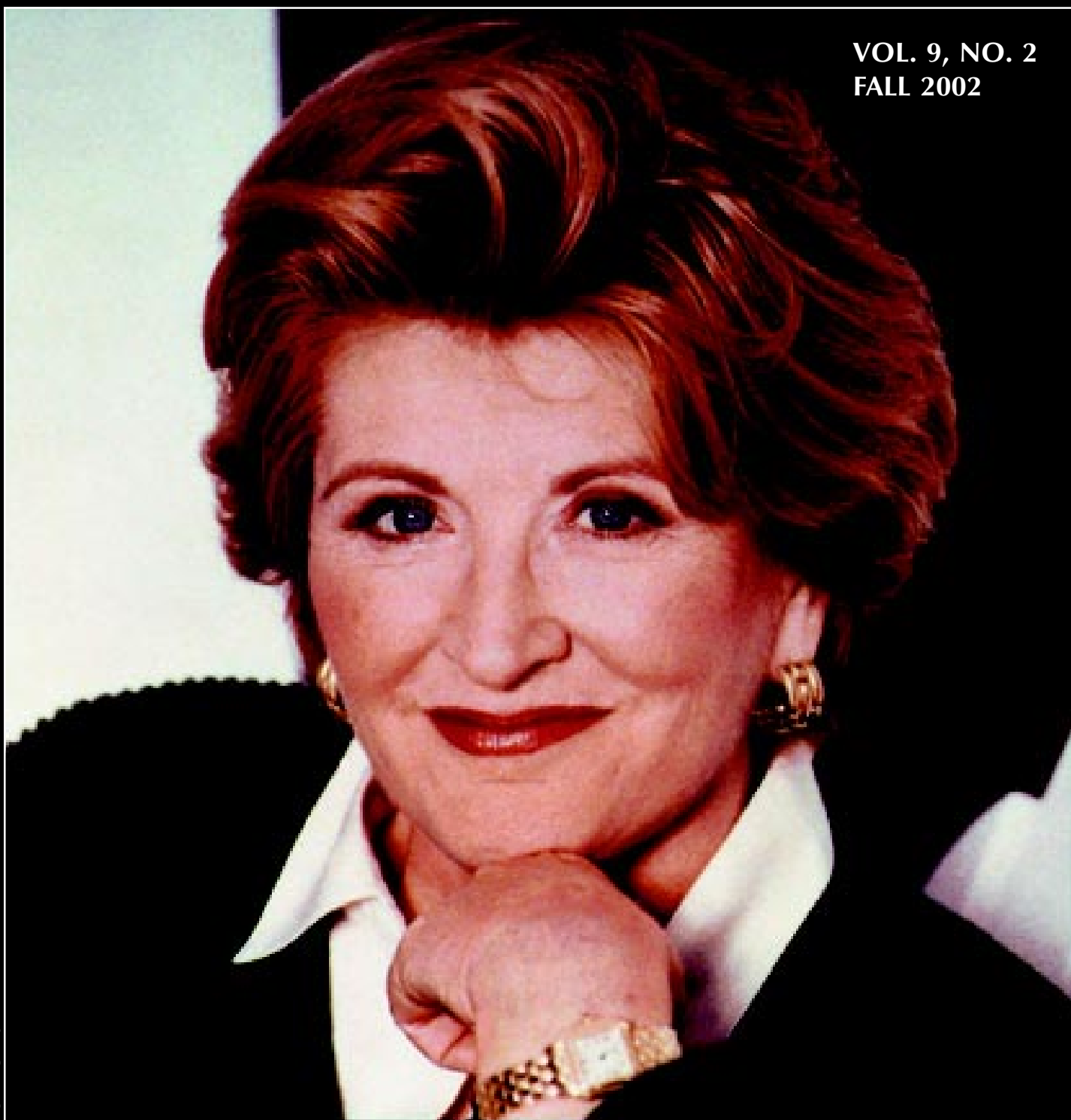


The Journal of the Alabama Writers' Forum

FIRST DRAFT

VOL. 9, NO. 2
FALL 2002



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FANNIE FLAGG: Welcome Home

FY 02

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From the Editor The Alabama Writer's Forum



Jay Lamar

First Draft Welcomes New Editors

We are pleased to announce two new book review editors for the coming year. Jennifer Horne will be Poetry editor, and Derryn Moten will serve as Alabama and Southern History editor. Horne's publications include a chapbook, *Miss Betty's School of Dance* (bluestocking press, 1997), and poems in *Amaryllis*, *Astarte*, the *Birmingham Poetry Review*, *Blue Pitcher* (poetry prize 1992), and *Carolina Quarterly*, among other journals. An MFA graduate of the University of Alabama, Horne has taught college English, been an artist in residence, and served as a journal, magazine, and book editor. She is currently pursuing a master's in community counseling.



Derryn Moten

Moten is associate professor of Humanities at Alabama State University and holds a Ph.D. and an MA in American Studies from the University of Iowa, as well as an MS in Library Science from Catholic University of America. Recent publications include "When the 'Past Is Not Even the Past': The Rhetoric of a Southern Historical Marker" (*Professing Rhetoric*, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2002) as well as "To Live and Die in Dixie: Alabama and the Electric Chair" (*Alabama Heritage*, 2001). Moten is a board member of the Southern Humanities Council, the Alabama Prison Project, and the Alabama Writers' Forum.



Jennifer Horne

Please continue to send books for review to the Alabama Writers' Forum, 201 Monroe Street, Montgomery, AL 36130. And please contact us if you are interested in reviewing books.

The Alabama Writers' Forum is generously funded by the Alabama State Council on the Arts, with additional funding from the Children's Trust Fund of Alabama and corporate, institutional, and individual associates.

Alabama Writers' Forum Greet New Board Members

The Alabama Writers' Forum adds three names to its board for FY 03. Philip Shirley of Jackson, MS, Stuart Flynn of Birmingham, and Julie Friedman of Point Clear, AL, join continuing board members Peter Huggins, president, Bettye Forbus, Linda Henry Dean, Aileen Kilgore Henderson, Daryl Brown, Ed George, John Hafner, William E. Hicks, Rick Journey, Derryn Moten, Don Noble, Steve Sewell, Lee Taylor, and Frank Toland. We bid fairwell to Kellee Reinhart, Rick Shelton and Denise Trimm. Welcome to the new board members and thank you to those continuing to serve.



JULIE FRIEDMAN

Julie Friedman is a former member of the Alabama State Council on the Arts, as well as a current member of the Alabama Committee for the National Museum for Women in the Arts and the Mobile Arts Council. A staunch supporter of community arts, she has served on the boards of the Museum of Mobile and the Mobile Opera Guild and was a member of the Cultural Plan for the City of Mobile steering committee. A resident of Fairhope, Friedman graduated magna cum

laude from the University of Alabama with a BA in Art History and was a member of Phi Beta Kappa and recipient of the Mary Morgan Art Award.



STUART FLYNN

Poet Stuart Flynn is the chair of Creative Writing at the Alabama School of Fine Arts. He has an MFA in Creative Writing from the University of Alabama, a JD degree from the University of Arkansas, and a BA from the University of Central Arkansas. Before joining the faculty of the ASFA, Flynn served as associate editor of *Alabama Heritage* magazine, where he managed the day-to-day operations as well as wrote and edited articles for the award-winning publication.



PHILIP A. SHIRLEY, APRP, APR

Former associate director of the Alabama Humanities Foundation and director of public information for Birmingham-Southern College, Philip Shirley has since 1994 served as president and chief operating officer of Godwin Group in Jackson, Mississippi, recently named by AdWeek for the sixth year as a "Top 50 Southeast Ad Agency." Shirley grew up in Ozark and Monroeville. A University of Alabama graduate, Shirley produced a radio program titled "The Poet's

Corner," which received the Obelisk Award in 1980 for Best Radio Arts Program. He was on the editorial staff of *The Black Warrior Review* and was founder and editor of *Baltic Avenue Press* and *The Baltic Avenue Poetry Journal*. Shirley has served on the committee for Writing Today at Birmingham-Southern College and is a published poet whose books include *Four Odd* (Baltic Avenue Press, 1977) and *Endings* (Thunder City Press, 1981).

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Cassandra King *Write What You Know*

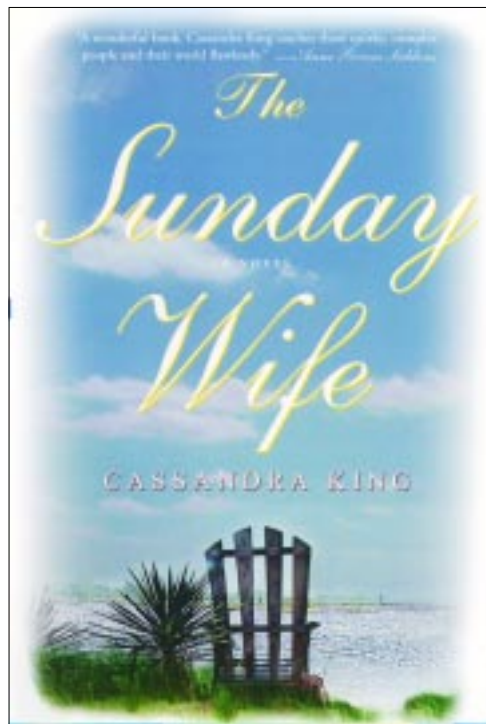
by Bethany A. Giles

Write what you know. Sometimes trite, sometimes as inspiring and common as “fasten your seatbelt” or “you want fries with that?” it turns out to be a good rule of thumb for Dothan-area native Cassandra King and her husband, Pat Conroy.

For years, readers have enjoyed Conroy’s novels such as *Prince of Tides*, *The Lords of Discipline*, and *The Great Santini*—all works that feature characters not just based on his family and friends but actually depicting them, King said. His new novel, *My Losing Season*, due out later this year, is no different as it focuses on basketball teammates from his Citadel years.

In King’s case, her September release by Hyperion, *The Sunday Wife* is set in the religious culture of the South—something she experienced first hand as the wife of a Methodist minister.

Careful not to speak badly of her ex-husband, King admits that he was not particularly interested in her creativity—he may have even been resentful of the time her writing took from him and her church work. In *The Sunday Wife*, a similar—though more extreme—dynamic takes place between the Rev. Ben Lynch and his wife, Dean. Her childhood in poverty, her quirky personality, and her musical talent are seen as embarrassing elements to be hidden so they won’t hinder his local



and national ambitions within the church.

“Because of the incredible demands on your time and energy, it’s not easy living with another writer. But being with someone who understands the creative process and to have the needed solitude for that process is wonderful,” King confessed. She and Pat have separate work spaces in their house and rarely share details of their projects, but King said they do work creatively and happily in similar ways.

“When I was teaching, I emphasized different writing styles of students. Some had to bounce things off others, but it depletes my creative energy to bounce ideas off someone else. I read of

another writer couple, Robert Olen Butler and Betsy Dewberry, who get together and read to each other, but that’s not our style. Instead it’s a supportive atmosphere to allow the other one to have the space to do what they need to.”

King said her first thought about their simultaneous writing projects of recent months is “helter-skelter.” “Reflecting on it, though, it’s very exciting—and I also think about how, for lack of a better word, I feel privileged,” King said. “Before, between classes and grading papers and that kind of stuff—well, we have the time now and we mostly devote our time to our writing, so it is not as

helter-skelter as it might be otherwise.”

King said writing *The Sunday Wife* was “tremendous fun.”

“Keep in mind that I wrote *Making Waves [in Zion]* (Black Belt Press, 1999, to be re-released by Hyperion in 2003) as my master’s thesis,” she said of her first published work. It felt as though she had written a lengthy book, but it really wasn’t large at all, she said.

“It is an entirely different book. I don’t

think we consciously think ‘what will the committee think about this?’—but, subconsciously, it was almost a paper. With [*The Sunday Wife*] I had the opposite problem. It all came pouring out, and I tremendously enjoyed writing it and getting into these characters and putting them in all kinds of situations. My manuscript was 500 pages, and the editors cut out some scenes I really liked.”

Many of the situations in *The Sunday Wife* are familiar to those who know Southern church culture, but others are surprising as various characters explore the myriad themes in this emotionally complex novel. King said this kind of exploration into humanity’s limitations and celebrations grew while she allowed herself to become immersed in the “other place” of Crystal Springs, Florida, where most of the novel unfolds.

“Here is my problem—and a problem for a lot of other writers, I guess. I’ve never talked about this. But when I write, I lose myself. I don’t want to stop to eat, I don’t want to answer the phone, don’t want to go to the bathroom. ... I get totally engrossed in the other world. It’s bizarre almost. ... I disappear into my writing in my head even when not at the word processor. You go into this other land, your own place, and that’s a problem, since you have to do other things. Pat and I both have large families and other commitments, so when some-



Pat Conroy and Cassandra King at Fripp Island

PHOTO BY ELIZABETH DERAMUS FOR COOKING LIGHT

one is coming for dinner, we purposefully don’t start writing or we suddenly find we don’t have dinner for them to eat. I can write until way after midnight...

I have days when I write until I can’t.”

That outpouring created believable personalities, adventures, and emotions that begin to reveal themselves as the First Methodist Church in Crystal Springs welcomes its new pastor. By the time he and his

wife move into the parsonage, their reputations precede them—his of a dynamic preaching style, winning personality, and great ambition; hers of a sad past, excruciating timidity, and curious musical abilities. He is celebrated while she is tolerated.

Due to this dynamic—and the expectations placed upon clergy and their families by the church—a certain level of sacrifice is required of both Ben and Dean. They keep up appearances of a particular kind of marriage relationship that does not exist.

King said this was not intended to be a male-bashing book, nor is it to be a critical exposé of the Methodist Church. “I didn’t want anyone to think there was a bone to pick with the Methodist Church. I grew up Methodist—now I’m Episcopalian, having converted several years ago. But I was married to a Methodist minister, and a lot of things in the book came from life.”

“There are certain humiliations [that come with] living in a house furnished and kept by the church. I had some really bad experiences that didn’t get in the book because I didn’t want it to seem as though I was grinding an ax. I had a really unpleasant experience with someone who wanted to inspect the parsonage right after my mother had died, and threatened to get a key and come in anyway if I didn’t let them in, for example.”

Other similarities exist between Dean and her author.

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“We have shared creative frustrations,” King said, admitting that she plays the dulcimer, like Dean. “Dean’s music is not just a metaphor. Coaches’ wives, corporate wives, and pastors’ wives are placed in certain roles where the side of them that doesn’t fit that mold has to suffer. That’s what I wanted to do with the dulcimer. I’m not Dean. I probably have some characteristics of her, but I was raised in a close-knit family, so I was not an orphan (like Dean). Dean’s a fictional character.”

The close relationship between Dean and her best friend and confidante in Crystal Springs, Augusta, is based loosely on friendships King has had with two other women. “I certainly had friends who encouraged me to be more adventuresome in my life—and not so into my role as a minister’s wife that I didn’t live my own life.”

The bonds between women, survival of past pain, payment for past or present sins, living in the present, caring more for others than yourself, church stereotypes, social and moral accountability, death, mental illness, and redemption—these are among the many themes explored in King’s book. While entirely entertaining, this work is not merely entertainment. Some readers will find at least one message to ponder among the belly laughs, tears, and jaw-dropping moments.

“I think I did try to express some observations about life in the last chapter. I wanted to show that there are good men out there. It was important that two of the characters eventually had to free themselves before they could not be afraid to love again. I didn’t want this to be yet another story of a woman who was in a repressive relationship and found her way out. I wanted to look at relationships (both male and female) that help us find ourselves and release us from patterns that are not healthy.

“I wanted to bring out that we are all limited—all flawed and limited. Ben certainly limited himself by his ambition, and Dean is limited by her fears. We have traits that we know are not healthy. To recognize this about each other can be redemptive,” King said.

The *Sunday Wife* is a Literary Guild and BookSense selection as well as Books-A-Million’s President’s Choice for September. It is in its third pre-publication printing.

Bethany A. Giles writes from her home in Sheffield.

CLEAR EYES AND TRUTHFUL SPIRITS

ASF Young Southern Writers' Project

by *Linda Henry Dean*

On June 21, 2002, the Alabama Shakespeare Festival hosted a reception honoring 13 young playwrights, finalists in the 2002 Young Southern Writers' Project Playwright Competition, and their teachers. The competition, sponsored by the Alabama State Council on the Arts, Central Alabama Community Foundation, and Barnes & Noble, invites students in grades 9–12 to submit one-act original plays to ASF that address the subject of being a Southerner through the plot, characters, setting, or theme.

First-place winner this year is Michael Griffith, a freshman at Bradshaw High School in Florence and the student of Darlene Montgomery. Michael's play *Perpetual Motion* examines the dilemmas faced by a young girl in the 1960s who finds herself pregnant out of wedlock. As she and the baby's father examine their own relationship and goals, an engaging story of warmth and hope emerges.

Adam Andrianopoulos, a junior at McGill-Toolen High School in Mobile and a student of Nancy Fontenot, took second place with his play *A Killer in the Trailer Park*. Adam combines psychics, trailers, and threatening phone calls but gives some surprising plot twists to create a clever parody of horror films and Southern stereotypes.

Third-place winner is Kelly Lambert, a 2002 graduate of Hoover High School and a student of Joshua Rutsky. Kelly's play *All Four Feet: A Tail Exploring Tolerance* is an allegorical account of Belle, an Alabama farm cat relocated to a busy apartment building. Belle reflects on interspecies relationships, loyalty, and forgiveness as she makes her journey.

Gwen Orel, ASF literary manager, found a wonderful facility with language and story-telling among the entries. "The stories encompass subjects as varied as racism, single parenthood, unidentified flying objects, the cult of football, religious tolerance, and peer pressure, in styles ranging from classic memory play to satire to allegory. Their voices are curious, involved, rooted in place and authentic. It is so exciting to read these emerging new playwrights."

ASF artistic director Kent Thompson agreed: "I am excited by this group of winners—their willingness to look with a clear eye and truthful spirit at the issues in society—their heart, imagination, and humor convince me we will have playwrights for the Southern Writers' Project for many years to come."

A total of 93 plays were submitted from students in 17 schools throughout the state. The competition review committee read the works anonymously, with no knowledge of the author or school. Thompson, playwright-in-residence Carlyle Brown, and Orel served as final judges.

Orel foresees that the competition, only in its second year, will attract even more entries next year as teachers and students become more aware of this opportunity. "By visiting schools and conducting workshops before the contest and providing all entrants with critiques of their work afterwards, we hope to encourage not only this year's winners but all the students and teachers who want to enjoy playwriting."

This has already happened. Kelly Lambert, third-place winner, wrote to ASF, "When Mr. Rutsky, my teacher, first presented the competition to our class, I started writing the play purely for myself, to explore ideas I was dealing with at the time. I didn't expect it to be taken seriously because the characters are all animals. I was pleasantly surprised that ASF saw the seriousness in it and encouraged a variation that would be seen as comic by many. The awards reception was a great chance to meet other young playwrights. I'd never been interested in writing a drama piece before. . . and that I placed gives me drive to become more active in the theater genre, and even more encouragement that I should pursue the literary arts as a career."

The three winning plays are published on ASF's website, www.asf.net, on the Young Playwrights link. Read and enjoy!

Linda Henry Dean is director of education at the Alabama Shakespeare Festival and board member of the Alabama Writers' Forum.



Winners, finalists, and their teachers (standing left to right): Miles Thompson, Adam Andrianopoulos, Steve Cagle (Montgomery Barnes & Noble, sponsor), James Coleman, Erin Weems, ASF artistic director Kent Thompson, Kelly Lambert, ASF literary manager Gwen Orel, Kali Pyrlik, Darlene Montgomery, Linda Beatty, Jean Burt, SWP playwright Doris Baisley, and Joshua Rutsky. Kneeling: P.J. Lee, Scott Fortner, playwright-in-residence Carlyle Brown, and Michael Griffith.

Alabama's Literary Mainstay

by Dan Kaplan

For nearly three decades, Black Warrior Review has been publishing some of the country's best new literature.

It's like this: Someone asks you if you've ever heard of a certain book, a certain movie. "It's a classic," you're told. You look away thoughtfully, brow furrowed, then turn back. "Yeah. Yeahhh," you say, even if you haven't. Next thing you know you're at the bookstore, the video store, or on the Internet investigating, and you find it and fall in love with it, wondering how you've managed to miss something so good. And the next thing you know you're asking people if they've heard of this book, this movie. It's like that.

So here's the big unknown: *Black Warrior Review* (BWR), published by the creative writing program at the University of Alabama, has been one of the country's top literary journals for nearly thirty years. How could you have missed it?

Since Jeanie Thompson, executive director of the Alabama Writer's Forum, and her classmates founded the magazine in 1974 (see sidebar), *Black Warrior Review*, named for the river bordering Tuscaloosa, has consistently published the freshest fiction, poetry, art,

interviews, book reviews, and essays by Pulitzer Prize and National Book Award winners as well as emerging talents, including many from Alabama. But while BWR has gained national attention from readers, writers, and the wider literary world, it still remains relatively unknown in its home state.

"Our goal is to see that our own community knows we're here, and have been all along, making unique

and important contributions to literature," says current editor David Mitchell Goldberg. "We want Alabamians to know they can find one of the best reads anywhere right here."

It was clear from the time of its founding that the magazine was headed for big things. The first few issues alone featured work by nationally recognized writers like Albert Goldbarth, Colette Inez, Norman Dubie, and Barry Hannah. While the early editors solicited most of the magazine's contributions, established writers, once BWR's reputation caught on, began submitting, considering it a top venue for their work. Along the way, literary giants such as Rita

Did You Know?

- Numerous works published in *Black Warrior Review* have been reprinted in the Pushcart Prize series, *Best American Poetry*, *Best American Fiction*, *Harper's*, *New Stories from the South*, and other anthologies?
- *Writer's Digest* once hailed *Black Warrior Review* as "one of 19 magazines that matter"?
- BWR publishes local authors as well as nationally and internationally recognized authors like Pulitzer Prize winners Rodney Jones, Rita Dove, Yusef Komunyakaa, James Tate, Charles Simic, and Annie Dillard?
- BWR originally published an excerpt from Janet Fitch's *White Oleander*, soon to be a major motion picture?
- BWR publishes a chapbook by a nationally recognized poet in every issue and will hold its first annual chapbook competition in spring 2003?
- *Black Warrior Review* needs you on its subscriber rolls? (See our ad on p.4)



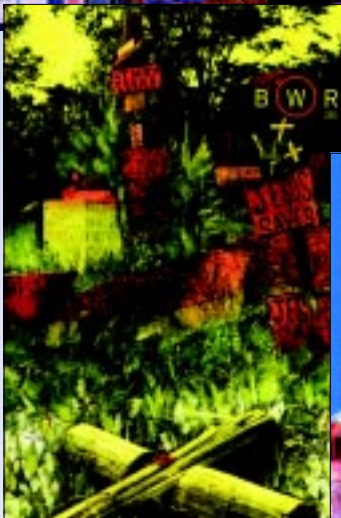
Dove, Rodney Jones, Yusef Komunyakaa, W.S. Merwin, Annie Dillard, and Rick Bass and rising stars like Mobile native Tom Franklin have found their way into the magazine's pages.

One of the unique features of the magazine is the inclusion in every issue of a chapbook—a sizeable selection of poetry—by a well-known poet. In 2003, *BWR* will hold its first annual chapbook competition, awarding the winner with publication and \$1,500. And beginning in October, *BWR* will begin presenting on its web site (<http://webdelisol.com/bwr>) Favorite Fiction, Poetry, and Essays from the 1990s, selected by the current editors.

Like fine wine, *BWR* just gets better with age. Its popularity with both readers and writers alike continues to grow. The magazine now receives about 10,000 unsolicited submissions a year for its two annual issues—a clear indication of its esteemed literary status and the editorial staff's necessarily high standards.

But don't take my word for it. The best way to get in on the secret (and let the secret out) is to subscribe. The Fall/Winter 2002 issue, featuring chapbooks by award-winning poets Molly Peacock and Denise Duhamel and fiction by Anthony Varallo and Bret Anthony Johnston, is due out in October.

Dan Kaplan is Managing Editor of Black Warrior Review.



Clockwise from top left: Covers of Volumes 25.1, 25.2 by Alabama artist William Christenberry. Cover of Volume 29.1, due out in October, by Northport artist Susie Steele. Cover of Volume 28.1 by Kentuck artist Kathy Fetters.

■ How far was I from Alabama now? How far from that ex-wife, the hospital morgue, the incinerator fire? Suddenly I felt detached, as if this part of my life were a narrative, a story where a lonely, unhappy man marries the wrong woman. The marriage fails in a thousand details, scenes like the man slinging his silent wife's puzzle off the table where she's been sitting for days. The man pleading, "Talk to me." The woman standing, looking at the sky in pieces all over the floor. The woman saying, "I'm leaving you."
—From Mobile-native Tom Franklin's essay "Pieces of Sky," published in Volume 27.1

At the 2002 Associated Writing Programs Conference (New Orleans), BWR editors past and present reunited. Some are pictured here, spanning 29 years of UA acclaimed literary magazine's editorial staff. Michael Pettit, Editor in Chief, 1980-82 (MFA '83), Brad Watson, Fiction Editor, 1979-80 (MFA '85), Tim Parrish, Associate Editor, 1989-91, Christopher Chambers, Editor in Chief, 1997-99 (MFA '99), Jeanie Thompson, Founding Editor in Chief, 1974-76 (MFA '77), Jeff Mock, Editor in Chief, 1988-89 (MFA '89), Mitch Wieland, Fiction Editor, 1995-96 (MFA '96), Geoff Schmidt, Fiction Staff, 1986 (MFA '90), David Mitchell Goldberg, Current Editor in Chief, 2002-03.



ANITA MILLER GARNER

How
the
Black
Warrior
Review Was
Won,
a Reminiscence

by Jeanie Thompson

Birmingham, Alabama, 2002—On a hot July day, I have driven from Montgomery to Birmingham with a list of Alabama Writers' Forum appointments. First, I stop at Ebsco Media's production plant on Fifth Avenue South to proof the final galley of the *Writing Our Stories: Anti-Violence Creative Writing Program Curriculum Guide*. I have spent five years of my life nurturing this program, and I'm very close to seeing a tangible outcome of all the teachers' and writers' work. I'm already itching to hold the new baby.

As I walk through the door, leaving Alabama's summer swelter behind, the smell of printers' ink engulfs me – that overpoweringly enticing, chemical smell that says *hot type, dirty printers' room, pages, typeface, the first Black Warrior Review*.

In 1973 the small passel of poets and fiction writers who formed the first class of the University of Alabama's MFA Creative Writing Program were led to dream big. Thomas Rabbitt, our teacher and mentor, urged us to start a nationally prominent literary magazine. John Bensko, who later went on to win the Yale Younger Poets Prize, drew up the original specifications and budget request we presented to the Student Government Association for funding.

Somehow, in the meeting in a seminar room in Morgan Hall where we also had poetry workshop, I was at the head of the table and someone suggested that I serve as poetry editor. Remember, this was 1973, President Nixon was still in office, and we thought "communally." I demurred, contending that Richard Weaver should be poetry editor and that I would do the editor-in-chief job (which I perceived as House Mother to the literati) because Richard knew more about poetry. After all, he'd published a poem (the first he ever sent out) in *Poetry*.

There wasn't a lot of design to it, but I think our innocence, our desire to make something world class, was the catalyst.

I didn't know the first thing about managing a magazine, but I worked with Rabbitt on the fund-raising language, and he helped us solicit work from writers like William Stafford, Marvin Bell, and Norman Dubie. We also sat through the political necessities required to start, and fund, something new.

When Bill Strickland at Drake Printer's in Tuscaloosa asked, "What sort of typeface do you want?" I repeated blankly, "Typeface?" Same with paper, binding, etc. It was Mr. Strickland who taught me all these things – my first on-the-job training – and the way I seem to have learned everything about literary management since.

If you looked back in time, you would see this: a young woman parks her 1965 VW bug in the Drake Printer's parking lot, never dreaming she'll spend eight hours proofing type, while the smell of printer's ink seeps into her bones. She's never proofed a magazine, but she watches as the patient typesetter rolls out the individual page proofs of hot type on a hand roller. *The Black Warrior Review*, volume 1, number 1, Fall 1974. Above the table where she sits hangs a printer's calendar with a cheesecake girl in orange hot pants smiling down at her like a patron saint.

When something doesn't look quite right, she will politely ask the patient man to move a name, or correct an error that she and her staff missed. He will kindly do this, even suggesting from time to time where a line of leading might improve the layout. She doesn't know what leading is but learns that it is actually that: *lead*. And space.

So now through much space, and time, she has been asked to tell how the magazine got started. The new editors, Dan Kaplan and David Mitchell Goldberg aren't from Alabama. They aren't even Southern! She remembers fondly the first *BWR* cover – a Southern bayou scene in black and white shot by Marshall Hagler – chronicler of the Chukker Nation, watering hole of poets, bikers, and dreamers.

There was nothing particularly romantic about *BWR*'s early years, except the fact that we believed, with the beautiful naiveté of youth, that we could actually make a magazine to change the world of letters. We set the bar as high as possible. When I was told that *BWR* had been given the designation a while back as one of the 19 best journals in the country, I was pleased, but not really surprised. Seems like that infectious spirit has been transferred from editor to editor.

Even with the advent during my tenure of "compugraphic machines" that eventually led to much more economical computer-generated type, I think that the smell of printer's ink must have been floating somewhere around Manly Hall. It wafts by, and the editor starts looking out the window at the quad, dreaming about the feel of that newly formed magazine in his hands. Or she opens the carton of newly delivered *BWR*'s and the smell pours out, engulfing her like love.

Jeanie Thompson was founding editor-in-chief, 1974-1976 (first 4 issues), of *Black Warrior Review*. She received her MFA from the University of Alabama in 1977, has published three collections of poetry, and now is the executive director of the Alabama Writers' Forum.

Alabama Humanities Foundation to Honor

HARPER LEE, ALABAMA POWER COMPANY

By Lauren Powell

A renowned storyteller. The former governor of Alabama. A history teacher. Founder of Birmingham's Civil Rights Institute. An Alabama historian and writer. Former Postmaster General of the United States. And now the author of one of the most pivotal books of the 20th century.

Who are these people?

They are the worthy recipients of the Alabama Humanities Award. Given annually to honor an individual in Alabama who has made an exemplary contribution to the public understanding and appreciation of the humanities, this award honors the most dedicated and innovative educators, historians, scholars, and trailblazers in the state. Since 1989, the Alabama Humanities Foundation (AHF) has celebrated their contributions at the annual Alabama Humanities Award Luncheon. As supporters and administrators of some of Alabama's most exciting cultural opportunities, AHF offers this token of gratitude to award recipients for living a well-examined life and making their humanistic ideas and dreams come alive for fellow Alabamians.

On October 3 the AHF will host the 13th annual Alabama Humanities Award Luncheon. Friends and supporters will meet at the Wynfrey Hotel in Birmingham to honor the 2002 award recipient, **Nelle Harper Lee**. A native of Monroeville, Lee is the Pulitzer Prize-winning author of the 1960 classic *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Celebrated for what historian Wayne Flynt calls "its masterful treatment of racial and

class tolerance and understanding," the novel remains popular and is still required reading in schools across America, England, Australia, and Ireland. Keynote speaker for the event is **Dr. Bruce Cole**, chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities. Formerly the Distinguished Professor of Fine Arts, professor of Comparative Literature, and chairman of the Department of the History of Art at the University of Indiana, Cole has written fourteen books, many of them about the Renaissance, including his most recent, *The Informed Eye: Understanding Masterpieces of Western*

Art. Nelle Harper Lee and Dr. Cole will both attend a champagne reception before the luncheon with AHF board members and Patron ticket holders.

The **Corporate Citizen in the Humanities Award** is given at the discretion of the AHF board of directors, at no set interval, to honor a member of Alabama's corporate community for its continuing support of cultural and humanities organizations in the state. **Alabama Power Company** will receive the 2002 Corporate Citizen in the Humanities Award.

Tickets for the event may be purchased by calling the Alabama Humanities Foundation offices at **205/558-3980**. Individual tickets (\$45) and tables of ten may be reserved. For an extra treat, ask about our Patron-level packages, which include valet parking, an invitation to the champagne reception, and other benefits. We hope to see you there!



Lauren Powell is AHF Publications Coordinator.

OPENING THE DOOR

Innovative Book Arts and Creative Writing Projects

by Anne Bailey



So there is the book, and there is the language itself. The letter “D” can be traced back to the ancient Phoenician and Hebrew alphabets and the shape of a doorway. In Greek, the D “Delta” was written as a triangle and also applied to the mouth of the Nile, the river’s delta. Understanding the shapes of an alphabet leads to an opening, a passageway, an access door. Like a book, these doors and openings can be open or closed. One can pass through. One can be blocked. Imagine my first arrival in Hong Kong when I could read only a few Chinese characters. I had no passage of understanding. It was terrifying, to feel so shut out. Of course in Hong Kong there is lots of English as well, so the tendency is to seek out the familiar and the known rather than grapple with the unknown and risk being vulnerable. Fortunately for me, I was going into China to study

Chinese language, and in China, the characters were simplified in order to improve literacy rates. So I had a lot of support. And that’s what we need, support. Whether we are learning to read in English, Chinese, Spanish or Arabic, we need support to make it to the door, to the delta. As we learn the shapes and letters and the combinations that form units of meaning, we move into the doorway. And as we gain access to the world of language in its various forms, we pass through the door; we leave the river and enter the sea—the sea of our own curiosity, meaning, and intelligence.

Language is whole grain richness. There is no stopping language. It moves and changes as we do. It feeds us and we feed it. It both defines us and gives us freedom. Language is a story. It is our history. Whether we realize it or not, when we use words, we reach into ancient roots that are living still. We connect to our ancestors all over the globe through spoken and written language. The languages used today are witness to the curiosity, despair, greed, and love that have moved people and their languages around and around the globe, up until this very moment. Language itself is a living testimony to our epic journey as humans, our struggles and relationships.

Language is a group process. Language allows us to relate to others, to express our thoughts, feelings, ideas, needs, and desires. Language is a living partner in our relationship with the world. This is a mysterious and intense process.

Projects

My professional work is as a storyteller, creative writer, and book artist. I often combine these areas into programs as needed. For example, I was teaching in an art gallery, and I wanted to work with the middle and high-school students in playing with language. As it turns out, the “writing” part of the creative writing was a challenge. The students had little confidence in their abilities to write, and so the program floundered. When we switched to oral work, the students brightened up and started to have fun.

I started to think about how to work with the students to re-create their relationships to written language. How to introduce them to the letter “A” in a way that would make that letter part of their lives? I had an idea. I went to the hardware store and bought a number of packets of paper stencils in different sizes. I bought different sizes. Then I had some card stock cut so we’d have durable paper to work with. At the next class, I put out the stencils, art materials, and paper. We used the stencils to make a word that had some particular meaning to the student. Many of the kids made their own name. Some made “money,” “million,” and “ching,” but there was more—the name of a girl in favor, the name of God, emotions, colors, smells, places. And as they worked, tracing letters and placing them carefully on the paper, they talked. And they discovered by doing. Their comments revealed that they were noticing letters in a new way. They noticed the different qualities of the drawing mediums—pastels, chalks, color pencils, markers. The atmosphere in which we worked

was busy and relaxed. Over a series of classes we created more and more words, and at last, we had enough to build a poem. Everyone was excited about this part. We laid the words out on the floor and started to arrange and rearrange. The process flowed well, and we were at last satisfied with the results. The final step was to mount the giant poem (5'x7') on the wall of the gallery. We all stepped back to look. It was a moment.

In the next session of classes I had the opportunity to work with many of the same young people. I wanted to build on what we'd done with the stencils in terms of developing a personal relationship to language via letters and words, and through a group process of writing a poem. In the first class I asked who liked to read. No hands lifted. "Who likes to go to the library?" No hands lifted. "What do ya'all think about books?" I asked. And there were replies such as "Books are boring" and "They're always trying to make us read books. But I don't like them" and "What do I need books for?" And so we spent that session talking about books and school and what they didn't like.

Despite what they'd said about books, I decided that a bookmaking project was just the thing. I got hold of some old hardback books, enough for each person. I wondered if I could help them reestablish a relationship to books that came from the ground up, that could redefine "book" in their hearts and minds. It seemed to me that a fresh vision might offer them new possibilities, new doors for accessing the world. And I wanted them to have choices in their lives, to have open doors, which books represent in a real way. So the project was designed to introduce them to books in a new way.

We started by de-constructing the old books. I gave them permission to rip off the case binding, which was a great joy for them. "If only my teacher could see me now!" As we worked I explained the parts of a book and how they are structured and why. We removed the book cloth and spine liners. Then we set the cover boards aside.

Next I brought in a dozen or so books of poetry by contemporary poets, mostly urban, hip, some Slam poets, others more traditional, but all poets of color, like the students. We spent the session reading poems out loud. The students were surprised by the poems and by their subjects. When one person could not pronounce a word, others leaned in to help out. We sat in a circle in an environment of relaxed energy. I talked some about poetry, about oral and written traditions, but mostly about how it is our lives.

Our coverless text blocks became journals. Using large markers and pastel crayons, the students wrote over the words printed on the pages of their text blocks. Some wrote poems. Some drew pictures. I put out containers of paint into which they could dip their text blocks. I offered scissors for cutting patterns into the pages, and Xacto knives for carving out sections from pages. There were watercolors and brushes for painting the pages, and glue for making blocks of pages. And in this way the students worked steadily for

the next two sessions. Their innovation was marvelous. They seemed amazed by their work, and by the possibility.

At last we were ready to re-bind the books. So we set to work making the decorated papers that would cover the boards and the spine liner in this "case binding." We used paste and watercolors to create paste papers, which are a typical and traditional method of paper decoration used by bookbinders for centuries. The results were beautiful. The students wanted to make more and more of these papers. After they dried we covered the boards. For the spines I picked a tough material called "Tyvek," which is very difficult to tear and has the appearance of Japanese paper when colored. We colored the material and when it was dry, I showed them how to measure and apply it. At this point some students came up with their own constructions, for they were by now comfortable with the creative thinking that we'd been using. They were learning to problem-solve and to evaluate on their own. They were learning how this thing called "book" works! Some used stencils to apply titles to their spines and covers. Others painted the outer pages of the text block. The books were gorgeous, worthy of any book arts show.

In the last class we set out the books as they would be displayed for the upcoming show. Phrases such as "end papers" and "text blocks" flew around. I said to them, "I have one question. What do you think of books now?" And almost to a person, they replied that "Books are cool" and "I really like making books." We displayed the books to highlight the various particular components of each. The books were beautiful at the show, as were the artists.

Open Doors

There was no study done to determine whether these projects had an impact. My goal was to offer practical information and applications that comes from the heart level, from inspiration. Our sessions hummed. To me, the humming is the impact. Each of us lives a process of creative and potentially open moments strung together. These moments are inherently spacious although we often rush to fill them up. Words, books and stories told can be doors opened for communication. And sometimes doorknobs are in order, to turn our hearts and minds which, when opened, manifest as a world that is vibrant and compelling.

Anne Bailey is a professional book artist, storyteller, and writer in Birmingham, Alabama. She works with schools, libraries, galleries, and museums, the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute, literacy programs, festivals, and hospice and retirement communities. In summer 2002 she traveled to Tepoztlan, Mexico, to study story and myth as part of a grant from the Alabama State Council on the Arts. Anne earned a BA in East Asian Studies from Barnard College of Columbia University New York, and an MFA in Book Arts from the University of Alabama, Tuscaloosa.

University of Alabama Press Announces Prize Winners

The University of Alabama Press has named the winners of its two annual prizes, the Elizabeth Agee Prize and the Anne B. and James B. McMillan Prize.

The University of Alabama Press Editorial Board has named **Jeffrey Alan Melton** winner of the 2001 Elizabeth Agee Prize and **J. Mills Thornton III** winner of the 2001 Anne B. and James B. McMillan Prize. Both winners were honored at a celebration hosted by the University of Alabama Press on July 26, at Old Alabama Town, in Montgomery.



The Elizabeth Agee Prize, awarded annually since 1987, is given to the manuscript chosen as "Outstanding Scholarship in the Field of American Literary Studies." The board chose Auburn University-Montgomery associate professor of English **Jeffrey Alan Melton**, for his work, *Mark Twain, Travel Books, and Tourism: The Tide of a Great Popular Movement*.

J. Mills Thornton III, professor of history at the University of Michigan, has been awarded the 2001 Anne B. and James B. McMillan Prize for his *Dividing Lines: Municipal Politics and the Struggle for Civil Rights in Montgomery, Birmingham, and Selma*. Awarded annually since 1995, the McMillan prize is given for the manuscript chosen as "Most Deserving in Alabama or Southern History or Culture" by The University of Alabama Press Editorial Board.

J. Mills Thornton III



Jeffrey Alan Melton

26th Alabama Symposium

Department of English, University of Alabama: Oct. 31-Nov. 2, 2002

See our website for details: <http://www.as.ua.edu/English>; Contact: cdavies@bama.ua.edu

ENGLISH and Ethnicity

Organizers: Catherine Evans Davies, Janina Brutt-Griffler, Lucy Pickering

Our focus in this symposium will be the use of English as a resource for the representation of ethnicity as an aspect of sociocultural identity. Our theoretical position is that ethnicity is potentially an aspect of the identity of every person, and that English can be used to signal a wide range of ethnicities in a wide range of contexts. Such a position problematizes certain key notions: the notion of identity must be conceptualized as complex, multifaceted, and socially constructed through a process of situated interpretation; the notion of ethnicity must be conceptualized as both subsuming and transcending earlier notions of "race" as well as including a wide range of perceptions of relevant cultural background; English itself must be conceptualized not as a monolithic linguistic entity with one "standard" form, but as a highly complex linguistic construct with spoken and written forms, and a wide range of dialectal variation that can be conveyed through shifts at all levels of linguistic organization (prosodic, phonological, lexical, morpho/syntactic, pragmatic, discursal). The symposium includes papers which address regional, national, and international contexts in the exploration of the relationship between English and ethnicity. We would like to attract a diverse audience, including linguists, literary scholars, creative writers, students, educators, psychologists, journalists, film buffs, and local community leaders. Participating creative writers include Dr. **Alamin Mazrui**, Dept. of African-American & African Studies, Ohio State University: "**English in the Black Experience: A Sociolinguistics of 'Double-Consciousness'**", Professor **Simon Ortiz**, Dept. of English, the University of Toronto, Canada: "**Speaking for Ourselves: Maintaining Native Cultural Integrity Despite Speaking English**", and Dr. **Yunte Huang**, Dept. of English and American Literature and Language, Harvard University: "**The Chinese Experience of Basic English**".

Take a walk down memory lane.



288 pages ISBN 0-8173-1123-8 \$29.95 cloth

The Remembered Gate

Memoirs by Alabama Writers

EDITED BY JAY LAMAR AND JEANIE THOMPSON

This collection of reflective essays—all exploring themes of artistic self-discovery and regional awareness—showcases 19 nationally known writers who have roots in Alabama.

In *The Remembered Gate*, nationally prominent fiction writers, essayists, and poets recall how their formative years in Alabama shaped them as people and as writers. The essays range in tone from the pained and sorrowful to the wistful and playful, in class from the privileged to the poverty-stricken, in geography from the rural to the urban, and in time from the first years of the 20th century to the height of the civil rights era and beyond.

In all the essays we see how the individual artists came to understand something central about themselves and their art from a changing Alabama landscape. Whether from the perspective of C. Eric Lincoln, beaten for his presumption as a young black man asking for pay for his labors, or of Judith Hillman Paterson, floundering in her unresolved relationship with her troubled family, these personal renderings are intensely realized visions of a writer's sense of being a writer and a human being. Robert Inman tells of exploring his grandmother's attic, and how the artifacts he found there fired his literary imagination. William Cobb profiles the lasting influence of the town bully, the diabolical Cletus Hickey. And in "Growing up in Alabama: A Meal in Four Courses, Beginning with Dessert," Charles Gaines chronicles his upbringing through the metaphor of southern cooking.

What emerges overall is a complex, richly textured portrait of men and women struggling with, and within, Alabama's economic and cultural evolution to become major voices of our time.

Jay Lamar is Associate Director of the Center for the Arts and Humanities at Auburn University and coeditor of the anthology Reading Our Lives. Jeanie Thompson is Executive Director of the Alabama Writers' Forum, a partnership of the Alabama State Council on the Arts in Montgomery, and author of four collections of poetry, including White for Harvest: New and Selected Poems.

Contributors

Mary Ward Brown
William Cobb
Fannie Flagg
Patricia Foster
Frye Gaillard
Charles Gaines
Andrew Glaze

Wayne Greenhaw
James Haskins
Andrew Hudgins
Robert Inman
Rodney Jones
Nanci Kincaid
C. Eric Lincoln

Albert Murray
Sena Jeter Naslund
Helen Norris
Judith Hillman Paterson
Phyllis Perry

Alabama

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RED MOUNTAIN POETRY AND FICTION

by Brian Ingram

John Cheever once said that the relationship between a writer and a reader is precisely like a kiss. You can't do it alone. We all know how a moving poem can help us retrieve our best feelings, how the right story can console and encourage. Even and especially in the most difficult times, our perpetual childlike love of a good story endures, as does our delight in the sound and rhythm of words. So when was the last time you sat up on the edge of your seat listening to a poem, perhaps leaning forward to hear better? When was the last time you could barely wait to find out what was going to happen next?

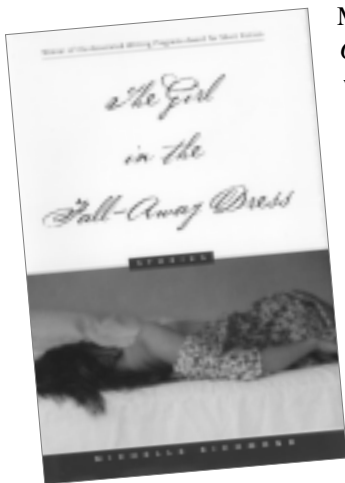
Jefferson State Community College and the Alabama School of Fine Arts are working together this year to host the second annual Red Mountain Poetry and Fiction Reading Series. The schools are collaborating to broaden the access to contemporary literature, to grow our state's literary offerings and to support our writers.

Each institution will host three readings during the school year, beginning in October and ending in April 2003. All events are open to the public and free of charge.

The following authors will conduct readings at the Alabama School of Fine Arts:

OCTOBER 25

Michelle Richmond, a native of Mobile, teaches writing at the University of San Francisco and is a graduate of the M.F.A. program at the University of Miami where she was a



Michener Fellow. Her *The Girl In The Fall Away Dress* won the AWP Award for Short Fiction and introduces us to narrators "bound by history and habit...landscape and lore" to the New South. Her stories have appeared in *Glimmer Train*, *Other Voices*, *The Florida Review*, and other literary magazines. Her novel *Dream of the Blue Room* will be published in 2003.

DECEMBER 6

Robin Behn is a Creative Writing Professor and Director of the M.F.A. Program at the University of Alabama. Her books are *Paper Bird*, winner of the Associated Writing Programs Award Series in Poetry; *The Red Hour*; and *Horizon Note*, winner of the Brittingham Prize. She is also co-editor of *The Practice of Poetry: Writing Exercises from Poets Who*

Teach. A recipient of fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation, the National Endowment for the Arts, and the state arts councils of Illinois and Alabama, her work appears in the Pushcart Prize anthology, *Best American Poetry*, and many literary journals.

JANUARY 31

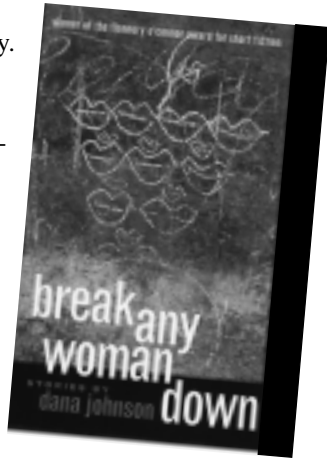
Tom Franklin, the author of the acclaimed novella/short story collection *Poachers*, was born in Dickinson, Alabama. He received his M.F.A. in fiction at the University of Arkansas in 1998. Franklin has been described as a writer who, with eloquent and deceptively simple prose, "will shoot you dead-on through the heart, and raise you up again." Having spent last year as the Grisham writer-in residence at the University of Mississippi where he completed his forthcoming novel *Hell in the Breach*, he will assume a similar position next year at the University of the South.

The following authors will conduct readings on the Jefferson State Scrushy campus:

FEBRUARY 13/14

Dana Johnson, a native of Los Angeles, worked as a magazine editor before completing her M.F.A. at Indiana University where she is now an Assistant Professor of Creative Writing and Literature. Winner of the Flannery O'Connor Award for the collection *Break Any Woman Down*, Johnson's fiction explores issues of race and alienation in the lives of women as they discover their identities through

sexual and emotional intimacy. Her stories have appeared in *Missouri Review* and *American Literary Review*. Her collection will be released as a trade paperback by Anchor Books in March 2003.



MARCH 13

Jeanie Thompson, a founding editor of the *Black Warrior Review*, is the author of three collections of poetry and numerous chapbooks including *Litany for a Vanishing Landscape*, a collaboration with photographer Wayne Sides. Her latest volume is *White for Harvest: New and Selected Poems*. In these poems, the reader experiences, through finely honed imagery, how we all become and grow moment by moment through friendship, pain, and love.

APRIL 17

Natasha Trethewey is Assistant Professor of Creative Writing at Emory University and author of *Bellocq's Ophelia*, a book of epistolary and diary poems inspired by images from portraits in the New Orleans red light district. Recipient of many literary awards, including fellowships in the Arts from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Alabama State Council on the Arts, her first collection of poems, *Domestic Work*, was selected by former U.S. poet laureate Rita Dove as the first recipient of the Cave Canem poetry prize.

Come join our area creative writing students and the Birmingham community as we welcome these provocative, wise, and entertaining voices. We can promise you won't be bored. In fact, you will encounter what Coleman Barks calls "a mouthopen thankfulness for what's put right."

For further information and scheduled times, call Stuart Flynn at the Alabama School of Fine Arts, 205-252-9241, or Brian Ingram at Jefferson Community College, 205-856-7827

Thanks to the generous support of Salle and James Redfield, the *Birmingham News/Post Herald*, the Alabama State Council on the Arts, the Jefferson State Instructional Improvement Committee, the Auburn University Center for the Arts & Humanities, our promotion of Alabama's already rich literary tradition is just beginning.

Brian Ingram, an instructor of English and Creative Writing at Jefferson State Community College, holds a M.F.A. from Vermont College. His stories have appeared in Sou'wester, Spectator, and other literary journals.

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THE WRITING LIFE

ASCA Fellowship Recipients

by Linda Busby Parker

Thomas (T. J.) Beitleman, an Alabama State Council on the Arts Artist Fellowship recipient for 2002-2003, is not a native Alabamian (he was born and raised in Virginia), but has adopted this state as his own. “Partly because I know more about Alabama than about Virginia,” T. J. says. He’s had the opportunity to learn as he crisscrossed the state tracking down research and doing interviews for *Alabama Heritage* magazine, where he served for a couple of years as an editorial assistant and then as editor-in-chief.

T. J. received his MFA in creative writing from the University of Alabama in May of 2001. About Alabama, he says:



T. J. Beitleman

“I’m a big football fan so, like a lot of folks, that was my only real connection to the state. I’ve learned it’s hotter and redder and flatter than I had envisioned. And its energy is so subtle, but inescapable. It’s hard to explain, but there is a sense of his-

tory and tradition that is so palpable to this place. That duality is what I enjoy most—and fittingly, least—about my adopted state.”

T. J.’s fascination with the “place” has fueled his desire to write about it. He’s currently working on a book of essays about Alabama with an eye toward exploring how the state and the South, in general, fit into an increasingly secular age of information, technology, and multiculturalism.

T. J. has also published poetry and short stories in a

number of literary magazines and, for him, each genre fills a different need. “Fiction feeds my need to make sense, my drive to make this world something I’d like it to be. Poetry is otherworldly. I turn to it, usually, when I’m tired of making sense. When I want to create another world, with other rules. Nonfiction is a social responsibility.”

“I know what creative writing is,” he says. “It’s a culture. It has carved itself a niche in academe. That seemed safe way back when the Iowans were holing up to write in the Ivory Tower. The danger there is less that creative writing will be ostracized or squeezed out; more that it will be co-opted. For instance, publication and awards are, for the most part, commodities. You publish to get and keep a job, or to get a better job. And MFA programs are simply oozing graduates. So many beans to be counted. Products over process. That’s the danger.”

For T. J., the joy of writing is in the process because “original writing is original thought.” And that’s what he’s teaching his students as a new faculty member at the Alabama School of Fine Arts. “I’m so excited to be working with these kids. They’ve already dazzled and inspired me—to think, to write, to learn—all in my first week of teaching here.” He’s pleased to be at a place where he can teach several different genres and the most important principle of writing: writing is thinking—original thinking.

James P. (Jim) White is the other recipient of the Alabama State Council on the Arts Artist Fellowship. He could be nicknamed “The Dean,” because he has been engaged in the process of studying, teaching, and writing for nearly forty years. Since 1982, Jim has served as director of Creative Writing at the University of South Alabama in Mobile, and he also holds



Jim White

the title of director and vice-president of the Christopher Isherwood Foundation. This year the foundation awarded eight grants to published novelists in the state of California.

Not only has Jim established his own reputation, but his students—including

Tom Franklin and Carolyn Haines—have also won awards and been published in some of the most competitive venues—*Playboy*, *Atlantic Monthly*, and *Esquire*, to name a few.

Like T.J., Jim has published poetry, fiction, and non-fiction. His first novel, *Birdsong*, a coming-of-age story about two Texas teenagers, was originally published in 1977, reissued by Methuen in 1985, and is currently in its fourth edition (TCWP imprint). He has subsequently published, solo or in collaboration, three other novels: *The Ninth Car* (1978), *The Persian Oven* (1985), and *California Exit* (1987).

One role Jim especially enjoys is that of a preserver of the works of other writers. This is one reason he wrote *Where Joy Resides: A Christopher Isherwood Reader* (1989) and has published articles about James Herlihy (*Seattle Review*) and William Goyen (*Texas Re-*

view). “Writing should not be about the ego,” Jim says. “I enjoy keeping the names and the works of other writers out there.”

In the last forty years, Jim has seen many changes in the life of the writer. There used to be fewer journals and fewer publishers and it was a more intimate world for the writer. “You could count on an editor reading your work,” Jim says, “not a student. And a writer had a personal relationship with his agent, his editor, and the people at the press. It was a much more literary world.”

For the first time, Jim, a native of Texas, is writing about his adopted state of Alabama; he has started a new novel set in Mobile, tentatively titled *The Root People*. He also has written, but not yet published, a novel based on the life and death of his close friend, the writer Christopher Isherwood.

“The Dean” has a few words to say about teaching creative writing as well. “All a teacher can do is to help the student love the art of language and that’s everything a writer needs. A new writer should not think about the money or the fame. Simply love the writing.”

That’s what both of this year’s Alabama State Council on the Arts fellowship recipients do—they love the writing and are engaged fully in the process of original thinking and creating the art of language.

Linda Busby Parker is a writer, living and working in Mobile, and is a full-time student in the Spalding University low-residency MFA program.

Southern WritersFest

October 26, 2002

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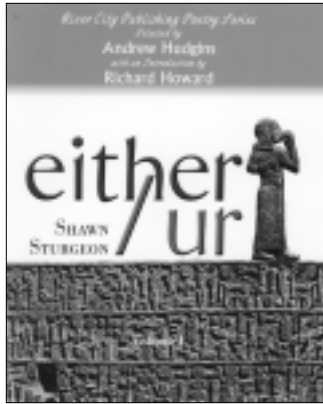
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Reviews



Either/Ur

By Shawn Sturgeon

River City Press, 2002
\$20.00 Cloth

Shawn Sturgeon's first book of poems is also the first in the River City Poetry Series, which aims to feature "books of national appeal by rising stars in the world of poetry." Seventeen of the book's sixty-one poems

have been published in the prestigious *Paris Review*, and another sixteen in the *Western Humanities Review*. Poet Andrew Hudgins selected this volume and will serve as series editor. Although Hudgins is from Alabama, Sturgeon teaches at Emory, and River City is in Montgomery, there is nothing of a limited regional nature about this book.

If you were to browse through *Either/Ur* in a bookstore, it might seem off-putting initially. Picking up the book and reading a few poems at random, I was at first uncertain how to approach them—lyrics, postmodern pastiches, twenty-first-century takes on the Metaphysical wits? Leaving categories aside, I turned the poems about in my head like strange new objects and found that I simply liked them. The title, *Either/Ur*, signals the binary-and-beyond playfulness of language present in these poems, and the further play on Ur—an ancient Sumerian city but also a prefix meaning the first one, original, or primitive—prefigures Sturgeon's preoccupations with history and origins.

In many of the poems, an unnamed "we" speaks, a sort of floating historical group voice that might turn up in Etruscan, Minoan, Roman, medieval, or something like the present times. By turns angry, resigned, uncertain, curious, regretful, this plural voice provides a parallel take on historical events from the perspective of the masses, not the kings, and in some ways stands in for contemporary Americans by suggesting that kingdoms rise and fall but people always find ways to go about their daily business. Sturgeon's casual, sometimes slangy, language reinforces this sense of contemporaneity; "On the Origins of Art" begins, "My god, not another revelation/while we stand in the rain, the priest going/on about the uses of sacrifice . . ." In "The Completion of the Phoenician," the speaker notes that "the Phoenicians have just sailed around/Africa!" and later

remarks, "Our Africa!/We hope to visit next year, take the kids/on tour, paint a picture for you—the cost//of departure, we're told is down two goat!" For the most part, the choice of an informal voice works well with Sturgeon's subjects.

The book is divided into three sections. The second, "Fables for Beasts," contains twenty poems in the voice of a speaker called Coyote. Composed of two stanzas of six lines each, the Coyote poems reminded me of both John Berryman's *Dream Songs* and George Starbuck's *Standard Length and Breadth Sonnets*. Sexy, funny, playful, with a dark edge, these poems reveal a mostly lovable rogue who finds himself in the strangest situations—about to be sacrificed by the Aztecs, for instance. Trickster figure, cartoon character, rake, Coyote is a source of imaginative transformation and a mischief-maker, a syntax-bending creative force who can't be tamed.

Linguistically lively but with a lyrical sensibility and a wide-ranging historical consciousness, the poems of *Either/Ur* aren't like anything I've read in a while. These poems are original, provocative, and intriguing. Read them first as you might listen to music, letting the sounds and images collide, and see where they take you.

Jennifer Horne is Poetry review editor for First Draft.

Greatest Hits: 1972-2000

by Robert Collins

Pudding House Publications, 2002
\$8.95 Paper

Robert Collins' most recent chapbook is an intriguing amalgamation of poetry and prose, the artifacts themselves prefaced with careful explanations of their origins and significances to the poet. Collins' *Greatest Hits: 1972-2000* is the 112th number in the Greatest Hits Series published by Pudding House press, and the idea behind the series is a deceptively simple one: find a poet whose work constitutes, in the words of the publisher, an important contribution "to literary arts," then have that poet select for publication twelve of his or her favorite poems. A slim volume, the collection is still very much a blend of Collins' different voices, both poetic ones spanning thirty years of the "spiritual journey" Collins describes writing as being for him, and the more tentative, even self-deprecating voice that is the poet trying to explain himself.

There are distinct phases in the poetry contained in the chapbook. First, there are persona poems and a dramatic monologue from Collins' first two chapbooks, mostly focusing on the *ars poetica* theme (here, Collins is at his most self-deprecating when he describes what he sees as his largely failed attempts to fully realize this idea). These are followed by poems influenced by different incarnations of family, both that of Collins' own childhood and the one into which he later married. The final, most recent grouping focuses largely on the questions of faith and Catholicism, and Collins' changing impressions of both. I was moved by Collins' account of hearing a couple make love in a hotel room next to his and the somewhat surprising understanding the speaker there accomplishes, sharing a failed experience of love rather than succumbing to a rehearsal of the pain of the speaker's own singularity. And I love the idea of the cardboard brain that the bachelor-turned-husband-and-stepfather finds in his new garage and shapes into a kind of hostile marker of the speaker's own reluctant transformation into those roles. But I most enjoyed the newest poems in the collection that explore Collins' Catholic childhood—the emblematic “Stanley's Confectionary,” the masturbatory “Dominic Savio Club,” and particularly, the chapbook's final poem, “Taking the Pledge,” a piece about the speaker standing in church as a boy,

about to swear I'll never take a drink,
and trying to ignore the troubled man
trembling unshaven across the aisle,
biting his lip and knuckling the pew,
ashamed of what little he remembers
of last night's raucous episode

In a way, this poem ironically and most unselfconsciously realizes the *ars poetica* project with which Collins initially describes himself so often struggling. While the earlier poems, “The Rainmaker,” “The Inventor,” and “The Glass Blower,” all create personas behind which the poet can fix his ideas into expressions at once both beautiful and distant, there is nothing beautiful about the scene in “Taking the Pledge.” Rather, the poem offers a kind of Dickensian hindsight to the poet/speaker, both in terms of the story that the man “knuckling the pew” can't remember, and the significance of that story to the speaker himself. Unaware, of course, of the “trembling, unshaven” man's role as an unhappy representation of his own future, Collins' young pledge-taker is an innocent, about to get lost in his own history. Rather than adopt a voice that doesn't quite do what Collins wants it to, here he simply defers to the voice that will all too soon speak for the speaker himself:

At thirteen, I'm too young to comprehend
all this. Obedient, ecstatic, I say the words
“I swear” too loud as he begins to falter,

ahead the many nights I'll babble wildly
in tongues, blood changing into wine,
certain I've no need of miracles.

The way in which memory works here, failing everyone really until recollected in the relative tranquility of the poem, is to me the most honest and compelling example of the art of Collins' poetic endeavors. It's the metaphor inherent in the everyday, the symbol in the sidewalk, if you will, that brings forth the truest expression of the power of this poetry. Hardly babbling “wildly/in tongues,” Collins' selection of his own “greatest hits” lays bare the many steps of the long walk this poet has taken. At thirteen, he is “too young to comprehend/all this”: now, he's too wise to pretend that “all this” can ever easily or succinctly be comprehended at all. As he says in his introduction, it's the journey that matters.

Greatest Hits 1972-2000 ends with an odd feeling that, somehow, Collins has in fact just begun it.

Linda Frost is associate professor of English at the University of Alabama at Birmingham and editor of the women's literary journal, PMS poemmemoirstory.

Islands, Women, and God

Paul Ruffin

Browder Springs, 2001

\$16.95 Paper

Ruffin's work has been compared with that of William Faulkner and Flannery O'Connor and certainly the plots and themes of this collection of short stories bears much resemblance to the work of those two masters, but Ruffin's work also embodies more than just traces of the short stories of Ernest Hemingway. The literary world that Ruffin creates is a masculine one populated by men fishing, hunting, and defending their property. In fact property plays a big part in many of the stories of *Islands, Women, and God*.

In “The Pond” Gerald Roper trespasses on a neighbor's pond in order to catch fish for his family and fishes up a dead pig, which he believes to be his dead girlfriend. The meaning of the story turns on the relations of property and propriety connecting women to domestic animals. Unable to control or understand women, many of Ruffin's male characters turn to violence or isolation.

Violence is also evident in the story “The Sign” as a son returns home for a family reunion. The son has suffered abuse at the hands of a violent father, which has given him an intolerable vision of the evil that lurks below supposed domestic bliss. “It is easy to imagine love at a distance, where little lights twinkle in from beyond the trees and you are driving alone in the dark, even when you know, deep

down, that the stabs of light are coming from hovels as desperate as the one you grew up in, with misery and disappointment and pain.”

Along with this vision, however, is his total disdain of religion as his father claimed to be an instrument of God when he beat him. “You have transgressed and God must punish. My hand and arm and the belt are just His instruments.”

One of the best stories in the book is “Island, Women, and God.” The story involves Ray, a man who fakes his own death in order to escape the responsibilities of family life and live “without all the complications that go along with having a job and a house and cars and stuff.”

The alienation of Ray and a number of Ruffin’s other characters doesn’t stem, like Hemingway’s, from the trauma of war or the defeat of radical political and social ideals. As the narrator describes Ray, “this guy wasn’t exactly the hippie type. Just a conservative good ol’ boy. He didn’t go to the War, but he would have if he’d got called, and he never got involved in all that flower-child shit, never wore his hair real long, never carried a protest sign.”

Ray justifies his rejection of society and responsibilities in a kind of New Age spirituality—a kind of anti-humanist pantheism. Ray claims that “over there” (in society) “man” is nothing but a scarecrow; “Out here he’s more. He’s everything. He’s a skull full of lightning. He’s—he’s God, or he’s soon going to be, because God is all of this.”

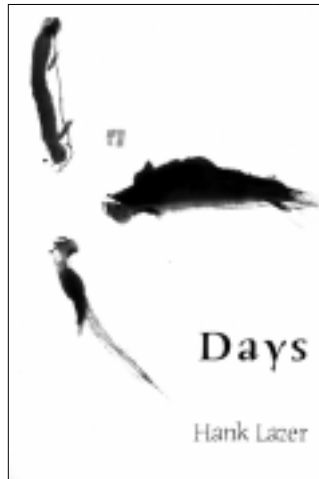
For Ray, like Robinson Jeffers whom he quotes approvingly throughout the story, “man” is corrupted and degraded in society and can only achieve transcendence by breaking away, rejecting society, and abandoning the possibility of social change to retreat into a solipsistic solitude.

One of Jeffers’s favorite themes was the intense, rugged beauty of the landscape in opposition to the degraded and introverted condition of modern man. Influenced by Nietzsche’s concepts of individualism, Jeffers believed that human beings had developed an insanely self-centered view of the world, and felt passionately that we must learn to have greater respect for the rest of creation.

This rejection of the social, and with it the abandonment of the possibility of social change, is romanticized as a moment of authentic insight and as some kind of innate male condition. As the story concludes the narrator muses on Ray’s escape; “I guess when the time’s right, when I’m old enough, the call will come. Some day like this, with the storms striding across the Gulf, and me standing out here waiting, hoping that when the sign comes, I’ll know what I’ve seen and have the strength to go.”

Ruffin is a fantastic chronicler of the lives of white middle-aged males and as such it is a partial view, an insight into the male psyche of a certain group of men as they struggle to find their place in relation to islands, women, and God.

Grant Pheloung teaches English at Auburn University. He is a frequent reviewer for First Draft.



Days

by Hank Lazer

Lavender Ink, 2002

\$14.95 Paperback; \$50

Limited edition set, includes CD, signed copy, broadsheet, and handmade slipcover

“This is a book filled with joy.”—Lyn Hejinian

In the space of a year and a day, Hank Lazer wrote over 400, 10-line poems to experiment “with the re-

sources and possibilities of the short line.” Very intriguing are Lazer’s short lines, along with his hand-written marginalia. The stylized lines (word-space exaggeration, columns, scrambled lines) are packed with a year’s worth of days, a thousand stories: “we eat breakfast / i show her things that rhyme with it.” What a complicated and wonderful book he has written/spoken/thought. *Days* represents a real triumph (struggle) in Lazer’s ongoing juxtaposition (cloning) of avant-garde writing (“blay, qazell, digl”) with lyricism (“your fundamental calm”). In *Days*, he has successfully engineered a vehicle for what he calls “new modes of lyricism.”

Although Language writers such as Lazer do not implement conventional poetic forms, they often use other “forms.” In *Days*, Lazer has chosen a ghostly Fibonacci-like structure on which to hang his “verbal amulets.” In his “Note” at the end of the book, Lazer tells us that he committed 234 poems to *Days*. However, not including the introductory poem, only 147 poems made it into the 160-page book. The book’s first poem (following the introductory poem) is on page 1; the last poem is on page 233. Given that each poem is one page in length, Lazer actually skips page numbers. What’s most interesting, though, is the pattern behind these skips.

The pattern of page number skips always results in a single sum (86) or range (0 to 86). Place the actual page numbers side by side with Lazer’s assigned page numbers into a spreadsheet and the iterations seem endless; the common result is always 86, or the range 0 to 86. It’s interesting to note that “86” is restaurant parlance for “hold the [e.g.] mayo”: cheeseburger, extra pickles, 86 (nullify) the mayo. Even though Dr. Lazer assured me (via e-mail) that the patterns I had uncovered were new to him, for the curious reader, even more “number mysticisms,” as he calls them, await.

A professor of English at the University of Alabama since 1977, Lazer is also assistant vice-president for Undergraduate Programs and Services. His long career as poet/writer/teacher began within traditional schools of poetry. Gathering an international reputation over the past 20 years as a leading

avant-garde critic and writer, Lazer has never completely abandoned those lyric roots that nourished him. *Days* is a continuation—better yet a Brilliant Corner—of Lazer’s critical and personal intrigue with the rifts (and a method to exploit/explore/close those rifts) between lyric and avant-garde writing. An earlier example of this is Lazer’s critically acclaimed *Doublespace* (Segue, 1992), which is two books in one: Book One, a selection of free form poetry (clear and lyric), bound with Book Two, a selection of Language writing (bearded and theatrical). The book certainly highlights the dual talents of Lazer as a mellifluous, as well as a dysphoric, writer.

Where *Doublespace* leaves Lazer as a linguistic mediator of the expression of ideas, *Days* places him in an even more precarious position as a lyric expatriate who feels as “far away from the sacred as I’ve ever been,” immersed in a “yellow elemental silence.” At times, Lazer seems to mourn the prospect of “being in love with emotion,” while “everyday is doubt.”

“Luckless structures,” “no toe hold,” Lazer, at times, seems ready to abandon ship. But he has chosen to sail on. “Oh great joy,” he writes. “The sum of things [86] does not vary.” *Days* is his “way of staying in touch” with a lyricism that often “seems” abandoned. The book is a highly personal, journalistic rendering of Lazer in his medium (median/mean/mode)—a success, I think, of Lazer’s desire to join his forces to the greatest purpose, that of self-fulfillment (“hawk [Hank] with squirrel in talons”) and the resultant expression of joy that follows (“rack ‘em & break ‘em”).

Russell Helms is an editor with Menasha Ridge Press in Birmingham. His writing has appeared in journals such as Birmingham Poetry Review, Vagabond, the Poetry Conspiracy, Freedom Isn’t Free, Aura, and others.

The Long Journey

By Wayne Greenhaw

River City Publishing, 2002
\$25.95 Cloth

In this entertaining, journey-as-metaphor novel, one of the South’s most versatile writers balances high adventure narrative with introspective characterization and graceful, scene-setting description. It’s the spring of 1919 in Town Creek, Alabama. Harold Reed, who at sixteen is impressionable and not worldly-wise, must go to Decatur—at best a two-day trip, on a long, lonely road—to meet his brother Bosworth, a soldier returning from the Great War. Proud to be entrusted with this mission, Harold is also apprehensive: “It wasn’t the kind of trip you took without some strong thought and mighty consideration, even when the ultimate goal was of a higher calling.”

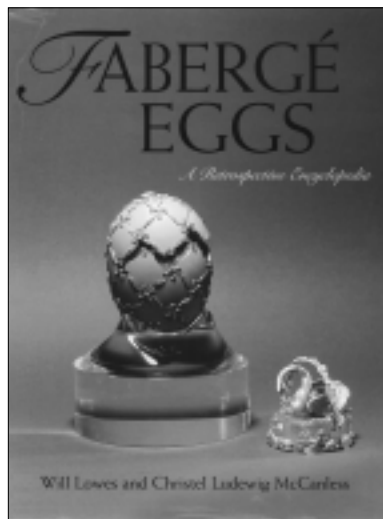
His initial companions are the horse he is riding and the one he’s pulling. Soon he’s joined by an Irish musician in a

Confederate uniform, a Greek circus performer in a hot-air balloon, and Powtawee, a Cherokee girl. This newfound camaraderie comes to a horrifying halt when a storm destroys the balloon, impaling its driver on a tree branch, and injures Powtawee. The reader may be disappointed that these colorful characters are dispensed with, but the void is quickly filled by others just as interesting.

In the sophisticated town of Decatur, Harold is seduced by two females. The first is an elegant woman old enough to be his mother, the other a young soiled dove he meets in Moccasin Alley. While waiting for the train to arrive, he takes a courageous stand against the Ku Klux Klan and plies his trade as a shoeshine boy. The emotional reunion with Bosworth provides an epiphany, as Harold resolves to help his war-damaged brother on the latter’s long journey to recovery.

The satisfying ending includes a summation from an older, reflective narrator: “After my trip to Decatur I became eager to experience new adventures.... I set my sights on a far horizon, a purple haze glowing with possibilities, a simple, almost silent, always sensuous, and mysterious sound, beckoning. When I traveled, I listened to the poetry of the road resonate in the atmosphere, and its echo kept me company, even when I was alone.”

Julia Oliver



Fabergé Eggs

A Retrospective Encyclopedia
by Will Lowes and
Christel Ludewig
McCanless

Scarecrow Press, 2001
\$65 Hardback

Christel Ludewig McCanless of Huntsville, Alabama, teamed up with Will Lowes of Adelaide, Australia, for her second art history refer-

ence book on the ever-popular subject of Peter Carl Fabergé (1846-1920), the Russian court jeweler for Tsars Alexander III and Nicholas II. Her first book, *Fabergé and His Works: An Annotated Bibliography of the First Century of His Art* (Scarecrow Press, 1994), is still the standard in the field.

This retrospective single-volume encyclopedia is illustrated with beautiful four-color photos for some of the 66 eggs discussed. An introductory essay is the first ever to outline the personal relationship between Fabergé and the two women he

served, the Tsarina Alexandra and her mother-in-law, the Dowager Empress Marie Fedorovna. Another essay traces the Imperial Easter eggs after the fall of the Romanov dynasty.

The major portion of the book provides comprehensive information about the 66 Fabergé eggs, including the names of the work master and his assistants (where known), the marks, the materials used, dimensions, technical descriptions, background notes, provenance detail, all known public exhibitions, and extensive reference citations in many languages.

The “Who’s Who” section profiles over 500 artisans and companies who worked for, or with, Fabergé. It includes work master marks and important archival material. Two appendices detail Fabergé egg auctions between 1934-1997 and over 100 exhibitions worldwide. A glossary of technical terms completes the volume.

Students of art history, artists making jewelry, or those engaged in enameling work, as well as art historians, will be fascinated by the minute size of some of the eggs produced by the House of Fabergé between 1885-1916. The descriptions of the automatons and surprises contained in the delicate Fabergé eggs are rich background material for an opportunity to enjoy and study these eggs in museum exhibitions worldwide.

Readers of the encyclopedia will discover the mystery and intrigue of how these eggs were first presented to the Tsarinas at the turn of the century and then learn how they survived the political upheaval of the Russian Revolution and the rise to power of the Communist regime. In the late 1920s these eggs began coming to the Western world and as recently as April 2002 the 1913 Winter Egg realized \$9.6 million at an auction in New York City.

Betty Grisham, a silk screen artist and art educator for 19 years, lives in Huntsville. The Betty and Charles Grisham Collection of Buccellati Animals made by the descendants of a mid 18th century goldsmith family in Milan, Italy, is on display at the Huntsville Museum of Art until November 24, 2002.

Tenderfoot Teacher

Aileen Kilgore Henderson

TCU Press, 2002

\$15.95 Paper

Aileen Kilgore Henderson, in the 1950s, was a *Tenderfoot Teacher* in Texas, as this volume of collected letters is entitled. She was also dedicated to her multigrade students, keenly observant of the flora and fauna so new to her Alabama-native eyes, and appreciative of the people, who befriended her in the vast Big Bend region of the Rio Grande.

During World War II, Henderson was among the women who volunteered for the WACs, which broke the gender barrier of the armed forces. Letters from her experience then

(*Stateside Soldier*, Univ. of South Carolina Press, 2001) show that she was stationed for much of her service time in Texas.

There, she writes in a brief prologue to *Tenderfoot Teacher*, she heard of Big Bend, the “wild and beautiful area—where panthers roamed free, where lost treasure waited to be found, where ghosts haunted the Chisos Mountains.” During her two-year time as a Texas teacher—she was also principal and janitor!—she did indeed see a panther, found the Ranger who soon after became her husband, and made many friends who joined her in admiring the sun’s glow on the Chisos.

She begins as “A Greenhorn in Wild Country.” Her first letter from Panther Junction, written before school had started, already shows observations of and enthusiasm for her new home: “the mountains...look more beautiful each day. When the folks point out Alsate, the Apache chief who haunts the Chisos...I examine all the peaks in sight.” Very soon she is no longer a greenhorn but like others there remains a pioneer in the sparsely settled country: at first, power comes from a generator (not always reliable); teen students (in school for the first time) drive many miles to attend; friendly skunks and foxes come to her patio to be fed and noisily wake her early if she’s forgotten to leave food.

Enjoyment of this new life is the main tone of these letters: affection for the children: “My dear Eligio...He is so thin and anxious of the other children’s approval”; relish of the local barbecues, including son-of-a-gun stew; appreciation of the desert in springtime bloom. There are minor limitations. Groceries, ordered by midweek mail, are delivered by Willie from the nearest, distant town only once weekly. Rattlesnakes come out on the trails. And the annual train trips home are long and tiring.

A few of the letters describe dangers. Once, on a picture-taking hike with a young friend, they are caught by a sudden storm in a steep canyon. Henderson described growing panic: “We both thought about water roaring down the canyon—it was so narrow where we were there wasn’t even a ledge we could climb up on to escape the torrent.” On another outing, a group gets caught in cross currents on the river and fears their rubber rafts will be torn by rocks in the water. For a time during her second year, a constant wind blows up a duststorm to clog everyone’s breathing; two small dogs die of dust pneumonia.

Photos of the author, her schoolchildren, friends, and some of her scenic expeditions enhance the book. The publisher might make one addition to a future edition: a sketch map of the canyons, arroyos, peaks, and trails of the Big Bend area described in these letters. They were first written to family members and now are edited to share with readers of the *Tenderfoot Teacher*, who came to feel that “I shall never be any place that I shall love more than this.”

Joan Nist is professor emerita at Auburn University and once taught at Austin College in Texas.

A Storm in Flanders:

The Ypres Salient, 1914–1918: *Tragedy and Triumph on the Western Front*
by Winston Groom

Atlantic Monthly Press, 2002
\$27.50 Cloth

*In Flanders Fields the poppies grow
Between the crosses, row on row.*

These are the first lines of the most famous World War I poem, “In Flanders Fields,” by the Canadian Major John McRae, who was *there*. McRae’s friend had just been blown to bits and, within twenty minutes of the burial, McRae sat and wrote his poem.

Winston Groom quotes it in *A Storm in Flanders*. He could have used it as an epigraph as well. The fighting in Belgium, in Flanders, from 1914 to 1918, was incessant, but flared up into four horrendous battles. Hundreds of thousands of men died in spans of less than a week, to gain, and then give back, a few yards of land. Reading this book, you wonder how anybody could have stood it for four hours, never mind four years. But they did.

In the First War 9 million soldiers from 26 countries died. Not civilians, military men: 1.8 million Germans, 1.3 million Austro-Hungarians, 1.7 million Russians, nearly a million British subjects and former subjects, 1.4 million Frenchmen, and 615,000 Italians. Some 50,000 Americans were killed. Is it any wonder this war looms larger, almost obsessively so, in the minds of Europeans than it does in the minds of Americans? The German thrusts through Belgium and at Paris stalled into trench warfare, as we all know. Why then, did the casualties become so obscene? Groom explains.

To begin with, technology had again outstripped the tactical imaginations of the generals. Men were massed and went “over the top” to be cut down by long-range pinpoint artillery and by the newly invented machine gun. Pill boxes and other defensive emplacements were concrete, not piles of brush or wood, although towards the end of the war, corpses were occasionally used as parts of the parapets. This was building material abundantly available, after all.

The Germans, already famous for their industrial know-how, developed the flame-thrower, which threw an oily flame 75 feet. Four hundred British were roasted alive in the first flame-thrower attack. The Germans also introduced gas warfare, which had been outlawed by the Hague Convention of 1907, which the Germans had signed. The German chemicals factories back home first sent up chlorine gas. When some defense was found for chlorine, Phosgene was developed and employed and then, towards the end of the war, the infamous mustard gas. It would be a useless exercise to rank these in order of obscenity.

Although everyone knows something about WWI, how it comes out—we won, for example—it is fun to come upon

bits—not trivia—but *bits of information* we didn’t know. For example, there is the myth of Chateaux generals, British officers safe in comfort, far from the front, eating caviar and drinking champagne while their men suffered and died in the mud and horror of the trenches. Groom remarks that 232 British generals were casualties, 78 of them killed. An extraordinarily high figure.

I also was intrigued by “The World’s Biggest Pig-Sticking.” The British naval blockade made food scarce in Germany. But as Groom puts it, “some genius” pointed out that there were 25 million hogs in Germany and they ate more potatoes and grain than the entire human population. So the Germans killed the 25 million hogs and then, for several months, “binged in a gluttony of pork until they were virtually wursted and brattened to their limits.” Later, of course, there was no pork.

Equally fascinating to me was Groom’s description of the war underground. English and German miners were employed to dig long, dangerous tunnels beneath no man’s land, fill them with explosives, and blow the enemy lines up. On some occasions this worked very well. At the Messines Ridge, ten thousand Germans were sent skyward in a single moment.

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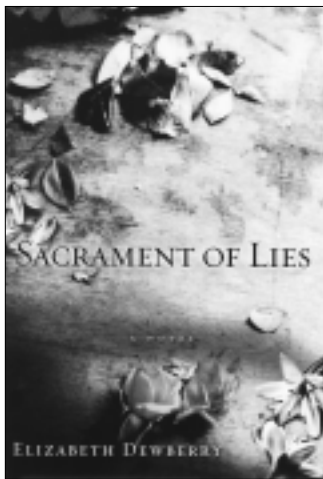
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Adding to his narrative overview, Groom from time to time zooms in on a particular British or Canadian or German soldier and follows his progress, quoting from his journals or letters home. He quotes numerous times from one German corporal, Adolf Hitler, who *did* fight on the Flanders front for four years and never overcame his bitterness at the German loss and humiliation.

Groom does a fine job of describing the battles and life at the front in this small place for four years. He may seem to some an unlikely author for such a book. Many may know him only as the author of *Forrest Gump* and think of him as a humorist. But remember, Gump served in Vietnam; Groom's first novel, *Better Times Than These*, is a war novel; his interview book, *Conversations with the Enemy*, is about Vietnam, and his previous work of history, *Shrouds of Glory*, a Civil War book, is also military. Groom is as much a military writer as he is anything.

Professional, academic historians will probably either pretend not to notice this book, or else criticize it as amateurish. Let them. Groom is writing for the common reader, not history professors. There are very few footnotes in this book. In a perfect world, in which we all had an ocean of time to read, we could indulge ourselves and read all we wanted. I would like to read a hundred books about WWI. When I had finished, I would have a good idea of what happened. Sometimes authors do this for us. Groom *has* read a hundred books about Flanders, digested them, processed them through his own consciousness, and in his own sometimes ironic, even sarcastic, voice has now given us a narrative summary, a synthesis of what he believes happened there, and this man can tell a story. We either trust his account or go read the hundred books for ourselves.

Don Noble is host of Alabama Public Television's BookMark and Alabama Public Radio's "Alabama Bound."



Sacrament of Lies

By Elizabeth Dewberry

Blue Hen Books of Penguin
Putnam, 2002
\$23.95 Cloth

Take a dash of Louisiana politics, add murder and a bit of madness, toss in a few ghosts and serve it Mardi Gras style. You have the perfect recipe for the latest psychological thriller novel by Elizabeth Dewberry.

Writing in a strong first-person narrative, Dewberry tells the story of Grayson

Guillory, daughter of the governor of Louisiana. Grayson is reeling from her mother's death only a year before. She knew her mother was mentally ill, suffering delusions, but the strange circumstances under which she died are extremely troubling.

Grayson discovers a video her mother made while living in the Governor's Mansion. Her mother reveals that someone is trying to kill her by drugging her. The fact that her mother is heavily medicated for mental illness makes Grayson question if the drugs are making her mother delusional or if she could be telling the truth.

Grayson must work her way through this terrible revelation. Who would have motive and opportunity? Who would gain by the death of this mentally ill woman, her dear mother? If there is indeed a conspiracy, how does Grayson figure out what it is? Dewberry shows her mastery of intrigue while viewing characters and events through a kaleidoscope of psychological levels. Everyone close to Grayson must be examined as a potential murderer.

The first and most obvious turn focuses on Grayson's father, Governor Guillory. The governor has lofty ambitions—he's eyeing a run for the presidency. His marriage to a mentally ill woman would have squelched his chances. He has complicated matters by quickly marrying Grayson's mother's sister, Audrey. But does this mean her father is a murderer? What a ghastly thought!

Grayson focuses even more tightly, this time on her partner, Carter, an aide to Governor Guillory. Carter is a carbon copy of the governor. Grayson had found that very appealing at first, but now she questions what the future holds in a marriage to a man so blinded by ambition that he is unable to see the pain it causes others.

Carter's stunning reaction to Grayson's concerns drives her even further into a state of paranoia. But then this makes Grayson just like her mother.

Since Grayson is a practicing Catholic, her faith figures prominently throughout the novel as she searches for truth.

Grayson plunges deep into her own psyche to try to understand what could be happening to her. Maybe she is losing her mind. Or, could she be the next target? Dewberry has done a superb job in maintaining the level of intrigue from the first few pages with credible and appealing characters. The setting of New Orleans during the height of Mardi Gras gives flare and color.

I very much enjoyed this latest novel by Dewberry, who has written two others: *Many Things Have Happened Since He Died* and *Break the Heart of Me*. Expect more exciting thriller novels from this Alabama native who resides in the Florida Panhandle with her husband, novelist Robert Olen Butler.

Marianne Moates is a freelance writer who lives in Sylacauga, Alabama. She is the author of Truman Capote's Southern Years (UA Press) and is a book columnist for The Daily Home in Talladega, Alabama.

Talk

A Novel In Dialogue

Corey Mesler

Livingston Press, 2002
\$14 Paper

Son of the civil rights activist and socialist Hunterbear Gray, John Salter has lived in eight states and worked as a convenience store clerk, a postmaster, and the director of a California Indian Education Center. He has drawn upon his past experiences to create *Alberta Clipper*, named for the sudden snowstorms that sweep across the northern plains, his first short story collection. Reminiscent of Richard Ford's *Rock Springs* or Raymond Carver's *So Much Water So Close to Home*, these stories are about people seemingly trapped by economic or domestic circumstances. As John Salter comments, echoing Carver on the inspiration of domesticity, "I wrote most of the stories with babies squirming on the carpet beneath me."

Salter's experiences of working among the kind of characters that populate his stories means he can impart a kind of sensitivity that is often missing from other story collections that take the same blue-collar themes and settings. Many of these characters feel trapped, desperate, and isolated, but Salter never suggests a kind of individual moral failure. There is no condescension from the author here because he knows this kind of life. Characters in the stories genuinely struggle to find warmth and human connection in the world that seems threatening and foreboding. In one of the best stories in the collection entitled, "The Bear's Fourth Leg," a boy is killed by the rural mail carrier who flees the scene of the accident. Like the story "Three Drum Theories," "The Bear's Fourth Leg" focuses on the differing reactions and emotions of the people involved in the incident. The story's emotional power comes from the understated and sparse language that Salter uses to describe and finally bring together the disparate elements of the story uniting the dead boy's mother and the deputy investigating the accident in a powerful closing image.

Infidelity is a recurring theme in Salter's stories and is also central to Corey Mesler's *Talk: A Novel in Dialogue*, which unsurprisingly is praised by Frederick Barthelme. Like Barthelme's stories in *Moon Deluxe*, Mesler's setting is the milieu of the middle-class male who, having a materially fulfilled life, still finds something missing.

The coercion of all this good life: I *must* be happy. And I am, I am. So why am I so batty? Why are my nerves stretched taut? Why is every day a struggle just to keep myself pointed forward? Why am I as nervous as a cat, just this close to full-blown panic attack, even alone in my home, just me and my thousands of books and my VCR and an old black and white movie to watch? Why should I be suffering the slings and ar-

Alberta Clipper

John Salter

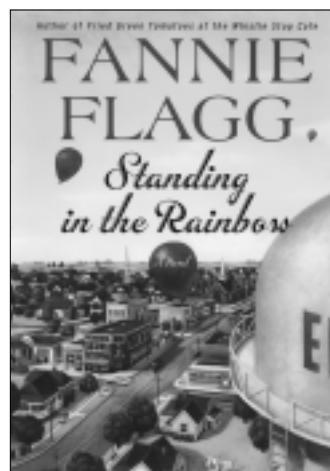
Livingston Press, 2002
\$12.95 Paper

rows of outrageous contradiction, of deep-seated depression in the face of bright sunshine?

Mesler's lead character Jim, a book shop owner, is witty, ironic, and suffering from a kind of generalized anxiety. "Hell, I worry about everything... Driving, crowds, being alone, crime, losing love, losing sexual interest, grocery shopping—I worry about grocery shopping" exclaims Jim in a dialogue with an unnamed friend. In spite of his tendency to fear and loathing Jim still wants to connect with the world and the "great unwashed masses." The novel emphasizes the alienation of the lead character by being constructed entirely in dialogue. This technique can be seen either as allowing the reader the freedom to construct the deep motives and internal struggles of the characters as they talk or it could suggest that the depth model of human consciousness is in fact a myth or that we are nothing outside of the talk. Perhaps that we are all merely constructs trapped in language. Like many of Salter's characters, Jim, the protagonist of Mesler's novel, seeks a resolution of the contradiction he faces in an extra-marital affair that becomes largely a meditation on the nature and boundaries of infidelity and the careful management and perhaps reconciliation of his anxieties.

The novel is certainly smart, funny, sexy, and wise with its snappy urbane dialogue, but it also raises important contemporary issues about consciousness and language and how these things connect us socially.

Both these works raise the issue that in spite of the presence of material abundance there is still a dissatisfaction, disaffection, and anxiety at the heart of contemporary American culture. Salter and Mesler in their works articulate and negotiate this anxiety in different ways and in different settings, but they are united in the fact that this dissatisfaction is more than just a mid-life crisis writ large and instead suggest that it may be an inherent aspect of contemporary consumer society.

Grant Pheloung


Standing in the Rainbow

by Fannie Flagg

Random House, 2002
\$25.95 Cloth

In her beguiling fourth novel, Alabama-bred Fannie Flagg expertly guides some mostly loveable characters through most of the last half-century. The multi-storied epic begins in 1946, the

year after World War II ended. As noted on the title page of the first section, the mood is “hopeful.” The United States is the best possible place to be: “After all, we had invented everything in the world that really mattered. Hot dogs, electricity, milkshakes, the jitterbug, baseball, football, basketball, barbecue, cap pistols, hot-fudge sundaes, and banana splits. We had Coca-Cola, chocolate-covered peanuts, jukeboxes, Oxydol, Ivory Snow, oleomargarine, and the atomic bomb! We even reached out and helped pick up and dust off Japan and Germany after we had beaten them—and if that wasn’t being a good sport, what was?”

In a sense, the fictional town of Elmwood Springs, Missouri, where all these people live or visit (or move to, or leave), is the protagonist. The catalyst for much interaction is a wonder woman, Dorothy Smith, who appeared in Flagg’s 1999 novel, *Welcome to the World, Baby Girl!* Married to the town’s only pharmacist, mother of two, “Neighbor Dorothy” is also “the lady with a smile in her voice” who, every weekday morning from her kitchen, broadcasts a radio program of gentle gossip, letter reading, recipe sharing, guest performers, and spontaneous renditions on the organ by her resident mother-in-law. Mother Smith leads off with “On the Sunny Side of the Street” and can be counted on to come up with just the right music to blend with Dorothy’s commentary.

Another regular on the show is the “Little Blind Songbird” who rents a room in the house next door until Dorothy arranges for the girl to fulfill her dream of adventure and travel. The Smiths’ boarder, Jimmy Head, is the short-order cook at the Trolley Car Diner. The town doesn’t yet have apartments and hotels, so families consider it a civic and Christian duty to share their homes. “Bachelors needed to be looked after, and single women certainly had to have a respectable place to live.”

The door is always open at Doc and Dorothy’s house. The traveling man who wanders in, thinking it’s a restaurant, is given a place at the table. When he tries to pay, he’s informed there is no charge; they were just so glad to have him. (In one of many imaginative plot twists, this hospitality is repaid in spades.) The Smiths’ mischievous son Bobby is a major role-player until he grows up, midway in the novel. Others include tractor-salesman-turned-governor Hamm Sparks and his timid little wife, Betty Raye, who escaped one life in the limelight only to find herself in another, and the town’s long-suffering beautician, Tot Whooten, who introduces herself to “The Public” in a sassy prologue: “I’ve never been to jail and I am most probably older than you are unless you have one foot in the grave and in that case, Hello, friend.”

As Neighbor Dorothy might tell her listeners, here are just a few of the gems that await you when you open this treasure-trove of wit and wisdom:

“Gospel singing was good for the soul but bad on the gallbladder.”

“Although it was not quite true, Anna Lee [Dorothy’s daughter] would rather walk through fire than ever disappoint her mother again.”

“Men are just like gardens. You have to tend them every day or they can go to seed.”

“Sometimes in life you just get lucky and hit the right combination.”

“What stood before him now was the Rolls-Royce of womanhood.”

“What the hell is AARP? It sounds like a dog throwing up.”

The book’s title is credited to one of Dorothy’s correspondents, a woman who found the end of a rainbow. She and her family got out of the car, stood in the spot, and felt “truly blessed that day.”

Our world of books is truly blessed to have Fannie Flagg.

Julia Oliver lives in Montgomery. She is the author of three books of fiction, including a 2001 novel, Music of Falling Water. Her first novel, Goodbye to the Buttermilk Sky, is available in a reprint edition from the University of Alabama Press.

The Heaven of Mercury

by Brad Watson

W.W. Norton & Company, 2002

\$23.95, Cloth

Brad Watson writes with great authority about the supernatural, ghosts, and weird occurrences in the everyday world of a place he calls Mercury, Mississippi, patterned after his home town of Meridian.

Ever since Brad Watson was a reporter in Montgomery for *The Alabama Journal* I have been following his work. A few years ago W.W. Norton published his fine collection of short fiction called *The Last Days of the Dog-Men*, which was an admirable showcase of stories set in Alabama and the South. But it was minor league compared to this magnificence, a saga of four lives intertwined through the ages and into after-life.

His description of Birdie Wells Urquhart’s late-life house: “The room contained, as if sealed there, the chilled stale odor of a neglected museum dedicated to the finer middle-class living room in the 1940s. Heavy furniture with thick and gnarled wooden protrusions like mummified hands at the ends of the armrests, no give he knew to the cushions beneath fabric developing the sheen of old clothing mothballed for years, springs as hard as the springs on the rear axle of his truck.”

We are seeing the place, experiencing it, through the eyes of another principal character, Finus Bates, who has been in

Continued page 28



Welcome to the *Alabama Center for the Book!*

The Alabama Center for the Book makes an inaugural splash this fall with a weekend-long celebration in Montgomery, including a Gala Dinner with Fannie Flagg, the “Telling Alabama’s Stories” festival, and a lecture by artist Charlotte Riley-Webb co-sponsored with the Rosa Parks Library and Museum.

The Alabama Center for the Book (ACFTB) is the 42nd state center named by the Library of Congress. Its mission is to promote books and reading throughout the state. It is a partnership organization that sponsors public programming on books and writers, disseminates information on books, literacy and reading, and highlights Alabama’s rich literary culture and heritage. As an affiliate of the Library of Congress, it also promotes national initiatives on books and reading.

Gala Dinner with Fannie Flagg



Best-selling author and Alabama native Fannie Flagg will be the guest of honor at a gala dinner on Friday, Sept. 27, 7-9 p.m., at Troy State University Montgomery. The event is sponsored by the Alabama Writers’ Forum, the Alabama Public Library Service, Capitol Book & News bookstore, Auburn University’s Center for

the Arts and Humanities, and TSUM.

“I am thrilled and honored to be able to participate in the first Alabama Center for the Book dinner. I am proud to be an Alabama writer and I cannot think of a more worthy cause,” said Flagg from her home in Montecito, CA.

Tickets are \$50 and include a signed hardback copy of *Standing in the Rainbow*, Flagg’s new novel. Tickets are available at Capitol Book & News in Montgomery (334-265-1473) and at the Alabama Center for the Book in Auburn. (334-844-4946 or www.alabamabookcenter.org). Don Noble, host of Alabama Public Television’s *BookMark*, will emcee the evening.

Telling Alabama’s Stories

Tall tales, grandfather stories, myths, legends, and make believe—you won’t believe the tales you’ll hear in Kiwanis Park at Old Alabama Town on Saturday, Sept. 28.

On that day, Old Alabama Town will host “Telling Alabama’s Stories,” a day-long celebration of storytelling featuring nationally and regionally acclaimed tellers, including Dolores Hydock, Joseph Trimble and Deborah Adero Ferguson, “The Dancing Story Lady.”

Telling will begin at 10 a.m. and admission is \$5 per family or \$2 for individuals; children 6 and under are free. Tickets will be available at the gate. Refreshments will be available.

“Telling Alabama’s Stories” not only highlights Alabama’s rich storytelling heritage but also complements First Lady

Laura Bush’s “Telling America’s Stories” National Book Festival, to be held in Washington, D.C., on Oct. 11-12.

“Painting the Dance Steps Between the Heart and the Mind”: Artist Charlotte Riley-Webb



On Sunday, Sept. 29, at 2 p.m., the ACFTB and the Rosa Parks Library and Museum will co-host a special lecture by Atlanta-based artist Charlotte Riley-Webb. Like her artistic forbearer Jacob Lawrence, Riley-

Webb explores the narrative potential of painting.

An exhibit of her work will be at the Rosa Parks Museum in September and early October. Called “Stories of My America,” it was inspired by a discussion with the artist’s grandson about a painting called “Walking North” which created an opportunity for sharing and learning. Riley-Webb describes her work as “contemporary realism with a flair for the abstract.” How abstract depends, she says on “what happens in the space between the telling of the story and the way that I receive it.” The lecture is free and open to everyone interested.

Hosted by Auburn University in the offices of the AU Center for the Arts & Humanities, the ACFTB is directed by Allen Cronenberg; its honorary chair is Kathryn Tucker Windham. Cronenberg notes that the events of this September will serve to introduce the Center to the citizens of the state and set the stage for upcoming programs and initiatives. Future events include a state literary festival, planned for the last weekend in September 2003; Letters About Literature, a national program in which young people write letters to an author—living or dead—whose work has had an impact on them; and a web-based clearing-house for information about literacy efforts in the state. For more information, check the ACFTB website at www.alabamabookcenter.org or call 334-844-4946.

love with Birdie ever since they were young teenagers, when he'd stepped into the brush to relieve himself near Chunky River in 1917 and spotted the naked Birdie: "Ample in the hip yet augmented in protruding carnality of bone, pelvic jut like a smooth white plow, a sweet little benaveled pooh, and shoulder blades beautifully awkward as the small futile wings of a hatchling. He gazed through the leaf lattice at the immaculate cradled shading of her visible ribs, smooth and defined of faint bone shadow, and the delicate scoop from which her long slim neck rose into an oval face made beautiful in this light and unselfconscious nakedness."

As Birdie cartwheels across his vision, Finus's heart aches for her, but it is the smooth and sultry Earl Urquhart who wins her hand, and Finus is left with the other girl, Avis Crossweatherly, whose personality matches the contradictions of her name and whose own sadness is a weighty burden throughout their tale of wonder and woe. Spicing and souring the landscape is Earl's sister Merry, a gorgeous creature as sexy as her brother, earthy and teasing, full of herself, tainted by bad breath and an uncompromising heart.

Written with a poetic detachment, the words sting as the author paints with bold and passionate strokes, filling the countryside with tiny details that rub through the senses like a pretty girl's kind word or a fingernail across a blackboard, all filled with measured emotion.

As the bard of Mercury, Finus, editor of the *Mercury Comet*, chronicles the lives of its citizens through the obituaries that make him famous among his readers. It is with a touch of brilliance that Brad Watson is able to view his characters through Finus's words, through his 20/20 vision, his aging middle-class wisdom, then back away to the Picasso-like cockeyed view of the maid Creasie and the witch woman, Aunt Vish, casting cloudy voodoo spells that never quite appear in clear focus, seen instead through the kaleidoscope of shapes and sizes, unfolding until the last sentence is stretched out in front of the reader.

Others have likened Watson's writing to other writers. To me he is a singular writer. He casts his own spells. His words are without equal. His sentences — often too long and too complex — reach a crescendo through love and lust, through honor and disloyalty, through hurt and hate and sweetness and glory, through the now and the past and well into the future. They tumble out, like the land, like the hurricane that destroyed Birdie's childhood home.

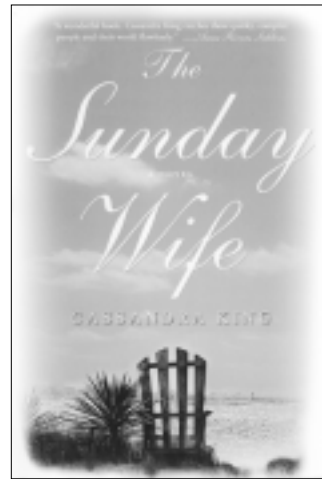
Although his world is as real as Birdie's living room, it is wild with ghosts that float through the rarified clouds high above Mercury, higher even than the highest building and the tower beacon of WCUV-AM from which Finus broadcasts his well-chosen words every morning to the world of Mercury.

Throughout the tale — a tall tale, at that, like a long shaggy dog story — their lives are laced together through the fabric that is Mercury, Mississippi, a place but not a place, as mildly mythic as a made-up land, as real as the tall Confederate monument that stands in front of the courthouse,

yet as unreal and as imagined as Aunt Vish's potion. But what is real? And what is unreal? Which has the most power: a bomb? or a well-fashioned paragraph?

Such are the truths of Brad Watson's powerful story, *The Heaven of Mercury*, to be read and enjoyed, then rediscovered and experienced thoroughly again and again.

Wayne Greenhaw is a writer who lives in Montgomery. His latest book is a novel entitled The Long Journey, published by River City Publishing.



The Sunday Wife

A Novel

By Cassandra King

Hyperion, 2002

\$23.95 Cloth

All eyes of the holier-than-Thou Crystal Springs congregation are on the newcomers. Dr. Benjamin J. Lynch walks into the room, his hair perfectly in place. A trademark dark suit, silk tie, starched white shirt, and fine leather shoes highlight his dashing looks. Behind him

wanders his spouse, Dean. The new minister's wife is dressed in a denim skirt and her best white cotton blouse. Her hair is set back in a modest ponytail.

While the preacher greets his adoring congregante, Dean melts into the background of her husband's glowing halo. The church ladies immediately scrutinize the new preacher's wife. Yet they fail to notice that buried beneath Dean's placid eyes, a spark is about to ignite.

Cassandra King is a woman on fire, in this, her second novel, *The Sunday Wife*. King takes stock of all that is revered in the church as well as all that is often only whispered or expressed with raised eyebrows in vestibules and backroom committee tête-à-têtes. From this she whips up one of the most compelling and yet sobering stories about the South, religion, betrayal, and pleasing others over one's self. *The Sunday Wife* is a riveting account of one woman's struggle to define herself within the confines of religious double standards.

Ben Leach, a golden boy, is reassigned from a twenty-year stint in Jacksonville area churches. He recognizes the opportunity of a lifetime in tiny Crystal Springs and begins to make his ascension toward his future clerical throne. The only obstacle is his wife, Dean. Ben carefully directs his hill-billy dulcimer-playing spouse to be on her "P's" and "Q's" in attire, entertaining, and in carrying out her churchly duties.

From Dean's point of view, "He was the esteemed man of God, me the thorn in his side."

Our heroine immediately finds herself living a fish-bowl existence surrounded by religious piranhas hiding behind "saccharine-sweet smiles." Nevertheless, Dean does everything she can to maintain her role as the supportive preacher's wife. She joins the choir, gives piano lessons, and slaves over home-cooked meals.

Among the female members of the church, Dean eventually stumbles upon another misfit, Augusta Holderfield. In the self-exiled congregant Dean finds a kindred spirit. Augusta leads a life of passion and spontaneity: whether taking off on secret escapades or dousing her cares in a Jose Cuervo margarita or catching the local Moral Majority in sinful acts, Augusta has a vibrant exuberance that Dean secretly admires. The two women soon develop a deep friendship.

Augusta and her wealthy husband, Maddox, have mysteriously left the congregation. Upon learning of their social importance, Ben methodically maneuvers his wife to sway the Holderfields back into the flock. As she begins to spend more time with the intriguing couple, Dean becomes close to their son, Gus, a sensitive child who suffers from recurring nightmares.

Within Augusta Holderfield's small circle of friends are two devoted male partners, Rich and Godwin. Augusta introduces Crystal Springs' most eccentric and blissful couple to Dean. Despite his old-money standing and peaceful existence, Godwin is scorned by members of the church and his own family. Through the hallowed brethren's vile rejection of Rich and Godwin, King masterfully weaves an enlightening relationship of true love and commitment between two people of the same sex.

Intrigued by local outcasts, Augusta stumbles upon Madame Celeste. Augusta insists that Dean go with her to visit the infamous Madame. The story quickly shifts into full dramatic gear as the fortune-teller offers a look into the future, causing traumatic fear for both Augusta and Dean.

In one of the most affecting scenes in the book, Augusta bursts into the formal right-wing Eagle Forum weekly luncheon. Behind her are two accomplices, Dean and Madame Celeste. The group leader, Annie Laurie Glasscock, another church busybody, is leading the meeting. "From her neck hung a chain and a jeweled gold cross the size of a hammer," writes King.

When the tall, mysterious Reverend John Marcus Vickery appears in town, the congregation comes out in throngs to meet their highly esteemed former minister. With his vivacious charm, political ties, and glossy Hollywood looks, Vickery is a man of God destined for the highest ecclesiastical stars. But the high and mighty Vickery has a dark side, known only to Dean Lynch.

Deftly decorating her narrative with subtle nuances of the Florida Panhandle towns of Seaside, Grayton Beach, and Apalachicola, the Alabama-born, South Carolina-based

writer has crafted an enchanting portrait of the South. Anyone who has eased into the exotic world of powerful storytellers, like Anne Rivers Siddons or Sena Jeter Naslund, will notice an affinity to King's clear and polished prose. Look for *The Sunday Wife* to leap straight onto the *New York Times* bestseller list soon after its fall release.

Elisabeth A. Doehring's reviews appear in Troublesome Creek Times (Hindman, KY) and Lewis County Herald (Vanceburg, KY) as well as in Kentucky Monthly Magazine (Frankfort). She lives in Mobile.

Cracker's Mule

By Billy Moore

Junebug Books, 2002

\$12.95 Paper

In *Cracker's Mule*, Billy Moore gives readers the story of an Eisenhower-era summertime for an 11-year-old boy in Opp, Alabama. His parents have sent "Cracker" from north Florida to his grandparents', Papa and Bigmother's farm, to escape the polio epidemic. Moore has written an appealing tale of countryside youthful activities reflected by the author's mature memory.

The book starts out at a livestock auction where Cracker advises Papa to buy a mule—gentle, obedient, and sturdy. Soon after the sale, however, he realizes that Mr. Sam Ray has sold them a blind animal. "What you going to name it?" his grandfather asks. "I'll call him Mr. Sam."

This introduction to the mule follows Cracker's own dictum, learned from a library experience that will resonate with many readers. Hastily checking out *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, he finds "I'd never been so put out with a book in my life. I swore right then that if I ever wrote a book, I'd have a title that told what the book was about." He was disillusioned by a long volume about Notre Dame that didn't have "the first thing to do with football."

Other mules are featured: mean Lucifer that the "peckerwood" men trick Cracker into riding, a potential catastrophe which turns into success; and Old Doc's Henny Jenny, the smooth-gaited mount who at first outsmarts Cracker each time he tries to catch her. Amid chores, church-going, and family gatherings, Cracker enjoys fishing in the creek (despite cottonmouths) and causing commotion for his sissified cousin Cuddy (who ridicules their storm shelter). But he also worries about his grandparents' health and their money shortage.

Some chapters are suspenseful short stories on their own, like the afternoon at Horny Head Hole when Cracker dares to cut into the fang marks on the head of Ring the dog to push out snake venom. Another time, when a tornado whips

Continued page 32

A New Look at Mobile Literary Giant William March

by Charlie Smoke

Who is William March? Ask that question of most people on the street and they will tell you that they've never heard of the author some people compare to William Faulkner and whom Alastair Cooke considered "the unrecognized genius of his time." Beginning with his World War I novel *Company K* (1933) and ending with his best-selling *The Bad Seed* (1954), March produced an impressive array of novels and short stories, most set in Alabama—and, according to filmmaker Robert Clem,

most "unjustly neglected." Born in Mobile in 1893, March died in 1954, just as *The Bad Seed* was being made into a Broadway play.

Through his Foundation for New Media Inc., Clem has undertaken to spark new interest in March's achievement by producing a documentary on the writer's life. Entitled *William March and Company K*, it includes a dramatization of March's first novel. With funding from the Alabama Humanities Foundation, the Blount Foundation, the Sybil Smith Trust, and the M.W. Smith Foundation, the documentary is nearing completion and will be screened as part of a celebration of March's work on Wednesday, October 30, at the Saenger Theater in Mobile.

The program will begin at 5:30 P.M. with a screening of *William March and Company K*, followed by an informal discussion featuring the filmmaker, Dr. John Hafner and Dr. David Sauer (Spring Hill College), Dr. Sue Walker (University of South Alabama), and John Sledge (*Mobile Register*). After a break for pizza and beverages, the program will

conclude with an 8 p.m. screening of *The Bad Seed*, a film based on March's novel and Maxwell Anderson's dramatization. Tickets for the entire program, an official Mobile Tricentennial event, are \$10 for students, \$15 for adults.



Photos of William March



Scenes from the film Company K.

March, born in South Alabama as William Edward Campbell, was one of 11 children whose father struggled to make ends meet. He joined the Marines and served in France during World War I and was decorated three times for bravery. As Clem notes, *Company K* is based on March's experiences and succeeds in "capturing the individual experience of war in terms both intensely realistic and beautifully poetic."

March came to Mobile after the war and secured a position with the Waterman Steamship Corporation, eventually becoming one of the company's top executives. He began writing in the 1920s, and his work met with immediate acclaim. By the mid 1930s, March was able to retire from Waterman to write full time, producing such novels as *The Tallons* and *The Looking Glass*, as well as *The Bad Seed*.

Clem, a native of Alabama and a graduate of Birmingham-Southern College, earned an M.F.A. from NYU's Graduate Film School and served as a fellow at the Sundance Institute. A noted writer, director, and producer, he has won a number of awards for his work, and his films have appeared on public television, the Arts & Entertainment Network, the Discovery Channel, the Learning Channel, and networks abroad.

This project grows out of the Foundation for New Media's mission to create media programs that are

"educational, informative, and rooted in the arts and humanities, providing discerning audiences with an alternative to commercial movie and television."

The Foundation made the award-winning documentary *Big Jim Folsom: The Two Faces of Populism* and

has just completed *The Diary of an Unknown Aviator*, a film about three southern aviators portrayed in the novel *War Birds*. Other Foundation projects have included numerous radio programs, among them *Hamilton v. Burr: A Strange Case of Homicide*, *The Untouchable Dr. Wilson*, and *Charles Chesnut: The Inner Life of Slavery*, with

Ossie Davis. After an anticipated broadcast on public television, *William March and Company K* will have an extended life on DVD and videocassette, including additional material, made available to Alabama schools.

For more information about the screening of *William March and Company K*, call the Mobile Arts Council at 251-432-9796.

William March and Company K Screening
Panel Discussion
Viewing of *The Bad Seed*
Wednesday, October 30
5:30 p.m.
Saenger Theatre
Mobile, Alabama
Tickets: \$10 students; \$15 adults
An Official Mobile Tricentennial Event

Charlie Smoke became director of the newly created Community Development office with the Mobile Arts Council after leaving WHIL-FM (Mobile's public radio station), where he had served for two years as an announcer and thirteen years as program director.

through, the storm shelter protects them, the postman, and neighbors, including the Thomas family, which is “colored.” But Papa is left outside. Only when he returns safe does Cracker feel “the world was back to normal.”

Humor is interspersed: to his posterior’s detriment, Cracker’s uncle JB gets in Ring’s way when the dog chases Roman candles on the fourth of July. And from Cracker’s eclectic reading, which includes fishing magazines at the barber’s, comes a judgment to amuse academics: in intelligence, Cracker figures that “fish were only about three smidges below a college professor.”

Cracker’s Mule may be enjoyed by good readers of the protagonist’s age. But as Harry Potter has shown, a well-written work can attract an adult audience. Moore’s book, in its episodic structure and detailed evocation of a happy boyhood almost fifty years ago, will appeal to those who appreciate reading about a time rich in Southern tradition.

Joan Nist

The Secret Names of Women

By Lynne Barrett

Carnegie Mellon University Press, 1999
\$15.95 Paperback

In her second collection of stories, Lynne Barrett, one of the featured writers at this year’s Gulf Coast Conference for Creative Writing, shows us women on the go, savvy thirty-something women, saddled with bird-brained conventional mothers, ineffectual fathers, in search of provisional identities, ways of looking at themselves. They have either come from somewhere or are on their way somewhere. Names figure prominently, given names, names put on or married into. In “Meet the Impersonators!” Sue Drum (nee Drummond), a drummer and songwriter in a Pittsburgh punk rock group, loses her lover, Lawrence Nash, when he hits the big time with a new name, Kid Orchard. Sue longs for Nash to get his Nashness back, but she knows she is stuck in the perpetual motion of ongoing moments. “When I hit the drum, the people move. It’s simple. Hit the drum. People move.”

In “To Go,” Florida cracker Ruth Anne Reedy puts on a new identity like a new hat—becoming Ruth Anne Wheeler through a bad and brief marriage, then Ginger Reed, exotic dancer. To please her lover, B. K., a beauty products salesman she is tooling around Florida with, she changes her name to Carrie Hull, after a girl B. K. knew in high school. B.K. dies of a heart attack in a fast food parking lot, and Ruth/Ginger/Carrie joins up with a group of fundamentalist women in a blue bus, Christ’s Songsters, as Carrie Hull, second soprano. As long as she’s on the move she’s safe.

In “The Former Star Carlson,” a Texas woman impulsively decides to marry an Estonian graduate student—she

wants to be able to say to herself she has been married; he wants to tear up his green card and make some money. Star’s father named her Estrella, after her Mexican grandmother, but Mom stepped in to change her name to Star, after the Lone Star State. Star becomes Star Essaloonis, impersonating a wife to fool the INS. She may soon become Mrs. Robert Brandenburg, who is Essaloonis’ INS contact. Or will she sleep with Bob and move on?

Impersonation and appropriation are ways for women to cope, Barrett implies. In “Hush Money,” an older woman, Wanita Donofrio, tells Annie O’Malley, a gardener for movie stars, about double dating with Norma Jean Baker during the Second World War. After Wanita marries her wartime sweetheart, Jimmy (Blue Eyes) Donofrio, and Norma Jean has become Marilyn Monroe, Wanita realizes that Marilyn has been trading on Wanita’s at the time unrecognized breathily sexy voice. Marilyn tells Wanita, “I didn’t just learn your way of speaking, I had to—I had to give mine up.” In return for Wanita’s silence, Marilyn persuades her producer to sell Wanita and Jimmy land upstate and later pays the mortgage off. At the end of the story, Wanita does an imitation of Marilyn for Annie. “I was stunned. Her voice had been a powder puff, a cobweb of sex.” But sexuality, allure, it’s all a game for Wanita anymore. She warns Annie to watch out for the cannibals in L.A., and Annie replies, “They won’t get me.”

Barrett’s women have authenticity. She knows what they wear, the kind of music they like, what moves them, what turns them off, and she lets them reveal themselves with dead-on precision. The women know what they don’t want: the same old thing all over again. Mothers have a lot to do with the same old thing, almost as much as lovers. In “Beauty,” we get a mom who for thirty-three years has given her daughter, Susan, a Barbie doll for her birthday. Mom has also labored over her sewing machine to create a Barbie outfit in keeping with the zeitgeist—in 1959, a full skirt; an A-line dress in 1962; in 1969, for “Hippie Barbie, an India-print skirt with flecks of mirror.” After getting pregnant in the back of a hatchback, Susan decides to leave home and have the baby in California. “You told the thing inside her—a dragonfly, a pollywog, or smelt—I’ll take you out of here to a place where the wind is a kind of breath, where whales swim by.” On her way, Susan tosses out a Barbie doll every hundred miles. She imagines the Barbies taking root and growing tall, “casting their beautiful shadows over the land.”

What these growing Barbie dolls signify awaits another book. Perhaps Barrett will write an Annie O’Malley novel, using her talent for fiction to give us a wised-up Alice in cannibal country or La La Land. As for the secret names of women, most of these women are impersonators, unwilling to dredge up secrets. The ultimate impersonator may be the author herself, putting herself *en situation*, without making a fuss or imposing judgment.

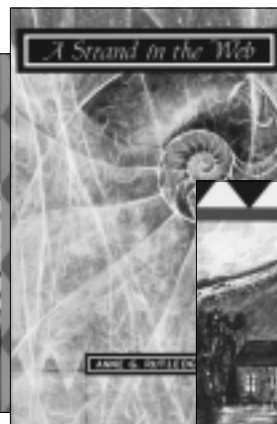
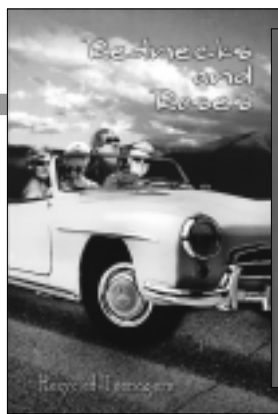
Charles Rose is a writer who lives in Auburn.

BookBriefs

“Learn from the elderly, live a better life” is the rallying cry of a group of writers in Jasper, AL, who have published a collection of their work under the title *Rednecks and Roses* (1stBooks, 2002, \$9.95). Perry “Woody” Woodley, a retired army man and former POW, and Jessie Abbott, an 85-year-old former civil servant, are among the contributors. The group of writers came together in a Walker College creative writing class, begun in 1993 and led by Tammy Townsend, and have been supporting each other’s literary work ever since. The book is their first publishing collaboration and is dedicated to the late Bart Country, a founding member of the group whose work is also included in the collection.

Thomas Bobo’s *I Dared to Try* (Court Street Press, 2002, \$14.95) traces the inspirations and challenges of a life spent in the Alabama educational system. Employed by the Montgomery Public School System from 1958 through 1993 (the last seven years spent as superintendent of the system), Bobo oversaw one of the most trying and important periods in the system’s history: federally mandated integration. But as Dot Moore (*Oracle of the Ages: Reflections on the Curious Life of Fortune Teller Mayhayley Lancaster*) has written, Bobo was “unwittingly” prepared by “a supportive community, a loving grandfather, parents who treasured their only child, and cousins and aunts and uncles and even an unfriendly banker who begrudgingly loaned him the money to go the University of Alabama.” The book offers inspiration and encouragement; as Bobo writes, “although education is still not equal in this country, we have to push children to dream, to try.”

Poet Anne G. Rutledge believes in the interconnectedness of things, and her new book, *A Strand in the Web* (Rutledge Expressions, 2002, \$14.95), testifies to a life spent discovering and following connections. Her poems touch on personal history; her home, Number Eight in the miners’ quarters of Birmingham, and her father: “They called him Uncle Snap cause/ he took nothing off nobody no time.” They also record the personal impact of events like the assassination Martin Luther King, Jr. Alive to the possibilities in sources as varied as African fables and proverbs to speeches by Senator John Kerry, the Huntsville resident brings the personal, political, spiritual, and creative together in her work. A former board member of the Alabama Writers’ Forum, Rutledge’s work was included in the anthologies *Been in the Storm So Long* and *River Crossings*, *Voices of the Diaspora* as well as in the *Birmingham World* and *Morena: Women of Color Empowering Our Communities*.



Don Keith’s *The Forever Season* (UA Press, 2002, \$18.95) will be re-issued this fall by the University of Alabama Press in its Deep South Books series. Originally published by St. Martin’s Press, the novel tells the story of a gifted scholar athlete who finds both his love for learning and for playing football challenged when he attends a major southern university. The novel, called by *Bookpage* “so much more than a sports story,” won the Alabama Library Association’s Fiction of the Year Award in 1997.

The Soul of Southern Cooking (NewSouth Books, 2001, \$17.95) by Kathy Starr is a collection of recipes that grows out of a “hard-scrabble heritage” and a love of good food. In her foreword, Vertamae Smart Grosvenor states, “Volumes have been written about ‘new’ regional American cooking.... But...there is still much we do not know about the old American cooking, especially African-American cuisine,” which “until recently was not even considered ‘cuisine’—but just ‘soul food,’ a cookery that...jst ‘grew’ from Massa’s leftovers.” Starr’s book goes a long way toward filling the gap. Organized by seasons, it includes such offerings as Fair Deal’s Saturday Night Chitterlings (named for Starr’s mother’s café), Fried Corn Straight from the Garden, Fist Biscuits, and Ambrosia. Complementing the recipes are family stories and cooking tips—“Mama says never put a raw rib on the grill before barbecuing. The ribs must be ‘jecked’ first. ‘Jecking’ is slang pronunciation in the black culture for ‘jerking,’ which, in this case, means boiling.”

The Cahaba Trace Commission, which recently published Norman McMillan’s *Distant Son: An Alabama Boyhood* (2002), has brought out Charles Edward Adams’s *Blockton: The History of an Alabama Coal Mining Town* (2002, \$30). From the founding of the town in Bibb County by a former Union Army officer and a New York engineer to a devastating fire in 1927 that destroyed a large part of the town to the closing of the mines, the book delves into the public and the private stories of this multinational and multiethnic community. More than 240 pictures illustrate the book.

Literary News

Readings and Author Series

Poet **Peter Huggins** will give a reading at "Books Sandwiched In" at the Tuscaloosa Main Library on December 10 at noon. For more information about the program or the series, call the library at 205-345-5820.

The **University of Alabama Bankhead Visiting Writers Series** has been announced for 2002-2003. Programs include

- October 3 **Lynn Pruett & Michelle Richmond**
- October 17 **Carl Phillips**
- October 25 **Felix Jung**, lecture on Flash technology for writers
- November 1 **Yunte Huang & Simon Ortiz**
- January 16 **Donald Revell**
- February 20 **Robert Creely**
- March 27 **Aimee Bender**
- April 17 **Robert Hass**

For times and locations or more information, call 205-348-5065 or visit the UA English Department website at www.as.ua.edu/english.

The **UAB Writers' Series** announces its fall series:

- October 23 **Cornelius Eady**
- November 6 **Lynn Powell**.

All readings are held at the UAB Honors House, begin at 7:00 p.m., and are free and open to the public.

Free parking will be available in Lot 16E in front of the Honors House on 10th Ave . S.

The Public Library of Anniston and Calhoun County is pleased to announce its 2002-2003 **Accent on the Author** series. The schedule is as follows:

- October 25 **Robert Inman**
- November 7 **Ellen Edwards Kennedy**
- January 14, 2003 **Kathryn Mitchell**
- February 17 **Charlotte miller**
- March 18 **Marlin Barton**

All events are held in the Ayers Auditorium at the Library, 108 East 10th Street, Anniston. For times or more information, visit www.anniston.lib.al.us.

Southern Writers Reading 2002, affectionately known as the "Annual Reading and Literary Slugfest," will be held November 22-24 at the Old St. James Church/University of South Alabama Baldwin County Campus in Fairhope, Alabama. It is sponsored this year by Over The Transom Books, the Fairhope Center for the Writing Arts, and the University of South Alabama Baldwin County. Participants this year who will read from their body of work and answer questions from the audience will be our *Stories from the Blue Moon Café* gang: **Silas House**, *A Parchment of Leaves* and *Clay's Quilt*; **Steve Yarbrough**, *Visible Spirits* and *The Oxygen Man*; **Brad Watson**, *The Heaven of Mercury* and *Last Days of the Dog Men*; **Bev Marshall**, *Walking Through Shadow*; **George Singleton**, *The Half-Mammals of Dixie* and *These*

Icons of the 10th Century at Comer Library

The B. B. Comer Library in Sylacauga has for the last three years offered a brown-bag lunch series on the issues, people, and events that shaped the 20th century. From "Retrospect" in 2000 through "Turning Points and Transitions" in 2001 to "Icons of the 20th Century: A Study of Persons with Impact" in 2002, the Comer Library has brought scholars and lay people together to learn and exchange ideas. The Icons series has featured scholars such as **Albert Brewer** (Samford University) discussing Lister Hill, John Sparkman, and Alabama's Congressional Delegation of Mid Century, **Allen Cronenberg** (Auburn University) on Mahatma Gandhi, and **Elaine Hughes** (University of Montevallo) talking about John Steinbeck. Fall 2002 will see **Dr. Hardy Jackson** (Jacksonville State University) talking about Elvis Presley, **Michael DeMarsche** (Jule Collins Smith Art Museum, Auburn University) discussing Matisse, and **Ed Harrell** (Auburn University) on Billy Graham. The fall Icon programs are at lunchtime and are free and open to the public. Contact the Comer Library at 256-249-0961. The programs are funded in part by the Alabama Humanities Foundation, and the library is happy to share experience and ideas about public programming with anyone interested.



Albert Brewer

People are Us; **Jennifer Paddock**, *A Secret Word*; and a wild card appearance by **Michael Morris**, *A Place Called Wiregrass*. It is certain that other authors will show up just for the fun of it. One evening will be dedicated to the Alumni Grill, a popular event in which past participants and host **Sonny Brewer** will engage the audience in dialog related to all aspects of their work. The troubadour for this year's event will be **Chris Gay**. He is the son of the writer **William Gay** and is as accomplished with a guitar as his father is with a pen. Anyone interested in the weekend schedule may visit www.overtetransom.com website, or phone the bookstore at 251-990-7980.

Awards and Notices

The **Alabama State Poetry Society** has named **Joe Whitten** its 2002 Poet of the Year. Whitten's work includes *Sparkling Waters: A History of Cook Springs*, *Mulled Memories*; *Evensong*, and *Wedding Bells and Funeral Knells*.

Big Fish... A movie based on **Daniel Wallace's** novel *Big Fish* will go into production in January in Alabama. **Ewan McGregor** and **Albert Finney** will star in the story of a son piecing together his dying father's life. **Tim Burton** will direct and **Dan Jinks**, **Bruce Cohen**, and **Richard D. Zanuck** will produce.

Alabama Public Television will host **Reading Rainbow Young Writers and Illustrators Competition** again this year. For the last seven years, Alabama Public Television has encouraged young writers through this annual state and national contest open to children kindergarten through third grade. Each entrant must write and illustrate his or her own work. All genres are welcome. To obtain an entry form

and for more information, call APT at 800-239-5233.

Grants for Novelists...the deadline for published novelists to apply for a Christopher Isherwood grant is Nov. 1, 2002. For more information: www.isherwoodfoundation.org.

Tune into **Alabama Bound** with **Don Noble** and hear reviews and audio essays about your favorite writers. Mondays at 7:50 a.m. on Alabama Public Radio.

Writer's Digest announces two contests: the third annual **Short Short Story Contest**, and the **International Self-Published Book Awards**. The story contest seeks submissions of 1500 words or less by Dec. 2, 2002; entry fee is \$10 per manuscript. The book awards require a \$100 entry fee for the first book, \$50 for each additional title. Cash and promotion are among the prizes. For entry forms and information, call Terri Boes at 513-531-1328 or check www.writersdigest.com or

T. S. Stribling Celebration Held in Florence

The **2002 T. S. Stribling Celebration** entitled "Happy Birthday, Mr. Tom!" was held March 3rd in Florence, Alabama. The annual event honors the late Florence resident and former Florence Normal School (currently University of North Alabama) graduate **Thomas Sigismund Stribling**. Stribling was the first Alabamian to receive the Pulitzer Prize in Letters (1933), awarded for his novel *The Store*. It is part of his famous Southern trilogy, which includes *The Forge* and *Unfinished Cathedral*.

More than one hundred people attended the 2002 T. S. Stribling Celebration, which featured talks by author **Howard Bahr** and scholars **Randy Cross** of Calhoun Community College and **Ken Vickers** of the University of North Alabama. The program also featured a special exhibit of black and white photographs produced by **Jay Isom** and **Lindsey Stricklin** shown with narration by UNA's **Dr. Ed Foote**. Part of a project by **Wayne Sides**, **Mac Brown**, **Shannon Wells**, and **Adrienne Ford**, the exhibit included archival photographs from UNA's Collier Library illustrating passages from Stribling's works. The Stribling Celebration also recognized young writers through the first annual T. S. Stribling Writing Competition. Bradshaw High School sophomore **Roshan Ahmed** won first place. Bradshaw High School junior **Brett Young** placed second. Third place went to Coffee High

School senior **Krissy Patrick**. The 2002 Stribling Celebration was sponsored by the Stribling Committee of Heritage Preservation, Incorporated. Additional sponsors included the Alabama Humanities Foundation, Florence-Lauderdale Public Library, Friends of the Florence-Lauderdale Pub-



Howard Bahr, Ken Vickers, and Randy Cross

lic Library, the Florence City School System, and the University of North Alabama.

The **2003 T. S. Stribling Celebration** will be held March 7th through 9th on the campus of the University of North Alabama. Celebrating the centennial of Stribling's graduation, it will be part of the school's Fine Arts Festival. The festival's goal is to raise scholarship funds for UNA's English Department. The event is sponsored by the University of North Alabama National Alumni Association.

William E. Smith, Jr. lives in Florence, where he practices law. He is chair of the T. S. Stribling Committee and an adjunct professor at the University of North Alabama.

The Back Page

Sincerely, Earl

by Earl Fisher

Writing is a difficult trade. I believe one virtue the writer needs more than any other is patience. Unfortunately, I have very little. It almost cost me my first publication with Avalon Books (Thomas Bouregy & Co.) in 1994, and, by inference, my latest publication with them in 2002.

In 1993 I was struggling to get a novel published. I had an agent repping a mystery novel, and I was searching for an agent to rep a children's fantasy novel. I discovered that Avalon Books would look at un-agented Westerns for teenagers, so I went to the Prattville Public Library. I was directed to a wall in the back of the library, where, to my surprise, a bookcase six feet tall and twelve feet long was filled to the brim

with Avalon Books. Obviously they weren't a fly-by-night publisher.

For a month I studied every facet of ten Avalon Westerns. Then I worked on an outline and wrote a first chapter. I was ready. I fired off a query letter asking if Avalon would like to see my first chapter. I received a reply in one week. "Send us the entire manuscript." I had one chapter finished. I took unpaid leave from my job, and for the next thirty days I wrote for ten hours a day, seven days a week. Those were the fastest, most enjoyable days of my life.

Even though I had previously written two novels, I didn't know if I could write a book on demand. Nor was I sure I really enjoyed writing. I did. I loved it.

I wrote. I re-wrote. My entire family joined in as editors, especially my wife, Linda, and my youngest son, Michel (who now calls himself Jack and attends Auburn). In fact, Jack still brags about finding the largest, the most terrible error—I had my hero in the saddle and on the ground at the same time in one scene. We fixed it.

On the thirtieth day we sent the manuscript out. Whew! We had put in lots of hard work, but the effort was worth it.

Then the waiting began. One month. Two months. Three months. What was wrong with these people? I had heard nothing in three months. I shot off a note asking if they had received the manuscript, and if so, had they read it yet. No reply. Four months. I wrote another note. Five months. I wrote another note. Six months. I was going insane! Not one reply in over six months. I told Linda I was fed up. I

would write the editor a letter, telling her exactly what I wanted her to do with my unread manuscript.

The calmer influence of my wife prevailed. "You have nothing to gain," she said, "and everything to lose. Send them a sweet letter."

I dunno. Have you ever sent a sweet letter to a bill collector? To the IRS? How about to the cop who gave you a speeding ticket? There are some people who simply don't deserve sweet letters. Unresponsive edi-



Earl Fisher

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tors are in that group. I wanted to bring the wrath of every Southern writer, published and unpublished, down on their little, pointy, self-centered Yankee heads.

After simmering for a day, I decided my wife was correct. A mean letter would get me nowhere. Instead, I would send a humorous letter: A check-the-box reply form, as editor-friendly as possible.

I mailed the letter off and waited. I hate waiting. Five days later the editor called me at work. She said they had received my check-the-box letter and loved it. They went to the stacks and pulled out my unread manuscript. They read the book, loved it, too, and made an offer to purchase it. The waiting was over.

The Man Hunter, my first book, was published in 1994. Avalon books, however, do not become best sellers. They are pre-sold to libraries, and though they are shipped nationwide, they do not make the *New York Times* Bestsellers List. From 1995 until 2001, I wrote a total of twelve novels. I had literary agents rep five of them, but none sold. My ego languished. I needed to get another book published. Soon. I decided to try Avalon again. I outlined a book, the next in a series, and sent a query letter. I was worried I had waited too many years without sending them a new book. But Avalon returned my query with a request for the entire manuscript, and once again, I didn't have it written. It took me thirty days to write *A Slug of Hot Lead*, the same amount of time as its predecessor. I sent the manuscript and waited. I wrote letters to them on a monthly basis, but nothing seemed to work. Six months later, they bought it. Almost six months to the day. My editor simply enjoys making me wait.

Writers need many virtues—unending persistence, limitless energy, and an ability to sell. A writer should be able to sell humidity to an Alabamian in the middle of August. But most of all, a writer needs patience. Someday I hope to gain a little myself.

Thomas Bouregy & Co.

Dear Ms. _____ :

It has been six months since I sent you my novel, *The Man Hunter*, and I have not heard from you one way or the other on publication. I have enclosed a simple check the box reply for your ease and convenience in getting back to me.

- We loved it, Earl. In fact, we keep reading it over and over and have forgotten all about getting in touch with you.
- We have lost it, Earl. Try again.
- We no longer publish fiction. Could you keep the same page length and make it nonfiction? Try a self-help book, Earl. You could use the experience.
- It's still in the slush pile.
- It needs a total re-write. Try it in English this time.
- Sorry, Earl. Before we can proceed, we need your social security number, DOB, and the vehicle registration number of the car you were driving when you submitted the work.
- It's too long. Cut 120 pages.
- It's too short. Add 120 pages.
- Oops! Sorry, Earl. Any author who inquires about his manuscript gets an automatic rejection. Your book will be returned to you third class in a few months.
- The only thing we liked about your book was the title. Unfortunately, we already represent three books with the same title.
- The only thing we didn't like about your book was the derived plot, the unbelievable characters, and the awful dialogue. If you can re-write the book with these simple changes, we might reconsider it in the future.
- We hate getting these corny check-the-box letters from you would-be writers. Get a life.
- The book's great, Earl But unless you have a law degree, a medical degree, or a Ph.D. in American Lit., you just aren't qualified to be a writer.
- We love getting these corny check-the-box letters, Earl. Send more!
- Your book was so boring, all the readers went to sleep. Or out to lunch. Or to a movie. Or something. The book moved sort of slow, Earl.
- Uh . . . it's in the mail, Earl.
- The reader assigned to your book has done one of the following: died, gotten married, been promoted, quit, joined the army, gone fishing. Your book has been given to a new reader. We'll get back to you.

In all seriousness, I would like to have some news.

Sincerely,

Earl G. Fisher

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**If you are a writer, a reader, a teacher, or a student of writing,
this is your site. We hope to see you there.**

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