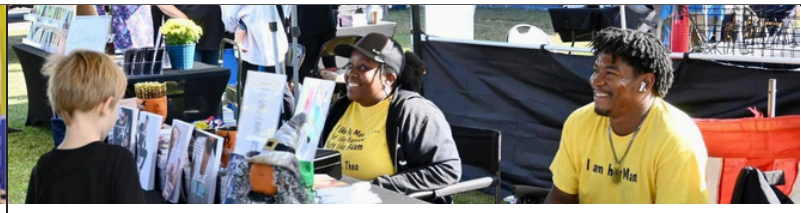
UPCOMING EVENTS

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Kentuck Festival of the Arts | October 11th - 12th

The Kentuck Festival of the Arts is an annual event that celebrates creativity, culture, and community in **Tuscaloosa**. Now settled into its new location at Snow Hinton Park, this nationally recognized festival attracts over 15,000 visitors from across the country for a weekend filled with inspiring art, live entertainment, and hands-on experiences. Be sure to stop by the Kathryn Tucker Windham Spoken Word Stage. This year's lineup includes Charlie "Tin Man" Lucas, Tom Franklin, Ace Atkins, Trudier Harris, Sandra K. Barnidge, Ashley M. Jones, & more!



Foothills Book Festival | October 11th

The Foothills Book Festival, formerly the Sumiton Book Festival, returns for its third year on October 11, 2025, at the Jasper Civic Center in **Jasper**. Founded by indie authors Laren Ruby and Willow Morgan, the Foothills Book Festival aims to connect readers with local authors. This year's lineup includes Forum members Bob McGough, Kerry Madden-Lunsford, Matt Nagin, Alison Robinson, Matthew Weber, and Rich Partain, and dozens more authors and vendors.



People Reading Prose in Bars | October 12th

Birmingham writer Audrey Atkins, producer of the radio program Arts Fell on Alabama, hosts this monthly open-mic style reading event for prose writers. Join us at Mayawell Bar in **Birmingham** (2900 4th Ave. S.) on Sunday, October 12. Sign up starts at 5 pm. Follow "People Reading Prose in Bars" on Facebook and Instagram for updates and to join this enthusiastic community of prose writers!



Jeanie Thompson & Larry Mitchell | October 21st

Master poet Jeanie Thompson teams up with Grammy Award-winning talent Larry Mitchell for a special music project based on her award-winning collection of verse titled *The Myth of Water*. In the new work, eight poems recast into songs tell the amazing story of author/activist Helen Keller and her native Alabama. Larry Mitchell's original compositions worked to Thompson's verse is a magical combination. Come enjoy a tuneful evening of joy and reflection with Thompson and Mitchell at The NewSouth Bookstore in **Montgomery** on Tuesday, October 21, at 5:30 pm.



Monroeville Literary Festival | February 26th - 28th

Part author's festival, part family reunion, the Monroeville Book Festival, held every year in the courtroom made famous by *To Kill a Mockingbird,* is a great excuse to enjoy "Monroeville's famous brand of hospitality." This long-running literary festival brings Alabama's literary community together over a long weekend in **Monroeville** for "captivating readings, enlightening discussions, [and] amusing conversations." This year's lineup includes 2026 Harper Lee Award Winner Ace Atkins. Stay tuned for news about the 2026 Truman Capote Winner, who is soon to be announced.



Mobile Literary Festival | March 7th

The 2026 Mobile Literary Festival will be held at the Ben May Main Library (701 Government Street) in **Mobile** on March 7, 2026. This year will mark the tenth anniversary of this free festival and writers' conference. The Mobile Literary Festival is currently accepting applications for volunteer faculty to share their knowledge of the craft of writing and tips on the publishing process. Follow "Mobile Literary Festival" on Facebook for more information.

ACE ATKINS

On Southern Fiction, the Writer's Life, and Winning the Harper Lee Award



Ace Atkins and Lesa Shaul in Oxford, Mississipi

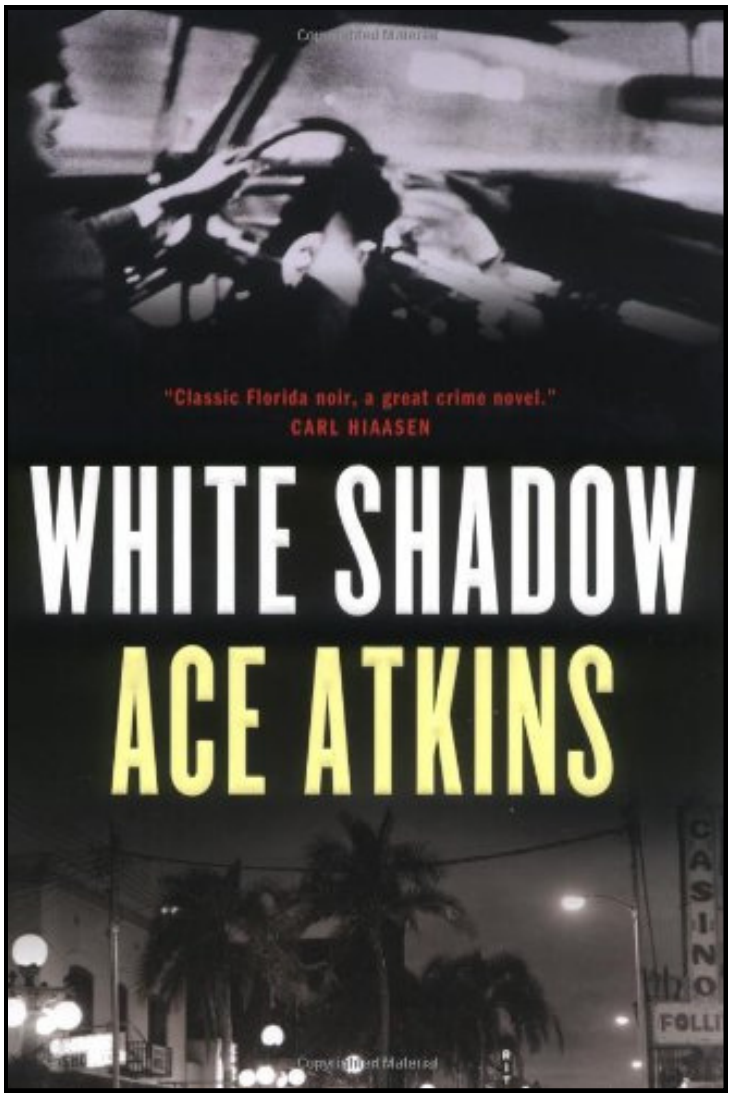
INTERVIEWED BY LESA SHAUL

In August of this year, I drove from Tuscaloosa to Oxford, Mississippi, to interview Ace Atkins, who was inducted into the Alabama Writers Hall of Fame in March. He has been selected as the Harper Lee Award winner for Alabama's Distinguished Writer of the Year for 2026, and he will receive this award at the Monroeville Literary Festival in April of next year. We sat in his office, which overlooks the legendary Square in downtown Oxford, and chatted for about an hour about writing, Southern fiction, music, and the challenges of being a writer in the age of declining readership and artificial intelligence. Afterwards, we went for lunch at the Ajax Diner, where I was served enough fried catfish, fried okra, and macaroni and cheese to feed me for three days.

Shaul: You were born in Troy, Alabama, is that correct? Your dad was a coach there for a long time.

Atkins: Yes, he was head football coach.

Shaul: You attended Auburn High School and then Auburn University, where you—I know you probably hear this all the time--were on the team that played "the perfect season" in 1993. And you were on the cover of *Sports Illustrated*, which is a great shot. I was familiar with that photo before I even knew who you were. I come from an Auburn family, even though I graduated from That Other School.



Atkins: [laughs] That's okay—you're forgiven.

Shaul: Then you were a crime reporter in Tampa, Florida, at the *Tampa Tribune*, where you were nominated for a Pulitzer for your coverage of the events that you later fictionalized in *White Shadow*.

Atkins: I wrote a series called "Tampa Confidential," and it was a ten-part series. It was almost like a novella, that really could have been fleshed out into a book, about a woman who had died under mysterious circumstances in 1956.

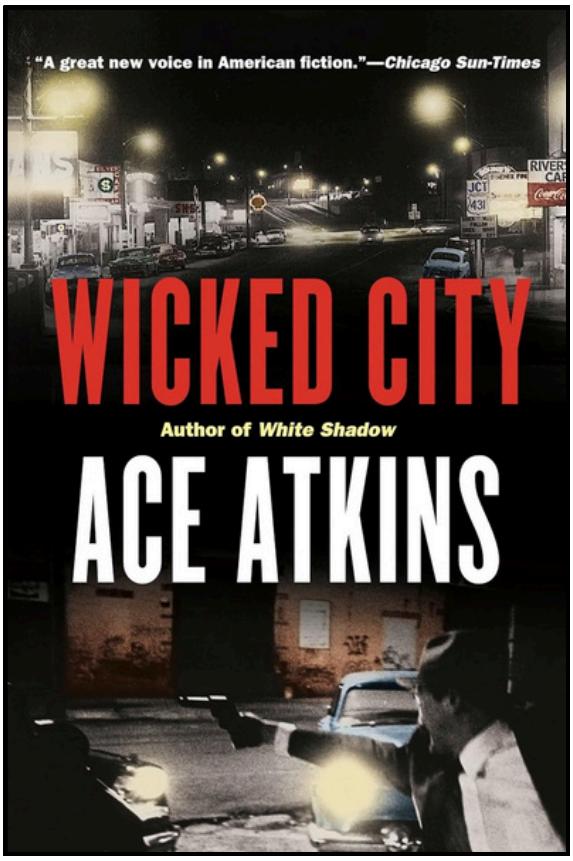
Shaul: Was it like the Black Dahlia of Tampa?

Atkins: It wasn't as sordid. This case caused a media sensation in 1956, and nobody ever found out what really happened. This woman was admitted to a hospital. She had been severely beaten, and she died in the hospital. No one knew what had happened to her. I requested the police records. In the late 90s, I ended up finding one of the detectives who worked the case as well as newspaper reporters who had covered the case. I found the woman's best friend, who miraculously was still alive. I found people who were still angry about me asking questions about it, even though it was forty years later. That's the tricky part about covering the recent past.

You and I were talking when you first arrived about *Wicked City*, which is about the assassination of Albert Patterson in Phenix City in 1954. Well, I was doing a book event in Birmingham at the, I don't exactly remember, but I think it was the Birmingham Athletic Club or something, back in 2017, and this elderly gentleman stood up, leaning on his cane. He looked at me and said, "How dare you make Arch Ferrell look so terrible! He was a fine man. Why did you have to point the finger at Arch Ferrell?" I thought, "Boy, it's like Faulkner said, 'The past is never dead. It's not even past.'"

Shaul: So after crime reporting, you turned to fiction?

Atkins: Well, simultaneously. I was still in the newsroom, and I was a full-time reporter. But what I really wanted to do was, I wanted to be a novelist. I thought the best way to do that was to gain a great deal more life experience. I had been a football player, but I was very young, in my early 20s, and I knew you needed life experience to be able to write the kind of novels I wanted to write. So at that time, I was reading a lot of crime novels. I love crime novels. I'm a huge fan of Elmore Leonard, Carl Hiaasen, James W. Hall.



Many of the novels I loved were set in Florida and based on real crimes down in Florida. So after I graduated from Auburn, I found that there were openings for reporters in the Tampa Bay area, so I went down there. After being part-time for a while, I eventually became a full-time newspaper reporter, doing the crime beat. It exposed me to a world that I would never have been a part of as just a student or studying fiction or going to jails. Every morning, I got up and I went to the police department and talked to the detectives. Usually in Tampa, there was a murder almost every day or every other day. There were kidnappings. I interviewed a serial killer.

Shaul: Did you ever go over to Ybor City?

Atkins: All the time. Ybor City was my beat. I covered the sheriff's office and police department. I covered court trials. I covered the U.S. Marshal Service and the FBI. Every day was an adventure. I would arrive at work and someone would say, "Oh, they just found a body in the Hillsborough River. Get down there." There was intrigue with internal affairs investigations. There was just everything. You met everybody. You met people from extreme poverty to people that lived in very wealthy neighborhoods in Tampa. You covered cases involving old money in Tampa. You crossed sections with the Cuban community. I mean, it was an education. And of course, being in the middle of all that Florida stuff, what I really wanted to do was write about the Deep South, while Florida seems like another country.

Shaul: I get that. Texas is the same way. I lived in the Dallas/ Fort Worth area for several years, and it was almost like there was this divide: Fort Worth was the West, and Dallas was the South. I went to a couple of wedding receptions at the Mansion at Turtle Creek, and I was like, "This could be in Mobile or Savannah or somewhere like that."

Atkins: You know the same thing happens with parts of Louisiana. North Louisiana is not that different from Mississippi, but New Orleans is its own place. But writing about the criminal elements in Florida, that was my education. I also had the great privilege of working with some very tough editors and people who really challenged me and taught me to write fast, and to write to the best of my ability, and to get it right the first time. And it was terrific. Also, I had no way of knowing then that my time as a reporter, that was the end of that business. I was there in the 90s, and newspapers were still central to journalism. The internet was something that people were like, "Oh, I wonder what's going to happen here." I was working in a very long, proud tradition, and I can't underscore enough what an education it was.

Shaul: I'm going to switch gears a little bit, talking about where we grew up and the stories that we heard growing up. Robert Penn Warren once said, "History is not truth. The truth is in the telling."

Atkins: I think Warren wrote the finest Southern novel of all time.

Shaul: *All the King's Men*?

Atkins: I don't think it gets any better than that.

Shaul: That's my favorite, too, that one and *World Enough and Time*. Great storytelling is part of being Southern. I first heard about the 1951 Kilpatrick shooting when I was just a kid. I was about a decade younger than my sisters and all my cousins, so at family get-togethers, I didn't have anyone to play with. So while they went off and did teenage things, I'd hide under the dinner table and listen to the adults talk. And that's how I heard some pretty salacious stuff. Like I would go to school and ask, "What does it mean to be born on the wrong side of the sheets?" My teacher would be like, "What?" So, growing up, did you hear similar stories, like about Phenix City?

Atkins: I did, but I heard it in very hushed tones. My mother was one of those Southern women who did not like to talk about unpleasant things. She thought that was very unsavory, that was something you did not talk about. But I know that any time we would get too close to Phenix City or drive through Phenix City on the way from Auburn to Columbus, my mother would say, "Oh, my gosh. If they ever drain the Chattahoochee River, how many bodies are they going to find?" And, "Oh, Phenix City. Your grandfather used to go there." My mother told me that she remembers going fishing with my grandfather when she was a child and watching him do an exchange of cash outside the back of their car. She watched as cash was being transferred from one car to another. My grandfather was an engineer who worked for the Highway Department around Phenix City in the 50s. There's no doubt he knew all those people that I wrote about in *Wicked City*. There's no doubt that he knew some deep truths about that time and place and what it was really like. My grandfather liked to drink. He was a storyteller. He knew Hank Williams. My mom would also tell me stories from her childhood in Alexander City. There was a famous disc jockey that lived across the street from her family, a guy named Bob McKenna. Back then, you had radio stations that would broadcast across a huge region. And so Hank Williams would come through and visit Bob McKenna, and they would drink and hang out. And she remembers seeing his Cadillac parked outside and remembers my grandfather going over there to have a drink with him. That's a good Alabama story.

"IF THEY EVER DRAIN THE CHATTACHOOCHEE RIVER, HOW MANY BODIES ARE THEY GOING TO FIND?"

Shaul: That's a very good Alabama story. I guess now, if Hank were alive, he'd be dropping by to do a podcast.

Atkins: Probably so.

Shaul: What is it about Southern noir that you're drawn to, if I may use that phrase, because I think it describes a lot of your work?

Atkins: I talk about Southern noir a lot. I like talking about Southern noir, even though I don't really think my books, besides maybe *Wicked City*

are really Southern noirs. I think I have elements of noir, but when I first got started, people didn't quite know how to talk about what I'd call Southern crime fiction. For a while, it was called Grit Lit.

Shaul: Like Larry Brown?

Atkins: Yes. Larry Brown was a good friend of mine. People didn't really know how to talk about that genre, so Southern noir became a blanket term. I think noir, in its truest sense, usually portrays people with no way out, so there's not a lot of heroics in noir. I tend to have some heroes within a nest, in the den of iniquity. That's the method I used in the Quinn Colson books. When I was writing *Wicked City*, I found Phenix City to be a lot more complicated subject than people were making it out to be. It wasn't just the citizens standing up for justice, and some of the citizens who were standing up for change were not necessarily the best people, either. But anyway, I carried that stuff over into the Quinn Colson books. I wanted to do a story about a modern-day Phenix City. Instead of a city, it was a county.

Shaul: Is that your Yoknapatawpha?

Atkins: Well, it was funny. If you really get into the nerdy Faulkner stuff, you can find where the original land deed [for Yoknapatawpha County] was from Chief Issatibbehah. So I named my county that. I have a Northern editor, and he said, "Ace, could you just give us something that people can pronounce?" So I shortened it to Tibbehah.

Shaul: When I read *The Ranger*, the first of the Quinn Colson books, back in 2011, I was delighted with all the Faulkner "Easter eggs" that I found throughout. Quinn Colson sounds a lot like Quentin Compson. Quinn's wayward sister is, of course, named Caddy. But the one I loved most, I guess because of where I'm from, was Lena, the pregnant teenager who had "come a fur piece" from Alabama looking for the boy who had knocked her up.

Atkins: I guess maybe a handful of people ever recognize that stuff. I think one of them was Don Noble, that I just put those Easter eggs in there.

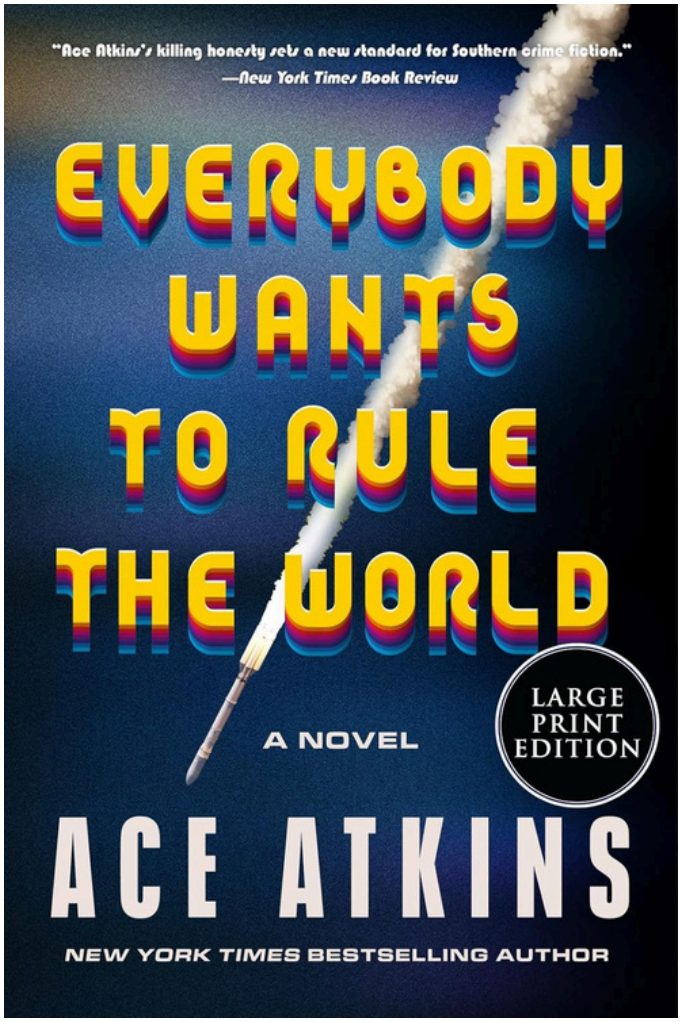
Shaul: A lot of the bad guys in your novels, they're meth dealers. They're white supremacists. They're greedy, like the bad Snopeses in Faulkner's fiction. I see Flem Snopes in characters like Johnny Stagg.

Atkins: There are things that I had to truncate to make them work in the novel that I wanted to write. But most of the characters in *The Ranger* are real people that have been fictionalized in real events. And I think that goes back to being a newspaper reporter. Anything that I mentioned in the Quinn Colson books has a thread of truth or a real person in mind. Things that I would find, and I would file away, and I would think, "Boy, this is a Quinn Colson book." And so the villains were found as real people. They're recognizable. We can walk over to the jail right now and find them. Faulkner used to do that. He would walk where we are right now, sitting right off the Square, and you hear the bell striking one at the courthouse. He famously would sit on those benches outside the courthouse and just eavesdrop on people. And nowadays, if you go on Wednesdays, Wednesday is drug court. Oh, wow. And if I were to sit outside on Wednesdays, for long enough here on the Square, I'd have enough material for twenty novels. You just have to listen.

Shaul: Music suffuses your work from your first novel, *Crossroads Blues*, to your most recently published novel, *Don't Let the Devil Ride*. I'm sure the title of your forthcoming novel, *Everybody Wants to Rule the World*, alludes to the Tears for Fears song released in 1985, which is the year the novel is set. I wanted to ask you, where and when did your love of music begin?

Atkins: I think maybe a lot of novelists are frustrated musicians. When I was a kid, I wanted to take guitar lessons, and I did a little bit. I was in an orchestra. I have always loved music. I'm a big movie guy as well, and I come from a background that emphasized athletics, so I think of things very somatically, and I think of things very musically, too. For me, music has always been a companion to the writing. It's always been something that when I think about a story, I almost have the soundtrack worked out beforehand. Like with *Wicked City*, it's Hank Williams. Hank was playing those honky tonks back in that era in Phenix City. For Quinn Colson, it's always classic country—it's George Jones, Tammy Wynette, Charlie Pride, and Waylon Jennings. Having the soundtrack in my head for the novel I'm working on gives me a sense of the aesthetics of the book. It gives me a sense of the book's feel, its tone, which is, to me, the most important thing.

Shaul: You and I are roughly the same age, the same generational cohort. I grew up listening to Jim Reeves and Patsy Cline and Marty Robbins, Tennessee Ernie Ford's Greatest Gospel Hits. Sometimes my parents had something else like Herb Alpert and the Tijuana Brass. That music seemed pretty exotic, at least by Sand Mountain standards back then. My first "grown-up" album was *Rumours* by Fleetwood Mac, which my sister gave me when I was nine. She's older than I am, so I listened to a lot of 70s rock. Then MTV



came along and shaped my musical tastes in the 80s. In the 90s, I was in Athens, Georgia, which was everything a music lover could want.

Atkins: Oh, wow. You got all the good stuff.

Shaul: I did indeed. I just didn't really appreciate it then the way I do now.

Atkins: I think the thing about being a Southern writer is that we're always steeped in this idea that when you write about the South, it has to be the South of Flannery O'Connor and Hank Williams and William Faulkner. In that sense, I've written some very Southern stories. *Wicked City* and many of the Quinn Colson books are very inspired by Flannery O'Connor's idea of the grotesque, and the music of Hank Williams and Faulkner references and all that, but it's complicated for people of our generation

because I think we were taught, if you're going to write about the South, you're writing about it in a Willie Morris way, like “I remember when the boys came home from the war” or somebody writing about growing up on the farm. My dad did. His dad did. He was a sharecropper’s son. He had to drop out of school in eighth grade because they needed his help on the farm. His dad ran moonshine. But that was not my generation. I can write about that through family history, family stories. That's what brings me to *Everybody Wants to Rule the World*. I can write about my era, my generation, but is it “Southern?” I don't know. I mean, it was Atlanta in the 80s, but it seems like only geographically is it Southern. I see some writers being drawn a little bit into trying to grit up their experience. I think there's people like Larry Brown who were and are writing it as they lived it. But I lived in the suburbs in Georgia in the 80s. My dad grew up as hard scrabble as you could get. I have pictures of my dad that look like something by Walker Evans. But in my teenage years, I'm sitting there in the afternoon in the air conditioning, watching Prince on MTV. I really wanted to write these deeply Southern stories because of the connection to Southern fiction, family history, that thing. But I think that this new book is really the most autobiographical book that I've ever done. No, I didn't grow up plowing with a mule. My dad did. My dad was Faulknerian.

Shaul: And so, ending on an apocalyptic note here, what do you see as the greatest threat to future generations of writers, A.I. large language models or the shrinking reading public?

Atkins: I think probably both. It's funny, and I don't necessarily mean this with younger people. I really have hope because I see younger people picking up books because I think older people are the most susceptible to technology and gadgets or whatever. We have a bookstore here in Oxford called Square Books, Jr., and it’s great to see kids that are interested in books and reading. I think that that's very positive, and I'm excited about that. But yes, people don't read books as much anymore. People's attention span is minuscule.

My mother passed away earlier this year, and I was going through her books. She had a collection from the 70s and 80s, a lot of James Clavell books. And I thought, “I don't think anybody would read a 1,200-page book anymore.” I don't think that they have the stamina. I mean, my grandfather and my father read entire newspapers. We are losing so much in the way of intelligence and critical thinking.

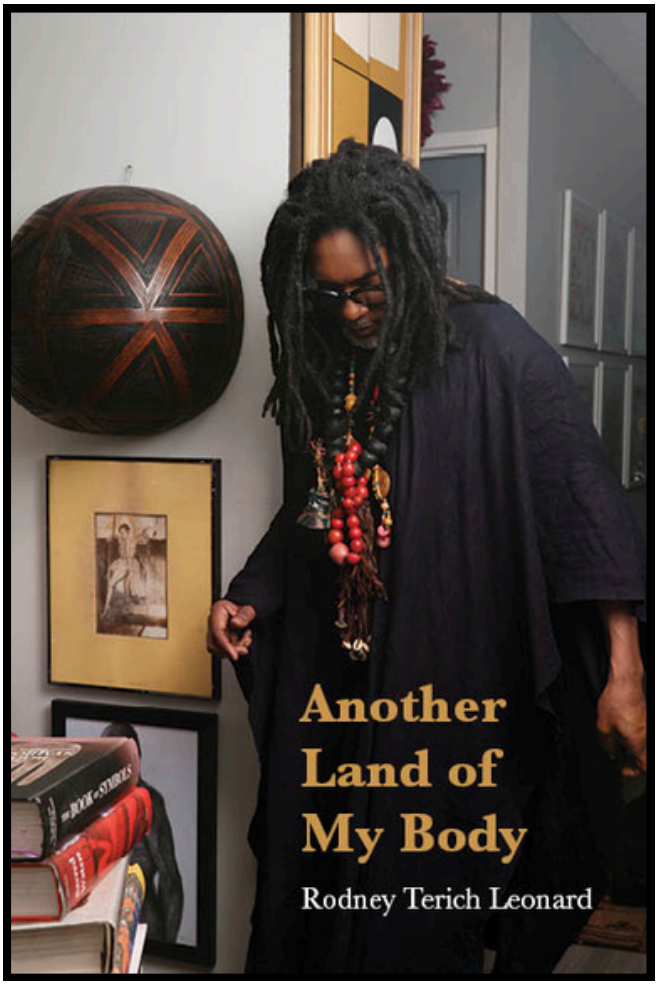
Shaul: Call me old school, but I think that writers, especially professional writers, using A. I. is just, well, lazy.

Atkins: It is lazy. Our brains are going to atrophy. I don't even like to use Spell Check. I still use a dictionary because I like to challenge myself to make sure that I get everything right, because when I was working as a reporter, you had to make sure things were right. If you go on Amazon, there are a lot of A. I.-generated books that are created by algorithms. You just plug in a topic, and the A. I. does the rest. So, yeah, it is a threat. It's something that I try not to think about too much, but it's scary. But the scariest thing is that it’s not only lazy, it's dangerous. Just watch the *Terminator* movies.

Shaul: Well, thank you so much, Mr. Atkins. It's been a pleasure to talk to you. We're going to eat, right?

Atkins: Let's go eat. That's a perfect way to end the conversation.

***Lesa Carnes Shaul spent the first eighteen years of her life in a small town atop Sand Mountain in northeastern Alabama. She is a professor of English at the University of West Alabama and author of* Midnight Cry: A Shooting on Sand Mountain.**



Reviewed by Jason McCall

To live in Alabama is to live with death as a next-door neighbor. Among the states, only West Virginia and Mississippi rank below Alabama in life expectancy, and only Arkansas and Mississippi have higher infant mortality rates. The statistics for Alabama relating to standards like poverty and healthcare are similarly bleak. These dire realities leave many of Alabama's citizens with a set of choices: accept Alabama as a doomed place, escape Alabama and leave all connections to the state behind, or find a way to live and thrive in the face of all the horrors and history connected to the state.

In Rodney Terich Leonard's poetry collection *Another Land of My Body*, he gives readers an array of bodies that are in different relationships with the land and with death. For example, in "Nary a Thimble for Young Sadness," Leonard's speaker laments the death of Nigel Shelby, a Black teen in Huntsville who committed suicide due to the abuse he received for being openly gay. The first line of the poem— "Huntsville. Gay & out & bullied" shows Leonard's talent for giving his readers an immediate setting and atmosphere in his poems. This poem wants readers to see Shelby as a connection to the histories of violence in Alabama and the United States, but it also wants readers to see that Shelby was never alone and is never alone. The speaker of the poem creates a kinship with Shelby when he says, "Born under the same moon, counties & storms apart / This scar above my ribs, the geography of people / yanking me for being me." The speaker could have been Nigel Shelby. The poem connects Shelby to the speaker of the poem, but also to boys like Emmett Till and Tamir Rice, who were never allowed to have a full childhood due to the violence America is often ready to level against Black boys.

Death comes in other forms throughout *Another Land of My Body*. There is the threat of death due to racial violence and homophobic violence, but many poems focus on the threat of death that came with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. In "One Wall Away a Woman Dies of COVID-19," Leonard puts readers in the middle of the dread and doom of the pandemic when the poem gives us a voice repeating "Uncle Nestor Uncle Nestor Uncle Nestor Uncle / Nestor Uncle Nestor Uncle Nestor Uncle Nestor" for the first 34 lines of the poem. The poem doesn't say if the woman is calling for Uncle Nestor to join her in the world of the living or the world of the dead, but the constant calling out serves as a haunting reminder of the separation caused by the pandemic. The specter of COVID-19 appears again in poems like "Ms. Clematine & Ms. Bessie Will of Rockford & Alexander City, Alabama." The poem gives readers a narrative of how the two women struggle and eventually succumb to the virus. From the early parts of the poem, when "COVID pumped up

on these sisters / With their pre-Parkinson's / & hypertension" to the end of their lives when "Clematine trucked to Flowers Hospital in Dothan. / Bessie Will refused Mobile. / Bessie Will went home & gasped." However, the strongest lines of the poem are its opening ones: "Quick sad corridor care without Kleenex & wipes. / They paid taxes in an American town with six ICU beds." These lines show that Clematine and Bessie, like many other people in Alabama and nationwide, were in dire situations before the pandemic. If COVID-19 didn't end them, they still faced a healthcare system that had left them behind. The mention of taxes in those opening lines also points to a supposed agreement between citizens and a government, but the poem shows how governments often don't live up to those agreements.

Faced with the longstanding traditions of racial and sexual violence and the new horrors of COVID-19, a weaker collection might present the reader with a speaker only filled with rage or despair. However, Leonard shows readers a speaker who refuses to succumb to the dangers around him. The title poem, "Another Land of My Body," starts with the following:

An abrupt ravine.
I learned another land of my body.
Packaged trauma—
Eleven orchids refusing mist.
Maimed to the bone.

There's violence in the opening of the poem— "Packaged trauma," "Maimed to the bone"—but the poem moves to show how want and desire can exist despite the violence. The poem ends with the following:

He rocked a red cap backwards.
My pinkie strolled across corduroy.
Grown shame is shame groomed.
Here I can't say what I sometimes crave.
Hunger is one of my songs.



Rodney Terich Leonard
Photo courtesy of Four Way Books

The poem closes with music, and, of course, music can be either a celebration or a memorial. Music can hold joy or pain. The hunger at the end of the poem receives no modifier, so readers can take this hunger as an all-encompassing hunger that will not be quenched or silenced by traumas or societal threats. This ending also brings to mind Frederick Douglass's statements on Black music in his autobiography. Douglass recounts how he has heard people compliment the pleasant sounds of enslaved Black people singing. Douglass says this is a misconception. He states that the music of enslaved Black people is a music of hurt and sadness, but it takes an understanding of enslaved Black people to truly understand the music. In this poem, part of the hunger seems not just to be a hunger for another body, but a hunger for a land where the songs out of the speaker's mouth can find ears that understand.

This want for connection ultimately leads readers out of the collection. "What's New at 50?," the final poem of the collection, features a speaker contemplating mortality and possibility. The poem ends with this:

Alone, nothing aches. This year
In the dream the woman I've seen

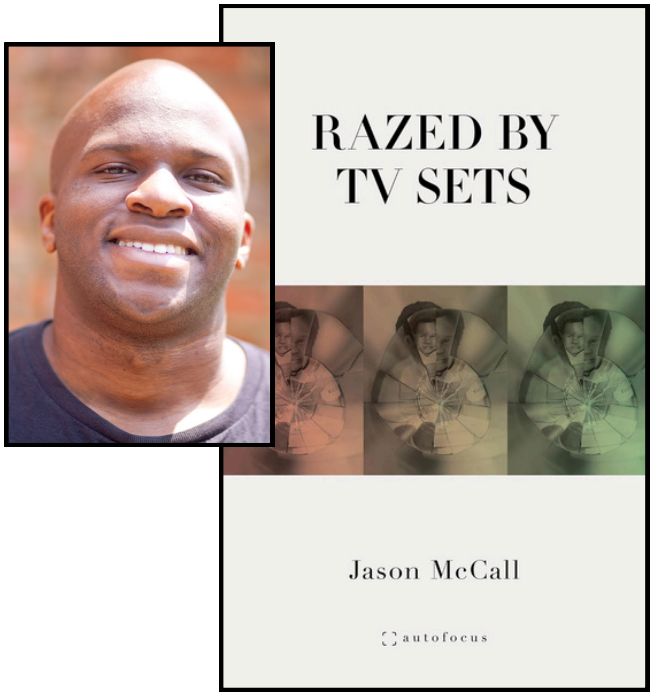
Since 12 has one leg & a new porch.
I want a mate who can write my Obituary.

I'm at my retrospective.
Let me call you back.

The final poem gives readers two possible paths forward for the poem's speaker. There's the choice of loneliness, a solitary life where "nothing aches," and there's the choice of a life with "a mate who can write my Obituary." These paths lead to a different life and a different death. A painless and lonely life or a life of desire and searching filled with the perils that desire and searching can bring. However, the pressure of this choice is diffused by the last line of "Let me call you back." The speaker is not in a hurry to choose one lane or the other. In the end, even with the pressures of aging and death pressing from every corner of the collection, the speaker chooses to move on his own schedule. When he's ready to choose his next stage in life, he will let the world know. He will call back on his own terms.

Another Land of My Body reminds me of what it's like to travel the world and carry the history of Alabama with me. But the collection also reminds me of some of my favorite epic poems. In *Beowulf*, the titular hero descends into the hellish swamp to confront Grendel's mother. In Homer's *Odyssey*, Odysseus travels to Hades and must listen to the pain of his dead friends in his quest to gain the information he needs to finally return home to Ithaca. In *Another Land of My Body*, Leonard's speaker takes readers on a journey through a type of underworld filled with broken promises and broken bodies. However, like the heroes in many of the old epics, Leonard's speaker climbs out of the underworld with a new knowledge of how to appreciate his body and new tools to help him survive. And through reading *Another Land of My Body*, readers can find new ways to define their own relationships with their bodies and homelands, along with finding new paths for their own survival.

Jason McCall holds an MFA from the University of Miami. His recent collections include the essay collection* Razed by TV Sets *and the poetry collections* Two-Face God, A Man Ain't Nothin', *and* What Shot Did You Ever Take *(co-authored with Brian Oliu). He is a native of Montgomery, Alabama, and he currently teaches at the University of North Alabama.



FIVE FAVORITES with TOM SPENCER

We asked Montgomery's **Tom Spencer**, author of the new smash hit ***The Mystery of the Crooked Man***, for his five favorite mysteries.

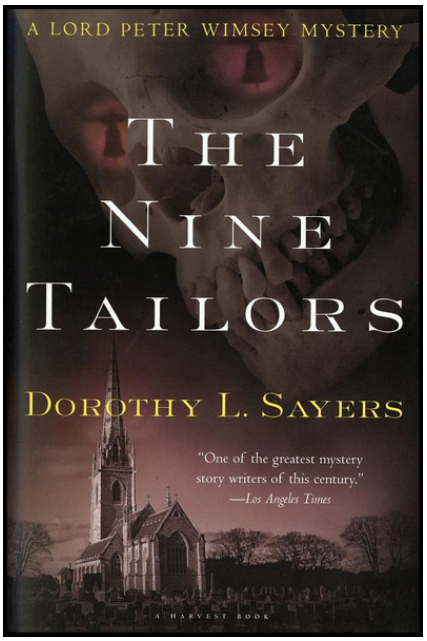


Photo by Jessala White, courtesy of NewSouth Books



1 *A Murder is Announced* by Agatha Christie

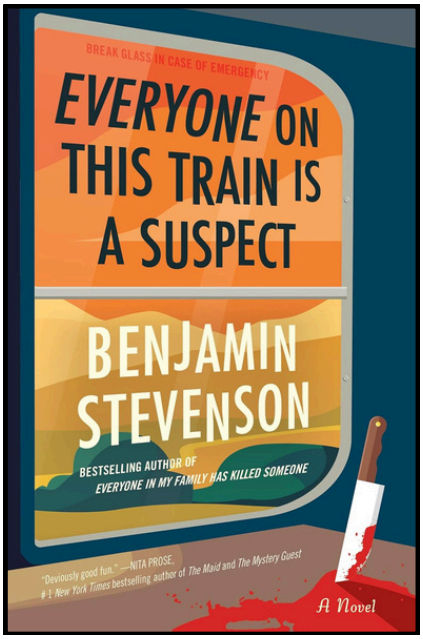
"There are many Agatha Christies I could have picked, but *A Murder Is Announced* is one of the greatest. It does a wonderful job of conveying Christie's vision of a world where evil is always lurking, just out of sight."



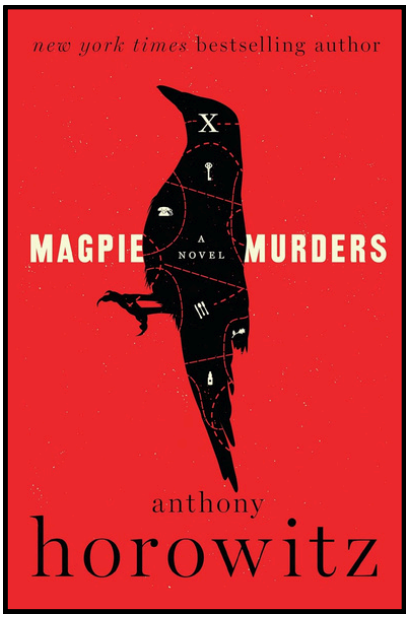
2 *The Nine Tailors* by Dorothy L. Sayers

"The best Lord Peter Wimsey book, for my money. A wonderful mystery plus you get to learn an awful lot about church-bell-ringing. What's not to love?"

3 *Everyone On This Train is a Suspect* by Benjamin Stevenson



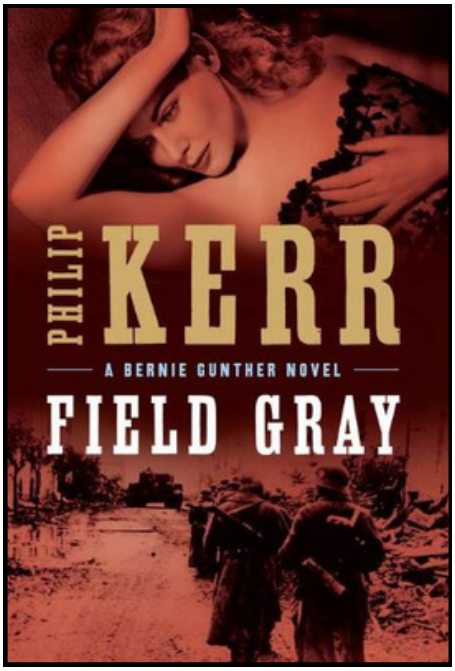
"A new novel that I read recently and loved. A meta-mystery set on a train full of crime writers speeding across Australia. Gripping, funny, and extremely clever."



4 *Magpie Murders* by Anthony Horowitz

"A contemporary mystery with a Golden Age cozy tucked inside it: two for the price of one! Horowitz is a master of the genre, and his pastiche of Poirot is pitch-perfect."

5 *Field Gray* by Philip Kerr



"Philip Kerr's series of novels starring Bernie Gunther, a detective (and other things) in Nazi Germany and postwar Europe, has fourteen excellent installments, but this one is my favorite. This is the novel where Kerr moves beyond his Raymond-Chandler-in-the-Third-Reich formula and into a darker mood of his own."



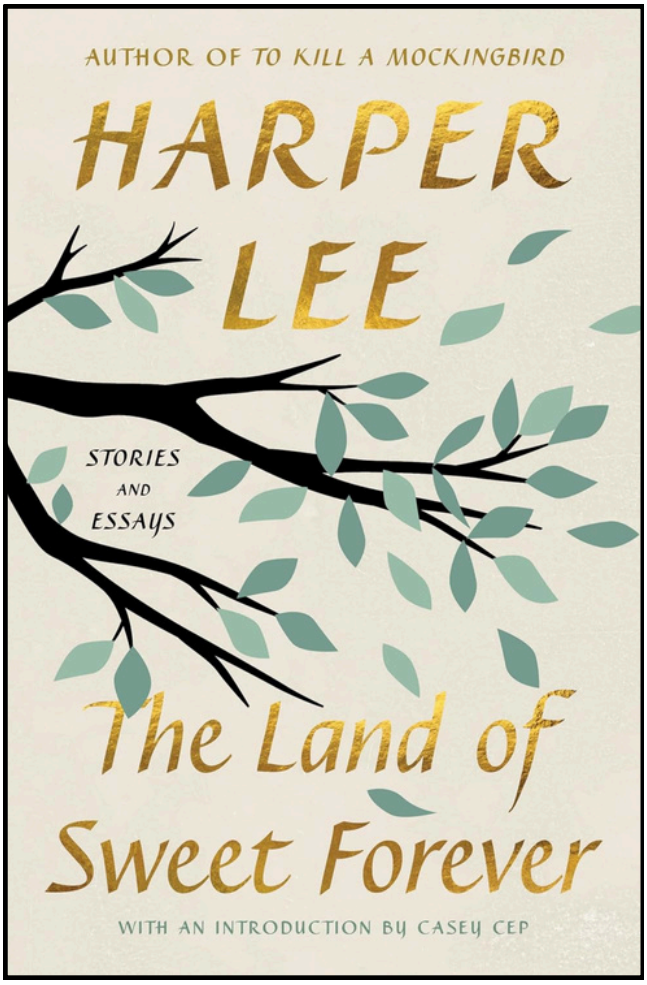
THE LAND OF STRICT EMBARGOES

ANTICIPATING THE NEW HARPER LEE COLLECTION

By Edward Journey

When Harper Lee's "rediscovered" novel, *Go Set a Watchman*, was announced in 2015, we were promised a "sequel" to *To Kill a Mockingbird*. I immediately preordered a copy. The new book was shrouded in secrecy. No advance review copies were made available, and we were left to guess what might be coming. Harper Lee was still alive – she would die the next year – and the world was assured that she had approved and was excited about the new release. Although Lee almost never made public statements in her last years, Tonja Carter, the attorney for Lee's estate, released a statement in Lee's name that said, "I'm alive and kicking and happy as hell with the reactions to *Watchman*." "Someone who knows someone" tells me that "Miss Nelle was very very happy about the rediscovery of that manuscript, and its publication and success."

There were some who weren't convinced. Lee's health was in decline and her sister, Alice Finch Lee, who had rigorously protected Harper Lee's literary legacy, had died a few months earlier at the age of 103. Alice Lee had told a friend that her sister was hearing and vision impaired and would sign anything that was put in front of her by someone she thought she could trust. The Alabama Department of Human Resources was brought in and declared Lee fit to make her own decisions. The intrigue continued and the publisher, HarperCollins, carefully guarded the book from pre-publication scrutiny. In a scathing 2015 piece for the *National Review*, William Giraldi wrote, "In a shady, bad-faith move, HarperCollins placed 'the strictest of embargoes' on *Watchman*: With a few exceptions—cherry-picked, one guesses, for the safety of their pedestrianism—the publisher wouldn't release advanced copies to the critical community. Strictest of embargoes? Are we talking about a book here, or plutonium?"



" 'STRICTEST OF EMBARGOES? ARE WE TALKING ABOUT A BOOK HERE, OR PLUTONIUM?' "

As the publication date moved near, we started finding out other things. *Go Set a Watchman* was not a sequel but was an early and very different draft of what would become *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Also, the existence of the manuscript for *Go Set a Watchman* had probably been known to some, including Tonja Carter, for years. Those of us who planned to read the book held our breaths and waited to see what was coming.

Arriving home from a friend's funeral in a torrential thunderstorm in July 2015, I found the package containing the book waiting at my front door. It seemed fitting since I had delivered a tin of cheese straws to the deceased's house with a note quoting *Mockingbird* – the expected quote about neighbors bringing "food with death and flowers with sickness and little things in between."

Despite the drama, and eager to find out what the drama was about, I tore into the soggy package and settled in to read *Go Set a Watchman* in a single sitting. There were some beautiful passages, some of which had found their way into *Mockingbird*, and the book is an interesting archival document of the making of a classic. I remember thinking at the time that if *Watchman* had been published in the late 1950s instead of *Mockingbird*, it would have been quickly forgotten.

The casual 1950s racism of Atticus Finch in *Go Set a Watchman* did not shock me like it did so many others. I am old enough to remember when men who appeared to be upstanding and respectable were involved with the White Citizens' Council, which was sneeringly called the "Klan in suits." These men had the same goals as the Klan but managed to convince themselves that they were more respectable. It was no shock to see how the idealized and noble version of Atticus that the young Scout saw as a child could become the tarnished and cautious man Jean Louise encountered as a more sophisticated young adult. The Atticus of *Watchman* might even give fuel to the critics who decry the "white savior" Atticus in *Mockingbird*.

"GIVEN THE GENERAL DISMAY THAT ACCOMPANIED THE PUBLICATION OF *WATCHMAN* HOWEVER, IT'S EASY TO UNDERSTAND WHY READERS MIGHT BE WARY OF *THE LAND OF SWEET FOREVER*."

Most reactions to *Go Set a Watchman* were not forgiving. Not long after the book's release, scholar and critic Tom Perrin summed up the critical consensus: "Harper Lee's novel sucks." To be fair, Perrin's summary prefaced a more thoughtful and less harsh analysis of *Go Set a Watchman*, but he had succinctly captured the general critical response. Others were more nuanced; *New York Times* critic Michiko Kakutani's measured review explored the contrasts in tone and focus between the early draft and the final novel, treating *Watchman* as the dry run that it was. Scholar Nancy Anderson "had a more favorable reaction to *Go Set a Watchman* than a lot of people did — a preliminary draft of *To Kill a Mockingbird* without further editing. It was a real insight into her writing process."

Now, a decade later, a new collection of Harper Lee's writings will be released in October 2025. Given the general dismay that accompanied the publication of *Watchman* however, it's easy to understand why readers might be wary of *The Land of Sweet Forever*. When I started receiving offers to preorder several months ago, I was in no hurry. I decided that I would wait and get an idea of what was in the thing. I was sure I would read the book eventually. With the flurry of speculation that surrounded the pre-release of *Go Set a Watchman*, over a million copies were preordered. In the wake of *Watchman*, I will be interested in seeing how many preorders are made for *Sweet Forever*.

The Land of Sweet Forever is said to include eight previously unpublished short stories and eight nonfiction pieces that appeared in various publications between 1961 and 2006. Those short stories "were discovered after Lee's death" we are told. There aren't many details – I hear they even refused requests for a look at the table of contents – but an advance blurb says the book will be "an unprecedented look at the development of [Lee's] inimitable voice." Nancy Anderson says, "Even if it is getting 'Christmas to Me' to a general audience, it will be worth it." ("Christmas to Me," Lee's 1961 essay for *McCall's* magazine, recalls the Christmas gift that led to the completion of *Mockingbird*. No need to wait and see if it's in the new book – it is easily available online). One potential source I contacted declined to comment, stating that any comments on the contents of the book are "strictly embargoed" until publication. There's that phrase again. That strategy seemed to work with over a million preorders for *Watchman,* so HarperCollins seems to be banking on it working again.

Some speculations wonder if the collection might include Harper Lee's college pieces for the University of Alabama student newspaper, *The Crimson White*, and "Rammer Jammer," the university's humor magazine, in the 1950s. Advance statements from Tonja Carter and HarperCollins seem to eliminate that possibility, but it wouldn't be the first time we've been misled. On a personal note (and not making any comparisons to Harper Lee), I wrote reviews and articles for *The Crimson White* for several years in the 1970s and don't think I would be thrilled if those were to suddenly reappear now. Even though we were told that Lee knew about and approved the publication of *Go Set a Watchman*, writer and literary critic Don Noble observes that "there is no indication that Ms. Lee ever wanted these pieces published." *The Land of Sweet Forever* "is someone else's decision, not hers."

second book. The participation of Cep, who is working on an authorized Harper Lee biography, is giving people hope for the integrity of this new Lee collection.

I suspect that if Alabamians had to choose a secular saint, it would be Nelle Harper Lee. Her insistence on her privacy makes her even more mythical to us, and we protect her legacy even more for it. It is the brave Alabamian who will admit to never having read "the book." And even those who didn't read it probably saw the movie – or know enough about it to feel like they did. Harper Lee, like the Atticus Finch of *Mockingbird*, represents the aspirational best of us. Is it any wonder then, that in the 1960s and beyond we cling to Harper Lee to perhaps offset the tinge of other Alabamians who have brought shame to the state in tumultuous times?

"I SUSPECT THAT IF ALABAMIANS HAD TO CHOOSE A SECULAR SAINT, IT WOULD BE NELLE HARPER LEE."

In anticipation of the new book, some express excitement that Casey Cep will write the introduction, feeling that her involvement adds some credibility to the project. Cep's book, *Furious Hours*, is an account of a series of mysterious and connected Alabama murders and their subsequent trials in the 1970s that Harper Lee covered in preparation for a second book, working title *The Reverend*. That second book never appeared. Alice Lee suggested that Lee only ever wrote one chapter of *The Reverend.* Given the popularity of *Mockingbird*, as well as Lee's contributions to her childhood pal Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood*, there was once eager anticipation about this never written

Years after *To Kill a Mockingbird* was published, Lee was asked why she had never published another book. "Two reasons," she said, "One, I wouldn't go through the pressure and publicity I went through with *To Kill a Mockingbird* for any amount of money. Second, I have said what I wanted to say, and I will not say it again." We were, for the most part, satisfied with that response and took her at her word. The acclaim and influence of *Mockingbird* is enough to seal any writer's legacy. That, too, is probably the reason for the skepticism and confusion about the posthumous publication of "newly discovered" writing.

From my initial indifference to the announcement of *The Land of Sweet Forever*, I have become more intrigued as it seems that HarperCollins is following a very similar playbook to the one for the roll-out of *Watchman* – limiting or eliminating advance copies, being cagey about content. I reached out to the publisher for comment for this piece and there has been no reply.

Don Noble finds the publisher's policy "distressing and suspicious." He continues, "A confident publisher seeks advance praise from other authors and the boost that comes from good reviews. The publisher here is selling the book based on readers' affection for Ms. Lee and *Mockingbird*, not suggesting that this is extraordinary work. And not 'risking' reviews." In other words, if you can get over a million presales, who cares about quality?

Don Noble, a Hemingway scholar, recalls the various posthumous works by Hemingway. "He worked on those for years and some were very nearly ready. Not all were wonderful." Noble reminds that "readers of any posthumous work should be mature and balanced enough to realize that this work does not affect your opinion of the works published under authority of the author. Your opinion of *Watchman* should not affect your opinion of *Mockingbird*."

Writer/historian Wayne Flynt, a friend of Harper Lee and a champion of her work, puts it succinctly. It depends, he suggests, "on what readers are expecting: the work of a near novice published writer, or a book carefully crafted and revised after the advice of her agent, ... as was the case with *To Kill a Mockingbird*." Writer/historian Frye Gaillard

"HARPER LEE CAPTURED LIGHTING IN A BOTTLE ONCE AND AT THE PERFECT AMERICAN MOMENT. HOW MANY WRITERS WOULD LOVE TO BE ABLE TO SAY THEY DID THE SAME?"

Among other writers whose posthumous publications have attracted attention and occasional controversy are Dickinson, Ellison, Fitzgerald, Hemingway, Kafka, Nabokov, Plath, and Proust. In some cases, unfinished works are knitted together from the author's notes after their death. As *The Land of Sweet Forever* comes closer to its release, I began to survey writers, scholars, and other "literary types" for responses to posthumous releases of writers' unpublished work in general and, specifically, the impact, if any, *The Land of Sweet Forever* and *Go Set a Watchman* might have on Lee's legacy.

says, "There's no shame if her other writings are less transcendent. Robert Penn Warren wrote multiple novels, none of which came close to *All the King's Men*. Others may have a different view. But out of curiosity if nothing else – and with enduring admiration for *To Kill a Mockingbird* – I look forward to reading *The Land of Sweet Forever*."

Novelist Charles McNair asks, "Is it important to see everything a great writer puts to paper, as a means of understanding the process and decision-making that the writer's life requires?



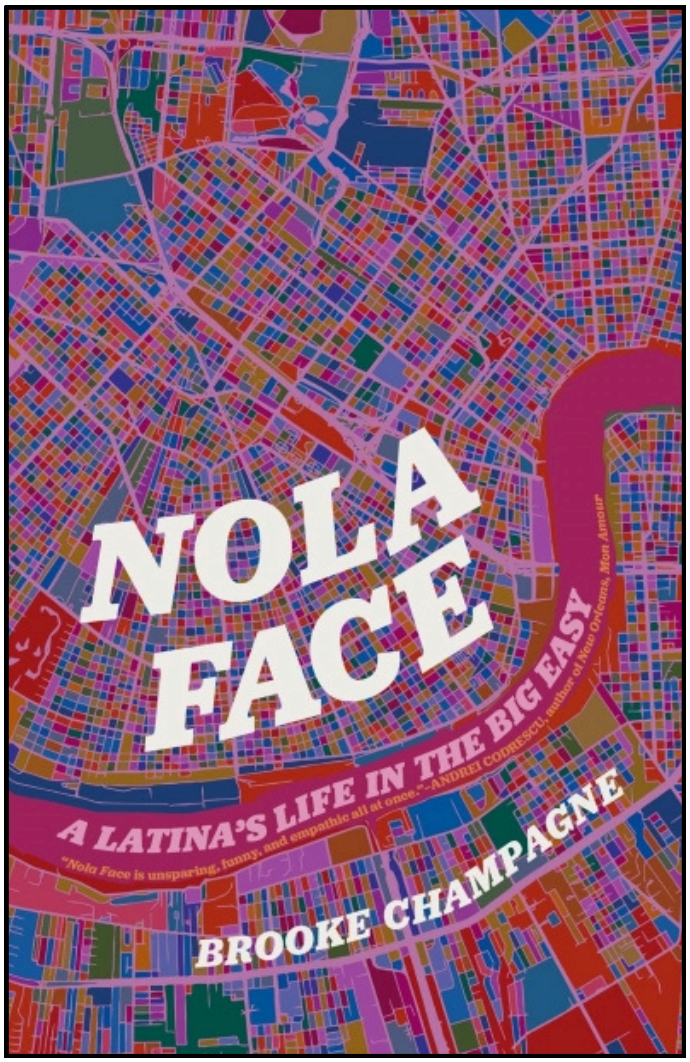
Or is someone simply cashing in on a name and reputation for a few dollars more?" Novelist Mark Childress, a native of Harper Lee's hometown of Monroeville, says, "I will always be excited to read any new or old writing from Harper Lee; I imagine her voice is in the stories, even if they aren't as polished as *Mockingbird*. I hope they are terrific. I think it is important to publish all of a writer's work, even the early less accomplished stuff – it helps you see how they polished their craft."

I doubt that the publication of *The Land of Sweet Forever* is as big a deal to other members of the reading community as it might be for interested Alabamians. We tend to be overly sensitive and protective of our Saint Nelle. We feel a need to protect her "canon," even if that canon is only one accomplished, revered, and very influential book. Harper Lee captured lighting in a bottle once and at the perfect American moment. How many writers would love to be able to say they did the same?

And how many writers' second books have diminished the acclaim of their promising beginnings – an outcome that Harper Lee studiously avoided until the end of her life? Any of Lee's output that comes after *Mockingbird* only serves to accentuate her singular accomplishment and provide further context for its enduring appeal. I don't think we need to "protect" Harper Lee's legacy. It's set and probably inviolable.

In his response to my query, Charles McNair ended with this: "One might ask, honestly, what Atticus Finch might have decided?" I find myself thinking, *What would Alice Finch Lee have done?* I think we know. Either way, and despite concerns, *The Land of Sweet Forever* is coming on October 21, 2025. With a skeptic's optimism, I hope it's a fantastic read.

***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).**



Reviewed by Edward Journey

In *Nola Face*, Brooke Champagne, Ecuadorian-French-Sicilian-American, conjures the intensity of a New Orleans upbringing in neighborhoods beyond the streetcar routes and tourist districts. Shock, sorrow, pain, joy, ecstasy, and hilarity co-exist in the space of a few short blocks and a few well-chosen sentences. Her family is introduced in its complexity and contradiction. In an early acknowledgment, Champagne writes, "Dad, if you're reading this, you've reached way too far into the book." It sounds like a dare to me.

Nola Face is a series of wildly personal essays and observations that analyze and explore the many factors that make Champagne, who currently teaches in the MFA writing program at the University of Alabama, a unique and authentic voice from a family that practiced "a cursory, Mardi Gras type of Catholicism." She may not have seen it all, but she's seen a lot of it.

Champagne examines her life as one of the younger Gen Xers, who "turned forty, appropriately, in the middle of a global pandemic." She often drops the names of writers, philosophers, and theorists along the way. The longest essay is a rumination on the legacy of Lorena Bobbitt, who chopped off her abusive husband's penis and became a pop culture landmark in the aftermath. While giving her pregnant sister a ride to an interview for a stripper job, Champagne ponders if "stripping is more about sexuality or capitalism." The Dustbuster handheld vacuum cleaner becomes a marriage metaphor. She cites Roland Barthes as she examines her issues with *The Giving Tree* in general and its author, Shel Silverstein, in particular. She freely admits that she has a "blond problem."

Many of the essays focus on Champagne's abuela, Lala. Champagne is close to her grandmother, and their relationship is charming and disturbing. Champagne and Lala steal away in Lala's red Dodge Charger in the middle of the night to get beignets in the French Quarter.



Brooke Champagne



As they pass the statue of Joan of Arc near the French Market, Lala vaguely remembers that "This girl fought a war for New Orleans a long time ago, … she also shaved her head." Champagne observes that Lala "was my world" at home, although she often makes her cringe in public. Even so, Lala's hold on her granddaughter is such that Brooke considers it a betrayal of her abuela to pray in English.

Lala teaches the young Brooke how to shoplift. Their shoplifting has its own code of ethics; if the item has no price tag, it's fair game. Champagne reminds the reader that price tags in those days were "half the size of a postage stamp, or twice the size of a hit of LSD." Lala, who does not use English, relies on her granddaughter to "translate" what she says to store clerks; Brooke's translation is often not what was actually said. "Lying in translation was the definitive marker of my childhood," Champagne writes.

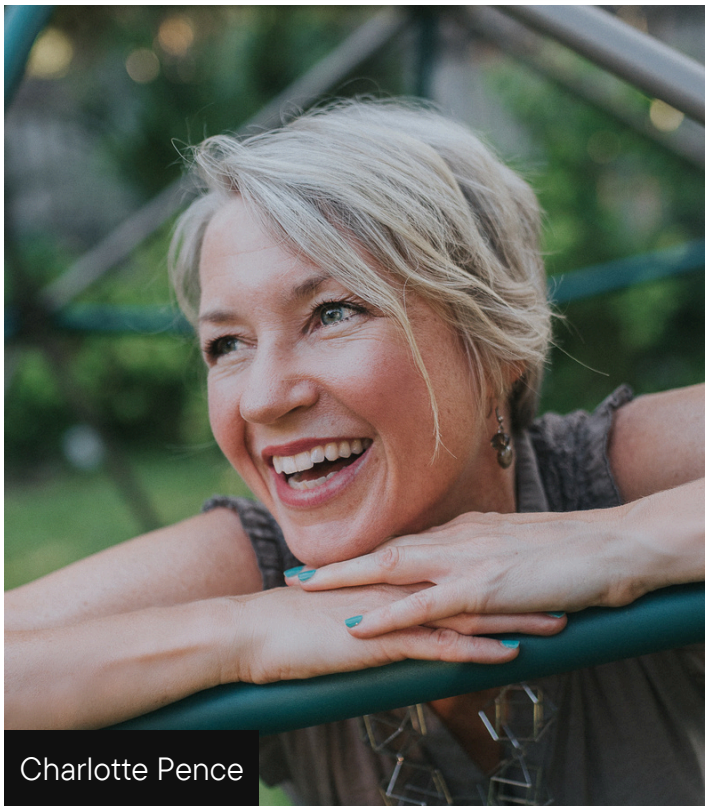
Lala is a recurring and dominant presence in the book. Champagne's connection to her grandmother might be troubling to a contemporary sensibility, especially in light of Lala's inappropriate affectionate behavior. Lala's unfulfilled promise to share a *secreto* with her granddaughter leads Champagne to search for elusive information after her abuela has died.

It takes courage to write such raw prose, and Champagne acknowledges the tricks of memory. "Memory's many vagaries…continue to challenge and delight my writing process." Her frank and unembarrassed delivery of her stories as she remembers them establishes a quick rapport with her readers (and her students, too, I suspect). Those inclined to clutch their pearls should be forewarned that Champagne freely and unapologetically makes use of what the ladies once referred to as "language." "I love my swearing and my swearing is a constant worry," she writes in an essay in defense of a word I am hesitant to repeat.

Champagne brings expansive knowledge, experience, empathy, and wit to these essays. Her stream-of-consciousness delivery makes the reader wonder where the next paragraph might lead. There is a section of *Nola Face* in which Champagne debates herself on which label applies to her writing – essayist or memoirist? I have a simple answer: She is a writer – and everything is fair game.

ALABAMA AWF WRITERS' FORUM

MEET OUR BOARD OF DIRECTORS



Charlotte Pence

Zanice Bond, President

Zanice Bond has made Alabama home for over a decade and is passionate about the arts and the humanities both in and out of the classroom. She is Associate Professor of English at Tuskegee University.

Charlotte Pence, Vice President

The Inaugural Poet Laureate of Mobile, Alabama, Charlotte Pence directs the Stokes Center for Creative Writing at the University of South Alabama.

Donna Estill, Secretary

Donna Estill is Dean of Humanities and Social Sciences at Calhoun Community College. In addition to being an administrator, she teaches as often as possible, has served as the Humanities Advisor for the Alabama Writers Symposium, and is an active member of the Alabama Association for Developmental Education.



Jay Lamar

Jay Lamar, Treasurer

Jay Lamar served as the executive director of the Alabama Bicentennial Commission from 2014 through 2020. She is the co-editor of *Remembered Gate: Memiors of Alabama Writers* and *Old Enough: Southern Women Writers and Artists on Aging.*

Tina Mozelle Braziel

Tina Mozelle Braziel won the Philip Levine Prize for Poetry for *Known by Salt* and co-authored *Glass Cabin* with her husband, writer James Braziel. She is the director of the Ada Long Creative Writing Workshop for high school students at UAB.

Suzanne La Rosa

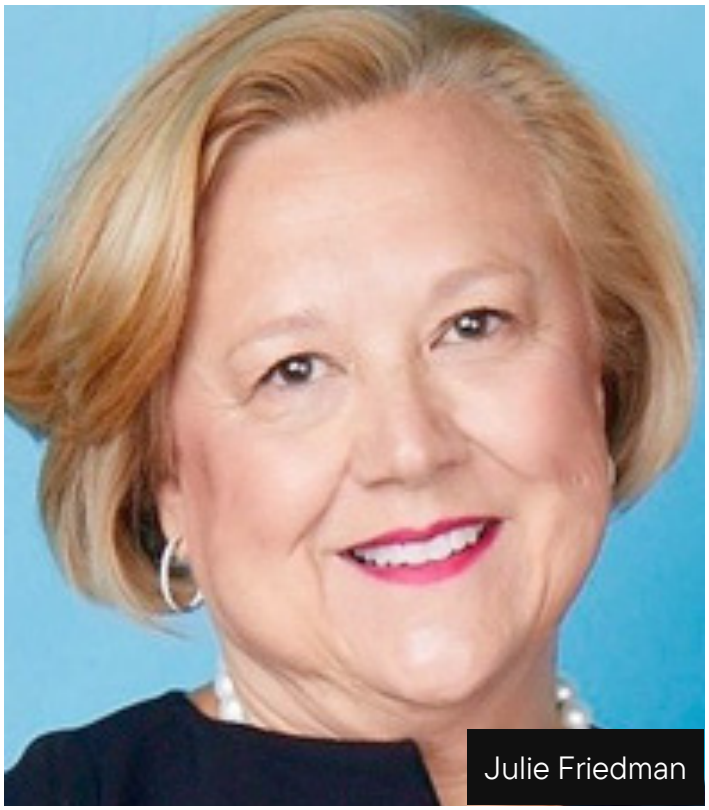
Suzanne La Rosa is a founder and publisher of NewSouth Books, an independent publisher in Montgomery, now an imprint of the University of Georgia Press.

ALABAMA AWF WRITERS' FORUM

MEET OUR BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Julie Friedman

Julie Frieman graduated Magna Cum Laude from the University of Alabama with a BA in Art History. She is serving her third term on the Alabama State Council on the Arts and is the former Chair of the Council. She has served on the AWF Board for twenty-three years.


Julie Friedman

Lauren Slaughter

Lauren Slaughter is Professor of English at UAB, where she is also Editor-in-Chief of the literary journal *NELLE*. She is a former NEA fellow in poetry and is the author of the poetry collections *Spectacle* and *a lesson in smallness*.

Kimberly Casey

Kimberly Casey is the Founder and Director of Out Loud HSV, a literary nonprofit in Huntsville. She also works as Poetry Editor for Passengers Press, where she is also on the Board.

Jacqueline Allen Trimble

Jacqueline Allen Trimble, Professor of English at Alabama State University, is a National Endowment for the Arts Creative Writing Fellow in Poetry, a Cave Canem Fellow, and a two-time ASCA Literary Fellow.


Sandra Whatley-Washington

Sandra Whatley-Washington

Montgomery native Sandra Whatley Washington was a cooperating teacher for the Writing Our Stories program for ten years at the Mt. Meigs Campus. She retired from the Alabama Department of Youth Services after nearly forty years of service to the state of Alabama.

Tom Perrin

Tom Perrin is Chair of the Department of Language, Literature, and Communication at Huntingdon College. His debut novel, *The Crooked Man*, was lauded as a "criminally good new murder mystery" by the *New York Times*.

NEWS AND NOTES

From Around the Forum

SALAAM GREEN WINS $50K FELLOWSHIP FROM AMERICAN ACADEMY OF POETS



Salaam Green, the inaugural Poet Laureate of Birmingham, has received the Academy of American Poets Laureate Fellowship. This prestigious award supports Poet Laureates engaged in community-based poetry projects. Green's project, Lyrics for Life Birmingham, a collaboration with Magic City Poetry Festival and Radical Reversal, is a ten-week poetry and hip-hop workshop for justice-involved youth at Birmingham's G. Ross Bell Youth Detention Center. The workshops will culminate in the publication of a digital and print zine featuring student participants' work. Green calls the $50k fellowship "an extraordinary honor," adding, "Poetry is how we navigate grief, joy, injustice, and reconciliation. Teaching literary excellence as a form of healing is at the heart of my work. Through literary arts, we repair what systems have broken, and I'm eager to apply this work with incarcerated youth." Green, a poet, educator, and healing arts practitioner, is the author of *The Other Revival* (Pulley Press, 2025) and *Once Upon a Magic City* (2024).

AIMEE HARDY AND ROBERT BAILEY WINNERS AT KILLER NASHVILLE



Alabama writers Aimee Hardy and Robert Bailey both won accolades for their new books at this year's Killer Nashville conference, an international writers conference for the mystery thriller. Trussville's Aimee Hardy won the Silver Falchion Award for Best Southern Gothic novel published in 2024, for her debut, *Pocket Full of Teeth*.

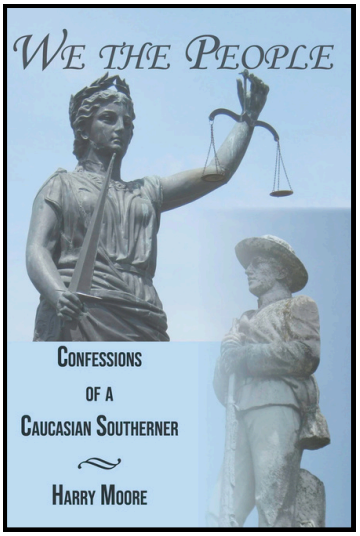


Robert Bailey, bestselling author of several legal thriller series, won the Silver Falchion Award for his most recent book, *The Boomerang*, which was named Best Thriller published in 2024.

Reviews of both books can be found on our website at writersforum.org/reviews.

HARRY MOORE'S *WE THE PEOPLE* NAMED BOOK OF THE YEAR BY ALABAMA STATE POETRY SOCIETY

Harry Moore's poetry collection *We the People: Confessions of a Caucasian Southerner* was recently named 2024 Book of the Year by the Alabama State Poetry Society. Retired after teaching English for four decades in Alabama community colleges, Harry has two other poetry collections, *Bearing the Farm Away* (2018) and *Broken & Blended: Love's Alchemy* (2021), both from Kelsay Books, along with four chapbooks. *We the People*, from Broadstone Books, explores racial themes from the author's childhood in the Jim Crow 1950s to the present.



MONTGOMERY'S JACQUELINE TRIMBLE NAMED ALABAMA POET LAUREATE

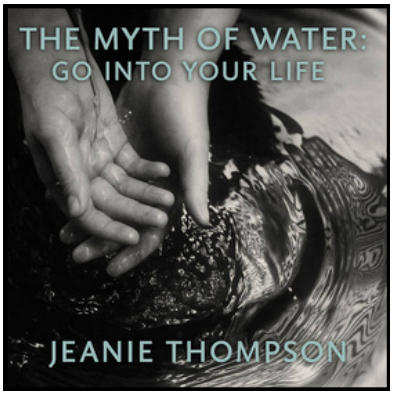


Jacqueline Allen Trimble, Professor of English and chair of Languages and Literatures at Alabama State University, was named the next Poet Laureate of Alabama at the recent annual meeting of the Alabama Writers' Cooperative. Trimble, a nationally prominent poet and author, is the author of the poetry collection *American Happiness*, which won the Balcones Poetry Prize, and, most recently, *How to Survive the Apocalypse*, which was named one of the ten best books of 2022 by the New York Public Library. "For a poet who has lived her whole life in Alabama, it is a dream come true to be named the state's poet laureate," says Trimble. "Knowing the depth of the poetic talent we have here, I am humbled and thrilled by the responsibility and the opportunity to champion Alabama poets. I cannot imagine a better endeavor." Ashley M. Jones, who served as Alabama's Poet Laureate from 2022 through 2025, calls Trimble "the poet we need for this moment. She is honest, exacting, and artful, and her poetry offers grit and grace. She will bring her deep care for Alabama and her heart for helping people to this role, and I couldn't be more proud to pass the torch to my dear friend and one of the best living poets in Alabama and the country at large."

This is just the latest accolade Trimble has accrued, both as a writer and educator. She has been a National Endowment for the Arts Creative Writing Fellow, a Cave Canem Fellow, a two-time Alabama State Council on the Arts Fellow, and – we mention this with no small amount of pride – is a longtime Member of the Board of Directors of the Alabama Writers' Forum. Trimble will serve a four-year term as Poet Laureate, an honor that the Alabama Writers' Cooperative has bestowed on our state's greatest poets since 1930. AWC President Jessica Jones explains, "the poet laureate is our state representative of literary excellence" and "makes poetry accessible through workshops, projects and readings throughout Alabama and beyond." Stay tuned to *First Draft* for more on Jacqueline Trimble's term as the Poet Laureate of Alabama.

JEANIE THOMPSON RELEASES ALBUM WITH GRAMMY WINNER LARRY MITCHELL

Award-winning poet and essayist Jeanie Thompson, executive director emerita of the Alabama Writers' Forum, has released an album featuring poems from her book *The Myth of Water: Poems from the Life of Helen Keller,* accompanied by original music by Grammy-winning guitarist and producer Larry Mitchell. "We crossed paths in Alabama, drawn together by a shared love of poetry and music," says Thompson. "His gift for creating space where words and sound meet made this collaboration possible." The album is available at jeaniethompson.bandcamp.com.

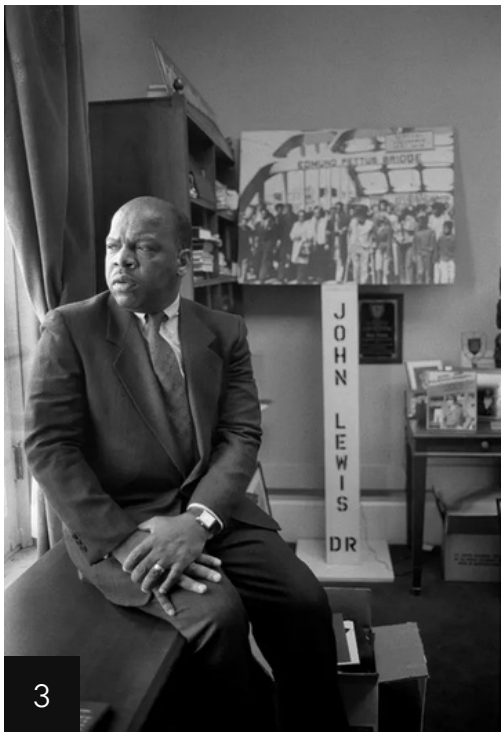


ALABAMA AWF WRITERS' FORUM

CONTESTS GRANTS & FELLOWSHIPS



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1 Hackney Literary Awards for Unpublished Novels

The Hackney Literary Awards, sponsored by the Cecil Hackney family of Birmingham, Alabama, were established in 1969. This prestigious writing competition recognizes excellence in fiction. The Morris Hackney family sponsors the $5,000 prize for an unpublished novel. Entry fee is $30.
Deadline September 30, 2025.

2 Willie Morris Awards for Southern Writing

The Willie Morris Awards for Southern Writing celebrate works in three genres: fiction, nonfiction and poetry. A national panel of judges reviews hundreds of nominated books and poems, looking for works that ask readers to engage with the complexities of the U.S. South. Submissions will be accepted July 1, 2025 - September 30, 2025. Fiction and nonfiction winners receive a cash prize of $12,000. The winner of the poetry category receives $3,000. Winners also receive an expenses-paid trip to Oxford, Miss., where winning writers are celebrated as a part of the Oxford Conference for the Book. For more information visit williemorrisawards.org
Deadline: September 30, 2025.

3 John Lewis Writing Grants

The John Lewis Writing Grants are inspired by the late civil rights icon and his more than three decades of service as Georgia's 5th District representative. The John Lewis Writing Grants will be awarded annually in the categories of fiction, nonfiction, poetry, and screenplay writing. The purpose of the grants is to elevate, encourage, and inspire the voices of Black writers in Georgia.
Deadline: October 10, 2025.

ALABAMA AWF WRITERS' FORUM

CONTESTS GRANTS & FELLOWSHIPS



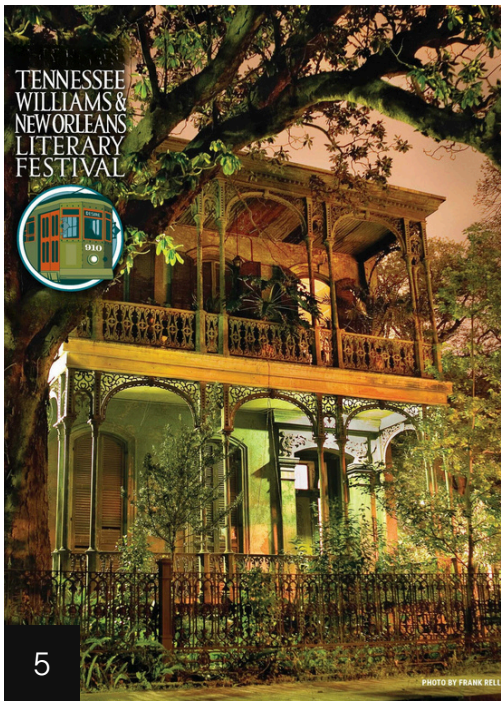
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4 Jake Adam York Prize for First or Second Poetry Collection

In honor of dearly departed Alabama poet Jake Adam York, *Copper Nickel* and *Milkweed Editions* provides $2,000 cash prize for the best unpublished first or second book-length (min. 48 pages) poetry manuscript. The winning poet will be published by Milkweed Editions and will receive "high-quality design, marketing, and strong national distribution." For more information, see copper-nickel.org/bookprize. **Deadline: October 15, 2025**.

5 Tennessee Williams & New Orleans Literary Festival Prizes (multiple genres)

The 2025 Tennessee Williams & New Orleans Literary Festival will be awarding in four categories: One Act Play, Poetry, Fiction, and Very Short Fiction. Entry fees range from $10 to $25 and awards range from $500 to $1,500. For more information visit tennesseewilliams.net. **Deadline: October 15th, 2025.**



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6 Alabama State Poetry Society 2026 Award

The theme for the 2026 Alabama State Poetry Society Award, offered through the National Federation of State Poetry Societies, is "Breaking the Rules. Choose a Form, but break it – modify an existing form." Line limit is 50 lines. First prize receives $75, Second receives $50, third receives $25. See nfsps.net for more information. Contest opens January 1st, 2026.
Deadline: March 16th, 2026.

7 Fairhope Center for the Writing Arts Writer-In-Residence

This competitive residency program offers a month's stay in the picturesque Wolff Cottage, located in the writers' haven of Fairhope, on the eastern shore of the Mobile Bay. As program founder Sonny Brewer puts it, this residency is an "escape-to-create or retreat-to-complete opportunity for a writer to get some good work done while living in one of the prettiest places in the country." Sounds nice, doesn't it? Writers must have previously published work, and should submit a writing sample, along with a completed application, which can be found at: fairhopewritingarts.org

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