

FIRST DRAFT

THE JOURNAL OF THE ALABAMA WRITERS' FORUM • SPRING 2008



REBECCA GILMAN

2008 Harper Lee
Award Recipient

WRITING OUR STORIES

Creative Writing Program Celebrates Tenth Anniversary

THE TRUTH ABOUT SELF-PUBLISHING

Ten Steps for Publishing Your Book

THE CRAFT OF THE BOOK REVIEW

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First Draft is a journal for writers, readers,
editors, publishers, and those who support
and work in the literary arts.

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VENDETTI STUDIOS

Ruth Beaumont Cook is the author of *North Across the River* and *Guests Behind the Barbed Wire*.

“show, don’t tell” message. I studied with Fred Bonnie in the old Bell Building at UAB, forging practice paragraphs in the styles of Hemingway, Faulkner, Welty, and others. Through the Alabama Writers’ Conclave, I met writers such as Charles Ghigna, Sue Walker, and Marianne Moates. In the 1980s, I discovered the Writing Today conference at Birmingham-Southern College and broadened further my friendships with Alabama writers and teachers such as Jeanie Thompson, Abe Fawal, Bill Carter, William Cobb, Wendy Reed, and Peter Donahue. One of my favorite tasks is helping to bring that conference from a few fledgling ideas to a full two days of literary sharing each spring.

When the Forum was founded in 1992, its stated goal of cultivating Alabama’s literary arts appealed to me because of its statewide reach. Since then, I have marveled at the variety of ways that commitment, along with commitments to promote writers and educate young writers, has broadened and evolved. I have had fun handing out copies of *First Draft* and introducing newcomers to the Forum through Alabama Bound each year. And now Danny Gamble is doing an excellent job putting the Forum into cyberspace with our Web site, online newsletter, and book reviews. It’s also been a pleasure to attend many of the High School Literary Arts Awards presentations in Montgomery and hear the incredibly gifted voices of young winners from all over Alabama.

When Jeanie Thompson first outlined her ideas for Writing Our Stories, I was so pleased to see the Forum extending its education commitment in this direction. First Marlin Barton, then Priscilla Hancock Cooper, and then Danny Gamble began working with troubled students at the Mount Meigs, Chalkville, and Vacca campuses of the Department of Youth Services, encouraging them to use creative writing to express their deepest thoughts. The program has expanded well beyond what was first imagined and is now even influencing programs in other states.

What a wonderfully colorful and far-reaching umbrella the Forum has become. I am so grateful for the opportunity to be a part of it and watch it continue to grow.

Ruth Beaumont Cook
AWF Board Secretary

Founded in 1992, the Alabama Writers’ Forum is a not-for-profit, statewide literary arts service organization whose mission is to advance the art of writing by promoting writers, educating young writers, and cultivating Alabama’s literary arts. The Forum partners with other not-for-profit arts organizations, schools, libraries, and like-minded entities across the state in a range of public programs and educational endeavors. Some of its partners include the Alabama Alliance for Arts Education, the Alabama Center for the Book / Caroline Marshall Draughon Center for the Arts and Humanities, Auburn University College of Liberal Arts, the Alabama Department of Youth Services, and Alabama Southern Community College. In addition, the Forum works in communities to promote local literary arts programming and to support teachers of creative writing.

Sustaining funding for the Alabama Writers’ Forum comes from our major partner, the Alabama State Council on the Arts, with additional funds from our extensive membership base, education contracts, individual contributions, and corporate commitments. Additional funds for special projects have come from the Alabama Children’s Trust Fund, the National Endowment for the Arts, the Southern Arts Federation, and the “Support the Arts” Car Tag Fund.



Rebecca Gilman

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STAGE PRESENCE



REBECCA GILMAN Receives 2008 Harper Lee Award

by *Gin Phillips*

As a child in Trussville, Alabama, Rebecca Gilman filled spiral notebooks with story after story. All the way through high school, she kept churning out fiction, short stories, snippets of scenes. Then something shifted in college: She wrote her first full play.

“The first time I heard a reading of one of my plays, I don’t think I wrote anything else [but plays] after that,” she said. “I really enjoyed the audience response, the give and take of the actors. I’ve tried to write prose, but I always find myself getting very tired because I have to describe things—“oh... the trees were brown.” And it always ends up being dialogue. Even with dramatic writing, I find I’m still tied to the stage.”

Gilman is the eleventh recipient of the Harper Lee Award

for Alabama’s Distinguished Writer of the Year. Presented annually by Alabama Southern Community College at the Alabama Writers Symposium in Monroeville, the honor is made possible through a generous grant from George F. Landegger, Alabama River Pulp Company, Inc.

The last decade has brought Gilman national and international attention, with plays produced from Lincoln Center in New York to the Goodman Theatre in Chicago to the Royal

Above: Pictured in a recent rehearsal for the Goodman Theatre’s world premiere production of Rebecca Gilman’s *Dollhouse* are (l to r) cast members Maggie Siff and Anthony Starke and playwright Rebecca Gilman. *Dollhouse*, based on the play by Henrik Ibsen, was directed by Goodman Artistic Director Robert Falls. Photo: Michael Brosilow

Court Theatre in London. She's won the American Theater Association's Osborn Award, the London Evening Standard Award for Most Promising Playwright—she was the first American dramatist ever to win—and was a finalist for the Pulitzer in 2001.

But the Harper Lee Award makes an impression, even after this widespread acclaim. "I'm thrilled and deeply honored," Gilman said. "Harper Lee is a hero of mine and *To Kill a Mockingbird* inspired me to become a writer, so I'd have to say it doesn't get any better than this!"

Gilman's plays include *The Glory of Living*, *Spinning Into Butter*, *Boy Gets Girl*, *The Sweetest Swing in Baseball*, *Blue Surge*, and *The Crowd You're In With*.

Her childhood sense of the joy of storytelling has never evaporated. Gilman loves the process of putting words on the page, of building the story and the characters. Yes, she says, playwriting is fun.

"Some things are totally fun, some things are totally frustrating," she said. "The actual writing is very fun, and collaborating is. But trying to get things produced is always frustrating. There's always a point at which you have to take what you've written and make it a commodity, and that's when it stops being fun."

Educated in Trussville and Birmingham, Gilman headed to Middlebury College in Vermont for two years before returning home to finish her undergraduate degree at Birmingham-Southern College. She went on to receive an MFA in playwriting from the University of Iowa in 1991, worked in Iowa City for three years, and then moved to Chicago.

When *The Glory of Living* propelled her onto the national stage in 1997, it was as if she'd emerged from thin air instead of Chicago. Just a year earlier she'd been working as a temporary employee in an accounting firm. And despite the seeming suddenness of her fame, she'd written a dozen plays before *Glory*.

"I was working in educational testing for a while, and I was a temp for a long time," she said. "I kept sending things out and waiting to hear. I had had a couple of productions when I was in college, so it wasn't like I'd never had any encouragement. I wasn't one of those people working in their basements who'd never had anyone say anything to them. But I did a lot of different things while I kept writing."

The earlier encouragement didn't prepare her for the wave of attention that swelled locally and beyond. The change in daily living was "pretty immediate," she says, with sudden attention in Chicago and the Goodman's interest in commissioning her to write *Spinning Into Butter*.

That award-winning, buzz-generating work explores race and racism at a small liberal arts college in Vermont. She wanted to focus on latent racism, unfronted and unacknowledged, thriving in an environment ostensibly free of such dark undercurrents.

"When I went to school in New York people would come and knock on my door—'What's it like in Alabama?' I would say, 'It's actually like it is in Boston—racism is as prevalent as it is where you're from.' I think it's pandemic. A lot of people

came from places where there was no African American population. You have no real life experience because you're comfortable you're not a racist, and that assumption has never been challenged."

She's talked about writing for a reason, for the acknowledged purpose of expressing an opinion. But she has not written plays that start with a political or social statement.

"A couple of plays started with an idea, but they are always grounded in character," she said. "Not just an abstraction, but an idea of who someone is, of who this woman is. Other times it may start with a line of dialogue. It's almost always something that's bothering me—it's very therapeutic."

She has no shortage of current projects. Living in Chicago, she's been an assistant professor of playwriting and screenwriting in the MFA Program at Northwestern since 2006.

"When you're young, you think you have to achieve a certain amount of success, and then when you reach middle age, you say 'it is what it is' and look for challenges," she explained. "Maintaining a writing career is really difficult. There was a certain point where I started looking at the trajectory of other people's careers—they have bursts of productivity, but there can be long gaps in between. So how do you fill those gaps?"

So now she is teaching. It's not the first time the idea occurred to her. She'd started graduate school at the University of Virginia thinking she'd like to become a professor. Instead she realized she wanted to write and scrapped her plans for a doctorate. She got her master's degree and immediately started the playwriting program at Iowa.

"I was only going to teach English so I could have a day job," she said. "Like being a professor is a day job. But now I realize there are so many times I wish I could have had someone explain things to me. No one explained how the business worked, and I had to learn it all myself. I thought if you could save another playwright those steps, I'd like to do that. And I thought it would be creatively interesting—it's nice to be there when people fall in love with theatre instead of when they get jaded."

Most of Gilman's plays have dealt with uncomfortable topics bluntly and with a dark humor: *Spinning Into Butter* highlights race, *The Glory of Living* centers on child abuse and serial murder, *Boy Gets Girl* deals with stalking and men's treatment of women. She's said before that reviewers never mention that her plays are funny. But *The Crowd You're In With*, which debuted in San Francisco, was called "delightfully funny" and "thought-provoking" by the *San Francisco Chronicle*. Through three urban couples at a backyard barbecue, the play dissects contemporary life and whether or not you should bring a baby into it.

"Honestly, I never know if things are funny," Gilman said. "I co-wrote a play with people in Chicago that we thought was very funny. It opened and no one thought it was funny. But it was really gratifying that people responded to this one."

The play closed right before Christmas 2007, and the Goodman will produce it in 2008.

Continued on page 6



MICHAEL BROSILOW

REBECCA GILMAN

PLAYS

The Crowd You're In With, 2007
Dollhouse, 2005
The Heart is a Lonely Hunter, 2005
The Sweetest Swing in Baseball, 2004
Blue Surge, 2001
Capitalism 101, 2001
Speech Therapy, 1999
Boy Gets Girl, 1999
Spinning Into Butter, 1999
The Glory of Living, 1997
The Land of Little Horses, 1997
My Sin and Nothing More, 1997

FILM AND TELEVISION

Spinning Into Butter, original screenplay with Doug Atchison, 2005.
Untitled Rebecca Gilman Project (pilot), HBO Independent Productions for CBS, 2004.
The Second, original screenplay. Commissioned by Chicago Films, 2000.

AWARDS AND HONORS

Resident Playwright, National Playwrights Conference, Eugene O'Neill Theatre Center, *The Crowd You're In With*, 2007
 Honorary Doctor of Humanities Degree, Birmingham-Southern College, 2006
 Joseph Jefferson Award Nomination, Best New Adaptation, *Dollhouse*, 2005
 Commission from The Acting Company, *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*, New York, 2003
 Finalist, Pulitzer Prize, *The Glory of Living*, 2001
 Olivier Award Nomination for Best New Play, *Boy Gets Girl*, 2001
 Inclusion in *Time* magazine's Top Ten Plays of 2001, *The Glory of Living*
 Inclusion in *The Best Plays of 2001-2002*, *The Glory of Living*
 Recipient, Guggenheim Fellowship in Playwriting, 2000
 Inclusion in *The Best Plays of 2000-2001*, *Boy Gets Girl*
 Recipient, Prince Prize for Commissioning New Work, 2000
 Inclusion in *Time* magazine's Top Ten Plays of 2000, *Boy Gets Girl*
 Recipient, Joseph Jefferson Award for Best New Play, *Boy Gets Girl*, 2000
 Recipient, Joseph Jefferson Citation for Adaptation, *The Crime of the Century*, 2000
 Inclusion in *Time* magazine's Top Ten Plays of 1999, *Spinning Into Butter*
 Recipient, Evening Standard Theatre Award for Most Promising Playwright, *The Glory of Living*, 1999
 Recipient, George Devine Award, *The Glory of Living*, 1999
 Recipient, Joseph Jefferson Award for Best New Play, *Spinning Into Butter*, 1999
 Commission from the Royal Court Theatre, 1999
 Recipient, Roger L. Stevens Award from the Kennedy Center Fund for New American Plays, *Spinning Into Butter*, 1998
 Recipient, 1997 American Theatre Critics Association's Osborn Award, *The Glory of Living*
 Recipient, Scott McPherson Award, 1997
 Recipient, Joseph Jefferson Citation for New Work, *The Glory of Living*, 1997
 Commissions from the Goodman Theatre, 1997, 1999, 2000, 2001, 2005

Continued from page 5

Now Gilman is working on a musical, *The Boys Are Coming Home*, an adaptation of *Much Ado About Nothing* and set at the end of World War II, that opens at the Goodman in June 2008.

"I always liked musicals a lot, then I was approached by the producer for this musical—the original book writer had become really ill, and the music was pretty much all written," she recalled. "So I thought it would be a good way to get my feet wet. Although now I'm entirely wet."

Writing the book for the musical has turned out to be a different way of writing and thinking.

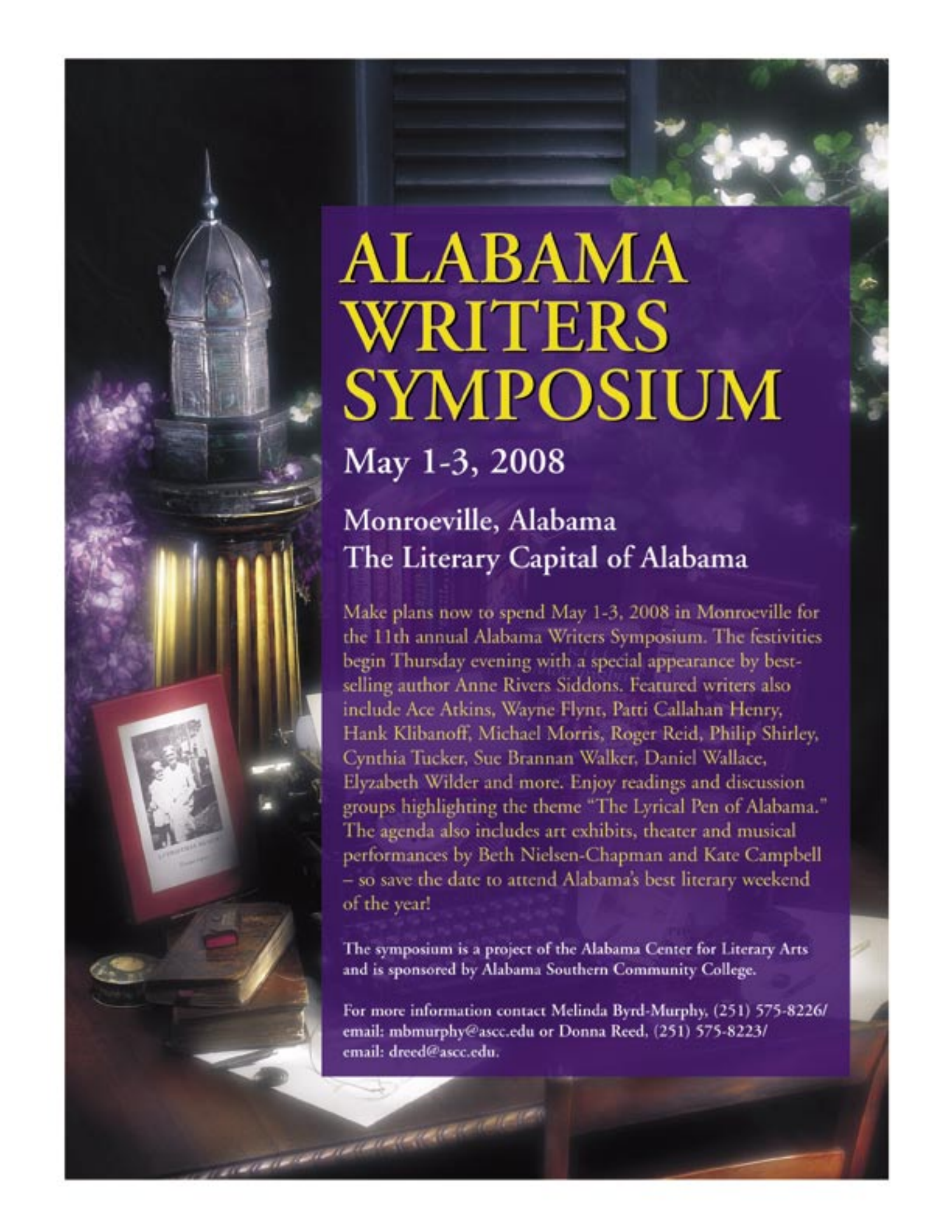
"Even though it's theatre, it's such a different form, so intensely collaborative," she said. "Everything you write has to revolve around the music, and when I write a scene, it's written with the intent of being musicalized—so the crux of my scene will disappear into the song. It has to be step by step. If I write too much at some point the composer's going to say to me, 'You've just written three ballads in a row.'"

When Gilman talks about her plays, she sounds thoughtful. When she talks about herself—about how she got to be where she is—she sounds bemused. There's a sense of wonder when she talks about fame. When she was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize for *The Glory of Living* in 2001, she didn't know anything about the nomination until someone said "Congratulations" as she walked into a theater.

"I said, 'Why?'" she recounted. "He said, 'You're a finalist for the Pulitzer.' I said, 'Oh really?'"

"They had sent a letter to my home address, but I wasn't home, so I didn't know it until it was announced in the paper. It wasn't exactly days of nail-biting. But when I found out, I went and bought a *New York Times* because I was thinking, 'How can I prove this to people?'"

Gin Phillips is a freelance writer in Birmingham. Her first novel, The Well and the Mine, was published in February 2008.



ALABAMA WRITERS SYMPOSIUM

May 1-3, 2008

Monroeville, Alabama

The Literary Capital of Alabama

Make plans now to spend May 1-3, 2008 in Monroeville for the 11th annual Alabama Writers Symposium. The festivities begin Thursday evening with a special appearance by best-selling author Anne Rivers Siddons. Featured writers also include Ace Atkins, Wayne Flynt, Patti Callahan Henry, Hank Klibanoff, Michael Morris, Roger Reid, Philip Shirley, Cynthia Tucker, Sue Brannan Walker, Daniel Wallace, Elyzabeth Wilder and more. Enjoy readings and discussion groups highlighting the theme "The Lyrical Pen of Alabama." The agenda also includes art exhibits, theater and musical performances by Beth Nielsen-Chapman and Kate Campbell – so save the date to attend Alabama's best literary weekend of the year!

The symposium is a project of the Alabama Center for Literary Arts and is sponsored by Alabama Southern Community College.

For more information contact Melinda Byrd-Murphy, (251) 575-8226/
email: mbmurphy@ascc.edu or Donna Reed, (251) 575-8223/
email: dreed@ascc.edu.

SO WHAT IF TRUTH IS STRANGER THAN FICTION?

(Fiction Is Still Better for Us)

by Kirk Curnutt

One recent night amid a bout of insomnia, I happened upon previews for a Tru-TV show called *Murder By the Book*, in which bestselling mystery writers narrate true-crime cases. The roster of novelist-hosts was impressive: James Ellroy, David Baldacci, and Linda Fairstein, among others. What really nabbed my attention, however, were the series' catchphrases. "Truth *IS* stranger than fiction," Lisa Scottoline averred. "You *can't* make this stuff up," Sandra Brown concurred. "And I've tried!"

Any other time, these slogans wouldn't have offended my credulity any more than "four out of five dentists prefer Colgate" or "We do chicken right" usually do, yet in my sleeplessness they got me plenty riled. Brown's statement struck me as especially facetious coming from a writer who (according to her Tru-TV bio) "is the author of more than fifty *New York Times* bestsellers," with a total of *sixty-six* novels (!) since 1981, "most of them still in print" (double !). By my count, Ms. Brown is dang successful at "making stuff up."

The more the preview played over the restless hours that followed, the more those lines stuck in my craw. They reminded me of a famous line from Philip Roth's 1961 essay "Writing American Fiction": "The American writer . . . has his hands full in trying to understand, and then describe, and then make *credible* much of the American reality. It stupefies, it sickens, it infuriates, and finally it is even a kind of embarrassment to one's own meager imagination. The actuality is continually outdoing our talents. . . ."

When exactly, I wondered, did authors blithely concede the imagination's supposed impotence in the face of the world's freakery?

My agitation led me to devise a rebuttal to the very notion that truth is stranger than fiction. As I found myself telling the TV screen, we shouldn't care if that's the case. After all, strange is the most humdrum thing that exists today.

I was so pleased by this modest epiphany that my imagination ran wild. I pictured myself as a defense attorney not unlike those in Baldacci and Brown novels. It was my job to save fiction from the gallows, and I knew immediately how my closing argument would go:

Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, "reality" is everywhere in a conspiracy to degrade us. By overemphasizing the sensational and the grotesque, by insisting that the times are so wacky that we can only roll our eyes with the risible flow, it fractures our ability to identify with one another. Fiction is a means by which we maintain imaginative ties to the deeper possibilities of human interchange. It helps us respect, revere, but maybe most important of all, understand why we behave as we do.

Thanks to Google, I discovered a great quote from Mark Twain's "Pudd'nhead Wilson's New Calendar": *Truth is stranger than fiction, but it is because Fiction is obliged to stick to possibilities; Truth isn't.*

I then dug a copy of "Writing American Fiction" from my files and found another bit of substantiation: *What it is to be human, to be humane, is [our] subject: connection, indebtedness, responsibility, these are [our] moral concerns. . . .*

Armed with these lines, I amended my argument:

Ladies and gentlemen, I stand up for novels because they teach me "the difficulties of being human." And the best do so by exhibiting Roth's other H word: humane. They keep me connected to the only thing I've grown to want from fiction besides felicitous syntax and a turn of phrase or two: empathy.

As heartfelt as I felt my argument was, I decided it still wasn't sufficient. I returned to my bookshelves for an example of how fiction loses empathic

power when it tries to out-weird reality.

*Ladies and gentlemen, I present a book by DBC Pierre called *Vernon God Little* (2003). So I don't do the plot an injustice, I'll quote the jacket flap:*



Kirk Curnutt

DIANE PROTHRO

“In the town of Martirio—the barbecue sauce capital of Central Texas—sits fifteen-year-old Vernon Little, dressed only in New Jack trainers and underpants. He is in trouble.

“His friend Jesus has just blown away sixteen of his classmates before turning the gun on himself. And Vernon, as his only buddy, has become the focus of the town’s need for vengeance.

“The news of the tragedy has resulted in the quirky backwater being flooded with wannabe CNN hacks all-too-keen to claim their fifteen minutes and lay blame for the killings at Vernon’s feet....”

Good jury people, this summary doesn’t begin to hit Vernon’s wacky highpoints. It fails to mention the predatory psychiatrist who tries to rape our hero, the girlfriend who entraps him so she can become a Penthouse centerfold, or the Death-Row exoneration in which he is saved from execution by DNA evidence obtained through his excrement.

You heard me right: his excrement.

Just so you know, that bit of impoliteness isn’t merely a plot twist in Vernon God Little—it’s a full-fledged motif. As one reviewer noted, “[Expletive] happens’ is the general theme of a great deal of art, but rarely as literally as in this book....”

If my line of questioning sounds unkind, you should know that *Vernon God Little* won the prestigious Mann Booker Prize in 2003. I imagine the British literati’s enthusiasm for it had as much to do with a righteous desire to denounce America during that first year of the Iraq war than with any aesthetic achievement. That *has* to be the explanation because there is no aesthetic achievement here. Pierre is so keen on making the point that Something Is Terribly Wrong with American Culture that he jettisons those Twainian “possibilities” in favor of an adrenalized outlandishness that’s as subtle as a mallet to the noggin. And by striving so hard to convince us that Mama, We’re All Crazee Now, he ends up with a fictional world that feels one hundred percent fake. The characters aren’t people but conceits (Everyone Wants To Be Famous), and strange plot developments happen because a Point Needs Making. But don’t take my word that the book is awful. According to a March 2007 BBC poll, thirty-five percent of British readers who bought it weren’t compelled to finish it.

Ladies and gentlemen, I concluded, perhaps the strongest criticism I can make is that Vernon didn’t offend or infuriate me. The targets are merely so obvious that Pierre’s satire comes off more schlock and yawn than shock and awe. If I were to summarize what it taught me, it would be that: 1. Americans are obsessed with violence; 2. People will debase themselves to get on TV; 3. Adults make adolescence much harder than it has to be.

In other words, I learned absolutely nothing I didn’t already know.

Because I know attorneys like to end with some uplift, I decided to give the jury a positive example of why, in an Age of Mocking Irreality, we need fiction that models the humane instead of the bizarre.

I introduce into evidence Stewart O’Nan’s Last Night at the Lobster (2007).

O’Nan’s novel is only the second book I’m familiar with whose title references the seafood franchise best-known for its Colossal Shrimp Trio and Big Seafood Feast. The other is *Red Lobster, White Trash, and the Blue Lagoon* (1999), a collection of *Esquire* columns by Joe Queenan. Queenan’s thesis is that (hold your breath now) Popular Culture Is Irredeemably Cheesy. To wit: Red Lobster is “geared toward people who think they’re just a little too upscale for Roy Roger’s.” Yet his proof comes off the backs of easy targets: polyester-clad patrons, kitchen grease and batter, Huey Lewis and the News on the soundtrack. The sub-Letterman glibness is lazy, right down to the chapter title: “Slouching toward Red Lobster.” Now I’m no William Butler Yeats or Joan Didion, but can that even count as a pun?

Thanks to Queenan, my first thought when I heard O’Nan’s title was *uh-oh*. I didn’t want anything to do with the book. But then my good friend and editor Jim Gilbert convinced me otherwise. As it turns out, *Last Night at the Lobster* is a beautifully elegiac peek into the routine of a service-industry manager in a downsized economy. The main character, Manny DeLeon, is treated with dignity because O’Nan empathizes with his travails. By contrast, one gets the sense that the only reason Queenan set his sights on Red Lobster is because it was the one cultural artifact he could come up with that fit his title’s mock-patriotic color scheme. Folks at Red Man Chew must be grateful he never heard of them.

Interestingly, reviews of *Last Night at the Lobster* are near unanimous in noting their surprise (and relief) that O’Nan does not deride his character’s world. This leads to my final jury point:

That one of our best novelists would eschew cheap shots at American franchise culture for humane nuance should not startle us.

What should is that we no longer assume he would.

A few nights after watching *Murder By the Book* previews, I caught some actual episodes. The true stories didn’t strike me as all that interesting *or* strange. Husbands killed wives, wives killed husbands, children parents and neighbors neighbors—the standard true-crime stuff.

Bored, I found myself making a bulwark on my bed of future reading. In addition to *Last Night at the Lobster*, there was Michael Knight’s *The Holiday Season*, Benjamin Percy’s *Refresh, Refresh*, Manuel Puig’s *Heartbreak Tango*, Sylvia Plath’s *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams*, and several Hard Case Crime paperbacks.

In the background, Tru-TV milked its catchphrases.

“Truth *IS* stranger than fiction,” Lisa Scottoline told me.

“Only because we don’t require truth to make its strangeness comprehensible,” I blurted back.

“You can’t make this stuff up!” Sandra Brown insisted. “I know—I’ve tried!”

“Sister,” I smiled, doing my best Mark Twain, “if that’s so, then you just ain’t working the possibilities.”

Kirk Curnutt is the author of the recently released novel Breathing Out the Ghost.

KIND AND BALANCED

Four Lessons Toward the Well-crafted Book Review

by *Don Noble*

The original title for this piece was to be “The Art of the Book Review.” I’m not at all sure reviewing is an art, but it is a craft, and as such it can be learned, so this is more a “how-to” than a piece on aesthetic writing.

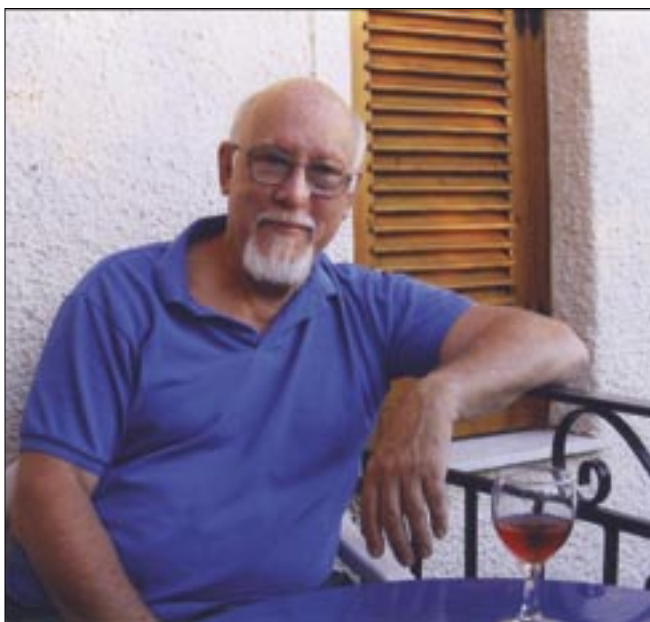
First, read the book. Do not skim, dip into, speed read, or otherwise treat the book superficially. Really read the book, from cover to cover. If you have to, read it twice. The book deserves that. Write your review immediately after reading, in one sitting, if possible, so it will have a single tone.

Read with a pencil in your hand. Underline. Mark things, what you like, what you hate, phrases, turning points. Make a mark at the top of the page so that you can later find the bit you want to quote or refer to.

You are doing a job and the book is a kind of tool, so don’t treat the book like a valuable art object, unless of course it actually is a valuable art book, in which case make notes on a separate piece of paper.

The review is not about you. Space is limited. Do not tell your reader how you sat under a tree in June with the book or read it during your divorce. If the book is set at the beach, for example, do not reminisce about how your father used to take you to the beach. It’s about the book, not you. (If there were time, I would riff here on introductions at readings that begin “I first read the work of John Barth when I was a wee tot and this is what Barth has meant to me.”)

I do not have a poetic sensibility, shall we say, and so I do not review books of poetry and so will not here give advice. I will say, however, that poets and people interested in poetry should themselves review more books. It is a sad commentary that more people write poetry than buy poetry. And if we all lament that books of poetry go unnoticed, unremarked, unreviewed, just enter the world silently and die, the fault for that must lie with the poetry community. Poets: Buy a book once



Don Noble

in a while and review it, gratis if need be, for your local paper if need be. If you don’t, who will?

Let me stick to my own world of fiction and nonfiction.

I First, fiction. First novels are a good place for beginning reviewers because to do a proper job with a third or fourth novel it is best to have read the previous ones. Then you can say if the writer is exploring new territory or repeating himself, getting better or, sadly, not.

Contrary to what some think, a review is not all judgment. For fiction, I would say fully forty percent is descriptive, the other sixty being

evaluative. By descriptive I mean, what genre is this novel? When and where is it set? Does it cover the events of a Saturday or six generations? Are there three characters or thirty? What is the theme or main concern of the novel? Courage? Marriage? Business ethics? Is the novel picaresque or tightly plotted? Lots of dialogue or nearly none? Is the novelist interested in description, the world of nature or the concrete city, or not? In other words, does place matter? Is the story told in first person or third or, irritatingly, second person. Are the characters believable humans speaking as you believe humans to speak? And, importantly to me, are the characters engaging? Do we come to care about their fates? (In other words, the component parts of fiction should be considered: plot, theme, setting, characters, and language, but not necessarily all of them in every review.)

It has become a compulsion among movie critics to talk about a movie in terms of other movies. That can be useful with fiction, but be careful. A novel is in some ways like another, but the differences are what matter. Nevertheless, to compare a road trip novel to Kerouac may be informative for your reader.

If you remark upon the style, the language of the author,

and you declare it to be as poetic as Fitzgerald or as dreadful as Dreiser, you are obliged to give a quotation so your reader will know what you find beautiful or awkward. Fitzgerald: “No amount of fire or freshness can match what a man will store up in his ghostly heart.” Dreiser: “He [Clyde] might soon expect to know a great deal about the art of mixing sweet drinks and decorating a large variety of ice cream with liquid sweets, thus turning them into sundaes.” If reviewing *An American Tragedy*, one would write “ugh” at the top of the page, if *Gatsby*, one might write “wow.”

Reviewers always wonder what to do about plot. The answer is to go light on the plot and never, never, give away surprise endings or other twists and turns the writer has so carefully managed.

II Nonfiction is, generally speaking, easier to review than fiction. For one thing, the writing itself need only be serviceable, not beautiful, but it should not call attention to itself in a negative way. Invisible is good.

Nonfiction reviews might be sixty percent description and forty percent evaluation. You want to describe the volume to your reader. Is this biography? History? Anthropology? Literary criticism? Some mixture of two or more? What are the parameters of this work? Is this the history of Western civilization or of Birmingham between 1950 and 1970? Nonfiction books, and fiction too for that matter, must be judged on their own terms. Does the author successfully manage to do what he sets out to do, as opposed to what you wish he had done?

How are the contents arranged? Most biographies are chronological, but some are thematic, by topic: money, fame, love, etc.

Reading this book, did you learn anything? If not, perhaps the book did not need to be written. A new biography of Hemingway might be written if the researcher found a big cache of letters from Ernest no one had ever seen before and they revealed something startling about him, but otherwise, why?

If you have expertise in the field covered by the book—a book about Virginia Woolf, say—is this book better than previous books in this field? For whom was this book written, the expert or the general reader? Indicate to your reader whether you are in fact an expert or a general reader. If you notice actual errors in a nonfiction book, by all means, say so. Dry nonfiction is excusable; nonfiction with errors is not.

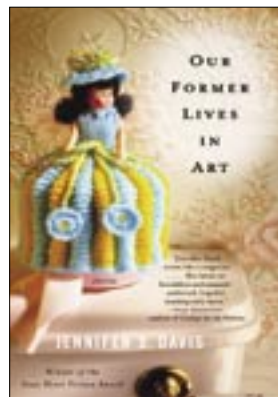
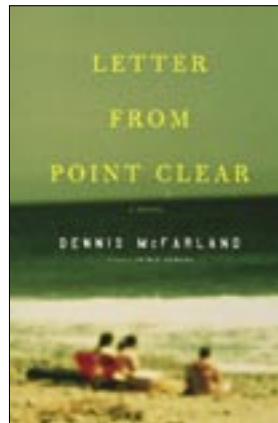
Here’s a tip all seasoned reviewers know. If the nonfiction book under review contains a startling, fascinating bit of information: quote it. You will get some unconscious credit for being learned. If a novel has something really funny in it, quote it: you will get undeserved credit for being witty. (Not entirely undeserved—at least you had the sense to recognize that the phrase was startling or funny.)

III Both novels and monographs are easier and neater to talk about than collections of stories or essays, which do have some difficulties in common. Say there are a dozen essays or stories. Do they have cohesion? In nonfiction there

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WRITING FICTION ABOUT THE PAST

by Julia Oliver

Henry James called “historical fiction” an oxymoron. Today, his novels and those of other long-deceased writers fit the simplest definition of that phrase. In a broader context, the category would include any novel which is set at least fifty years prior to the time it was written. The maxims “History tells us what happened; fiction tells us how it felt” and “History is a blend of fact and legend” bolster the premise that the story should be the dominant element. Mary Lee Settle’s analysis in a 1983 *New York Times* article makes the pairing seem congenial and logical: “By its nature, history is bound in time; fiction is timeless when it reaches the reality of a person, an act, or a scene that transcends the words conveying it. Both time and space are distances, and they work for historians and novelists in the same way—not as a gulf, but as a psychic focus.”

The genre flourished during much of the twentieth century, ranging from lowbrow bodice-rippers to mediocre mainstream and commercial star quality. Margaret Mitchell’s *Gone With the Wind*, which came out in 1936 in a thousand page, door-stopper-weight hardcover, has never been out of print. (In recent months, GWTW—it even has its own acronym—has spawned yet another sequel.) Anya Seton’s best-sellers, which she preferred to call “biographical romances,” were published from the early 1940s into the ’70s. Also popular were place-and-time novels, such as Eugenia Price’s genteel sagas



Julia Oliver

about St. Simon’s Island and Savannah. As established novelists began looking to the past for inspiration and ideas, their books were promoted as “literary historical fiction.” Critically acclaimed novels of the 1980s and ’90s include *The North and South Trilogy* by John Jakes, *Birdsong* by Sebastian Faulks, *Billy Bathgate*, *Ragtime*, and other titles by E. L. Doctorow, *The Ghost Road* by Pat Barker, and Margaret Atwood’s *Alias Grace*, which was based on a sensational 1843 murder in Canada. Others that come to mind are *Cold Mountain* by Charles Frazier, *Memoirs of a Geisha* by Arthur Golden, *The Night Inspector*

by Frederick Busch, and *The Blue Flower* by Penelope Fitzgerald, who made this point about technique: “I do leave a lot out and trust the reader to be able to understand it.... It’s an insult to readers to explain everything.”

Although traditionally historical fiction has been associated with panoramic scenery and high drama, a trend in recent years has been toward more tightly focused, introspective novels. Some I consider paradigms and keep on my favorites shelf are *Dewey Defeats Truman* by Thomas Mallon, *Folly* by Susan Minot, *The Master* by Colm Toibin, *The Judas Field* by Howard Bahr, and *Enemy Women* by Canadian poet Paulette Jiles. The 2007 Best Historical Fiction from *The Washington Post Book World* cites, among others, *Lost City Radio* by Daniel Alarcon, *World Without End* by Ken Follett, and *The Indian Clerk* by David Leavitt. As Sarah Johnson, editor of *The Historical Novels Review*, notes in an article for *Libraries Unlimited*: “It has become fashionable again to talk about the historical novel in public.”

“Contemporary” was the buzzword when I began submitting stories to literary journals in the mid 1980s. Although I didn’t plan to write in a particular genre, my published novels and two stage plays are set in times past. In hindsight, perhaps it has been less conflicting for me to imagine what a young person in 1918 or 1893 might say, think, and do than it would be to get into the mind of a character who could be the

contemporary of my children or grandchildren. In this mode, I must rely on history to show me what the world I'm trying to recreate was like, on my own judgment and intuition as to what my boundaries are, and on my imagination to make the narrative come alive.

Of course, the decision to place a book-length work of fiction in a time frame other than one's own requires a commitment to research, which can be tedious, frustrating, addictive, and magical. Whenever a crucial piece of information comes to light (even though you may not have been aware until the moment of discovery that you needed it), it's as though you've tuned into a helpful universe. Although you may not use a tenth of the material you've assembled, the ballast of that groundwork reinforces your connection with the times, places, and people you have chosen to write about.

During the construction of my novel *Devotion* (The University of Georgia Press, 2006), institutional and academic Web sites provided access to the expertise of archivists and historians. I read biographies and other books (most of which, including two novels by my real-life protagonist, I obtained through Interlibrary Loan and used book dealers), utilized microfilmed newspaper files in the Reference Room of the Alabama Department of Archives and History, and visited some of the geography my characters knew or would have known. The length of the Bibliography and Acknowledgments section is humbling proof that I could not have written this novel without a lot of collaboration.

If you think you'd like to try your hand and heart at writing fiction about times before your own, be aware that the field is a medium: characters who are appropriated from history—and some you have assumed were created entirely in your imagination—may start telling you what they're going to do and say.

Julia Oliver's books are Seventeen Times as High as the Moon, Goodbye to the Butter-milk Sky, Music of Falling Water, and Devotion, which received the 2007 John Esten Cooke Fiction Award and will be issued in paperback in Fall 2008.

Continued from page 11

will likely be some reason for the collection—twelve essays about U. S. Grant, for instance. With a collection of stories by one author, the stories are sometimes obviously linked, using some of the same characters and settings, but maybe not. Also with single-author volumes, do review the title story, the first story, and the last. Those are the pieces the author felt were most important.

Stories in edited anthologies are often not linked in any way, but choices still must be made; you can't talk about them all. Evaluate the overall success of the volume and indicate which two or three are best and why.

IV A debate simmering at the present time is over negative reviews. Since newspapers are dropping their review pages and fewer books receive any attention, should you take up space with a negative review? Consider this: If no one did, all reviews, obviously, would be positive, would become promotional materials. The reviewer would lose the ability to deliver real praise to a superb work. You would become an irritating cheerleader, and be regarded much like Browning's Last Duchess, liking everything. In economic terms, you would have debased your own currency, which is your credibility.

On the other hand, I would say, as does the heroine of *Tea and Sympathy*, "Be kind." Even a bad book is someone's love child, slaved over for months or even years. Don't just make fun of it. The review is not an opportunity to be a wise guy and snide and sarcastic at the author's expense, even if he deserves it. Your job is to provide a service to your reader, and the service is honest advice.

A tempting digression. Dale Peck was, for a while, the bad boy of American reviewing. His famous review of *The Black Veil* in *The New Republic* begins, "Rick Moody is the worst writer of his generation." Of *Infinite Jest* by David Foster Wallace, Peck wrote, "It is, in a word, terrible... other words I might use include bloated, boring, gratuitous, and—perhaps especially—uncontrolled." True, Peck became notorious and got a book contract for the collection *Hatchet Jobs*, but few of us are Dale Peck. He is a very bright, articulate, and savage writer. The rest of us should simply aim to be kind and balanced, remembering that books are written by living people, and you might run into the author at the next conference.

Don Noble is the host of APT's Bookmark and a weekly book reviewer for Alabama Public Radio.

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The Truth About SELF-PUBLISHING

A Primer for the Novice

by Tony Crunk

Twain, Joyce, and Kipling did it. So did Whitman, Woolf, and Cummings. And so, more recently, has Alabama native James Redfield. All achieved great literary success in part through the adventure of self-publishing.

Redfield's first book, a novel, sends its protagonist on a mystery-infused journey to Peru to discover a series of cosmic "Insights" into the possibility of personal and global spiritual awakening. After a long string of rejections by mainstream publishers, Redfield undertook to publish the book himself. He had personally sold some 100,000 copies, literally out of the trunk of his car, when it was bought and published by Warner Books in 1994. *The Celestine Prophecy* went on to spend over three years on the *New York Times* best-seller list, sell over twenty million copies, and be translated into some thirty-five other languages.

While it may easily be the best known, *The Celestine Prophecy* is only one of a number of highly publicized contemporary self-publishing successes. Such success stories have helped spark a boom in self-publishing over the last decade, and have helped transform an enterprise that was once widely disdained as mere "vanity publishing" into a thriving industry.

More importantly, new technologies in book design, printing, and distribution have recently emerged that make self-publishing more affordable and accessible. The primary innovation has been publishing-on-demand (POD) technology that allows books to be stored electronically and printed only when ordered, circumventing the traditional, more expensive, and more financially risky process of printing numerous copies of a book in advance—and hope—of sales. Major national companies such as iUniverse, authorhouse, Xlibris, and numerous, smaller imitators have emerged to take advantage of these innovations by providing POD services to writers.

Accordingly, self-publishing is an increasingly attractive option for many writers. However, anyone considering this option would do well to understand how self-publishing works, the advantages and disadvantages of working with service



Tony Crunk

providers—both large and small—and what one might reasonably—and unreasonably—expect of the process's end results. Self-publishing can be an extremely rewarding avenue for bringing one's work into print. Without adequate knowledge or preparation, it can also be extremely disappointing, and sometimes expensively so.

In traditional publishing, the publisher purchases a writer's manuscript and then performs the editing, design, printing, and marketing functions that put a finished book in a reader's hands. In self-publishing, the author either performs these functions personally or pays others to perform them.

Among POD service providers, a writer has a broad array of choices of types and levels of services. Most of the nationally known companies offer a selection of packages that vary according to, for example, the degree of the author's input into the book's design, number of free copies the author receives, and the availability of "marketing tools" such as Web site design, press releases, and advertising posters and postcards. Xlibris, for example, offers seven separate packages, ranging in price from \$299 to \$12,999; authorhouse offers three packages, ranging from \$698 to \$1048. Many packages include the service of listing the title with such on-line bookstores as Amazon and Barnes & Noble.

The most significant, defining aspect of self-publishing is that the writer bears the burden and responsibility of actually selling the finished book. The essential business of mainstream publishers is selling books; the essential business of POD companies is selling services to writers. Therein lies a common misconception, and common criticism, of POD publishers.

With its extensive advertising and national visibility, the POD industry has been accused of blurring the lines between traditional and self-publishing, and of gulling the naïve writer into assuming that self-publishing has attained a broader "legitimacy" that it may not have. Michael Garrett, a Birmingham

writer and editor who teaches courses in self-publishing, asserts that the larger POD enterprises have succeeded by “attempting to establish themselves as legitimate publishers and preparing deceptive marketing programs to convince hopeful writers that this approach could lead to a writing career.”

In this regard, POD’s very success has actually redounded to the detriment of self-published writers. Given the rampant growth in their numbers, many traditional outlets for promoting and selling books are increasingly resistant to self-published works. Many bookstores, by policy, will not stock self-published works, and many journals, by policy, will not review them. And, as “legitimate” as a listing on Amazon.com may sound, it certainly does not guarantee sales. Self-published titles on Amazon.com sell, on average, well under one hundred copies each. The self-published writer, then, not only bears the burden of selling the finished book, but increasingly must find innovative, non-traditional ways to do so.

Critics also assert the unadorned judgment that most self-published books are simply not very good, are often poorly written and poorly edited. In effect, the agents, editors, and publishers that self-publishing writers seek to circumvent serve a quality control function that may be missing in the self-publishing process.

Apologists for the industry counter that any disappointment in the self-publishing experience is more likely the result of writers’ not adequately informing themselves about the process in advance, and that legitimate POD companies work honestly with writers to match their services to the writer’s goals and resources. They maintain that limited access to traditional

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Ten Do’s and Don’ts for Self-publishing

- 1) **Do your research:** Plentiful Internet resources and highly respected books such as *The Self-Publishing Manual* by Dan Poynter and *The Complete Self-Publishing Guide* by Tom and Marilyn Ross provide essential information about the self-publishing process and its unique joys and challenges.
- 2) **Clarify your goals:** Plan a self-publishing strategy that can realistically achieve well-defined goals for your book’s ultimate sale or distribution.
- 3) **Know your audience:** Especially if you seek broad sales, know whom you would like to have read your book, how to reach them, and how to produce a book they will find attractive.
- 4) **Comparison shop for services:** Consult with a variety of providers, large and small, to assure you buy only those services you need, at the best price. Do not hesitate to ask for references.
- 5) **Have your manuscript professionally edited:** A poorly edited book can be as unsatisfactory to its author as to its readers, no matter the author’s sales aspirations.
- 6) **Make sure your manuscript is in the electronic form required by your designer/printer:** Using incompatible software or formatting can result in glitches that are tedious and expensive to correct.

7) **Ask for a digital file of your completed manuscript and cover art:** These files will come in handy when promoting your work. Most publications need a high-resolution image of your book’s front cover.

8) **Expect to perform most of the sales and distribution legwork yourself:** Though there are exceptions, it is unrealistic to expect bookstores to sell your book; it is unrealistic to expect publications to review it.

9) **Create a Web site to promote your book:** If well-designed, this can be an inexpensive and effective alternative to traditional sales venues such as bookstores.

10) **Develop your craft as a writer:** Especially, but not only, if your ultimate goal is literary “success” (traditionally defined), consider redirecting some of the time, energy, and money you might invest in self-publishing into taking classes or participating in writers’ groups that would make the writing itself a more rewarding undertaking, both for yourself and your future readers.



Continued from page 15

marketing avenues is more than compensated by the increased control POD provides writers over the content, design, and distribution of their books, unhampered by preconceptions of agents, editors, and publishers as to what may or may not be a successful book.

Susan Driscoll, President and CEO of iUniverse, cites actual advantages of POD over traditional publishing, even from the marketing perspective. The technology that makes POD possible allows for “multi-platform” publishing, that is, distributing books through new and emerging electronic media in addition to print media. Observing that technology has given readers, as “consumers of information and entertainment,” an expanded range of options, Driscoll asserts that “tech-savvy writers can find tech-savvy readers, and vice-versa.”

Writers who feel daunted by working with one of the larger national companies may do well to consider the alternative of a smaller, local POD service provider. One such company is Birmingham’s ABSNTH, Inc., whose owner/manager Russell Helms notes that even small companies have access to the same network of editors, designers, and printers used by larger POD companies, and they can offer such services at

competitive prices. More importantly, the smaller company can also work more personally with writers in bringing their work to print, even helping make contacts with local marketing venues. “The smaller local company can provide essentially the same services as the big companies,” says Helms, “but it can offer a level of control, comfort, and caring that can help assure the writer a satisfactory experience.”

Critics and apologists agree that it is essential for the self-publishing writer to have clear, realistic goals and expectations. Self-publishing is ideally suited for writers who seek to publish for more personal than financial reasons, whose primary goal is the production of their work in an attractive form that can be distributed to family and friends, or in the local community, in small quantities. And, though there is certainly no guarantee, self-publishing can, in fact, lead to broader commercial success, to the extent of the time, energy, and money that the writer can invest in aggressively marketing the book. However, despite the well-publicized achievements of the world’s James Redfields, writers who approach self-publishing as a path to broad literary success and acclaim are most likely to be disappointed.

Tony Crunk lives and writes in Birmingham.



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Clockwise from right: Natasha Tretheway, Deborah Wiles, Ace Atkins, Joshilyn Jackson, Stephen Berry, Rheta Grimsley Johnson, Rick Bragg, Cassandra King



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...Who Is Speaking And Who Is Listening...

ELEGY FOR A VIOLENT SOUTH

by Jake Adam York

Sometime in my first weeks of graduate school at Cornell, a classmate leaned over the conference table and asked me, *Did your family own slaves?*

Granted, I'd just presented a poem concerned, in part, with a pre-Civil War slave maroon, a colony of runaways, perhaps begging the question of my relation to the subject. But I was taken aback, surprised by how quickly the question came to her lips.

She seemed to want a confession, or to expect one. Did she think that only guilt could motivate someone, that only personal experience could authorize someone to write such a poem? The *No* I offered was hardly adequate. She seemed to want what a confession would provide, an account of the South to which the only door seemed to be a *Yes*.

Though she was the first to ask such a question so directly, she was hardly the last. For a great many people, it seems, the South is the worst of its history, and those who don't eschew *all* of the South are thought to endorse the horror. So, they ask an incredulous version of Shreve McCannon's famous question, *You don't hate the South?* Which is really another way of asking, *How could such terrible things happen in the South?*

What can I say? I was born in 1972, well after the Civil War and after the crest of the Civil Rights Movement and the violence most people recall. I can't, like Rodney Jones or Andrew Hudgins or Minnie Bruce Pratt, offer you an autobiography of repudiation, nor can I offer, like Diane McWhorter, an investigation both civic and familial. I can offer no confession, of myself or of my family. And yet my voice and my geography tie me to a history that demands an answer.

The difficulty is generational. But as a poet, I've inherited a special difficulty. The novelist might create characters who can explore the difficulty in a convincingly developed world. But when a poet tries the same, it seems contrived



Jake Adam York

or capricious—perhaps because poems rarely afford the room for complex realism, perhaps because poetry is still so dominated by personal confession that anything else seems suspect. The poet must find another way.

The elegy, the poem of mourning, provides an office through which to approach suffering, death, and loss that are not the writer's own, and it asks the writer to respond to suffering and loss, to terror. The elegy asks the poet to mourn, to confront

not only the fact of loss but as well the facts of the death, to acknowledge suffering, and yet to offer some consolation to those who survive. And so, it seems an exactly appropriate vehicle in which to approach this difficult history I've been asked to explain.

But here, tradition also cautions. Increasingly finding suffering and loss incommensurable, many poets have withdrawn from consolation and even from elegy itself. Dylan Thomas, for example, famously declares in his "Refusal to Mourn the Death, by Fire, of a Child in London," "I shall not murder / The mankind of her going with a grave truth / Nor blaspheme down the stations of the breath / With any further / Elegy of innocence and youth." More recently Mark Yakich observes in his poem "Against Elegy," there is "No meter for grief." That is to say, I think, that if grief is real, if uncontrived, it is too terrible for the order of a poem. Maybe that makes elegy a kind of emotional pornography, perhaps even, as Thomas puts it, a blasphemy that re-murders the murdered, putting the mourner in sympathy not with the dead but with death.

But as I confront our history of racial violence, I've come to feel elegy, whatever its excesses, *must* be hazarded; the alternative, a silent or elliptical reverence, feels too much like helplessness, too close to the silence that violence sought

to enforce. I look to Emmett Till's mother, Mamie Till, who opened the casket at her son's funeral, who allowed *Jet* magazine to publish photos of the body, so Americans could see what hatred can do to a body. We have to look, we have to return, so violence and hatred are not amplified or abetted by silence.

The poet tends to excess when he works alone, confident in his judgment or imagination alone, so I've adopted a documentary approach to the elegy, working from direct sources, from eyewitness accounts, photographs, and investigators' reports wherever possible, building each poem out of what survives that moment. The order of a poem is suggested by the facts of the case, and the poem's language—its diction and tone and sound and rhythm—are built around a quotation, something someone said. The scope of the poem's possibility is limited by these sources, so the elegy is authorized by the history to the degree the writing is sensitive and responsive to that history.

Amazingly, what survives is more than enough for exploration, for explanation, and even for imagination. This poetry, while deliberately limited in its scope, finds its own riches.

I wanted to understand, for example, how W. J. Milam and Roy Bryant could have murdered Emmett Till, been exonerated of the charges against them, and then felt confident enough to confess. I read with amazement the theories offered by their defense lawyers—that the body wasn't Till's, that someone else killed Till, that Till was alive and well in Detroit, that the body was a white man's even though no one seemed to know whose. The defense team essentially created not one but several alternate universes, an act that exposes the complexity

of the Mississippi in which Till was murdered: it wasn't one place but many places existing at once on a single piece of land. And in this multi-verse, the elegy and the anti-elegy are possible: Till is dead, gruesomely murdered, and the poem can approach the horror of his torture and death, but Till is also alive, providing a momentary, if false, consolation. What the poet might otherwise have been left to imagine has already been imagined, so a poem of consolatory vision and of grounding truth is possible at once.

"Substantiation," the poem I wrote for Emmett Till, is now bound—with elegies for Lamar Smith, Herbert Lee, Louis Allen, Addie Mae Collins, Denise McNair, Carole

Robertson, Cynthia Wesley, James Reeb, and Jimmie Lee Jackson—in *A Murmuration of Starlings*, a book I hope readers will take as an installment in an ongoing project to elegize each of the forty martyrs of the Civil Rights Movement whose names are inscribed on the Civil Rights Memorial in Montgomery.

I first visited the memorial when I was a student at Auburn, and now, dozens of visits later, I see those names cut into the black granite's silence, and I look more closely to see the faint but scintillating crenellations of the stone beneath the memorial's water, each one another syllable asking to be heard.

As he concludes his "Elegy for the Southern Drawl," Rodney Jones wonders "What words mean when they are given / From so many voices" so that he does not know, listening to that tape of his voice, "who is speaking and who is listening." As a poet writing beyond the horizon of my experience, I have tried to embrace this confusion, to learn from and to remember, in what I write, the voices of those who have passed. I don't know what is *my* voice any longer, but that seems less and less important all the time.

Jake Adam York is a fifth-generation Alabamian, raised in Etowah County, educated at Auburn and Cornell, and now living in Denver, Colorado.

AT LIBERTY

21 September 1961, Liberty, Mississippi

Everyone will say he drove to the gin
with a truck full of cotton so he drives to the gin
and gets in line and everyone will say
the congressman pulled in behind him so he gets out
yelling *Herbert Lee I'm not messing with you this time*
and his affidavit will say Lee had a tire iron
and there are no photographs so there is
a tire iron and since the congressman will say
Lee swung at him his hand will grasp the iron
under the tangle of his own dead weight
and the congressman will leave and will not
see him again so he just lies there bleeding
and no one will touch him so for a time
he is just a story or a huddle of starlings
or crows or a cloud of bottle-flies that might
explode and disappear until the witnesses
can say he's there and an undertaker can come
with a hearse from the next county over
and then he is dead and the congressman can
tell his story so Herbert Lee will rise
from his coffin and swing his iron
and the FBI can come to make him into evidence
but someone will have roped him into his grave
so there is no photograph and no one sees
the cotton boll wicking blood so there is no boll
only a clear, white negative in the dark
and a paper that slowly fills with flies.

Jake Adam York

WRITING OUR STORIES CELEBRATES ITS TENTH ANNIVERSARY

Three New Anthologies Launch the Next Decade

by Danny Gamble
photos by Jamie Martin

Writing Our Stories: An Anti-Violence Creative Writing Program, a partnership of the Alabama Department of Youth Services (DYS) and AWF, celebrated its tenth anniversary in the fall during the annual anthology debut events at three campuses where the program takes place. In addition to guests from DYS advisory boards and staff at each school, arts community leaders witnessed the pride of publication when first-time authors were presented to their peers and others. Teaching writers at each of the schools edited the new volumes.

The release of *Open the Door 10*, edited by Marlin Barton,

on the DYS Mt. Meigs campus on October 29 marked the kickoff of the celebration. DYS Executive Director J. Walter Wood Jr., AWF Executive Director Jeanie Thompson, Sgt. Danial Miller, and Sen. Hank Sanders (D-Selma, District 23) addressed the assembled student writers, guests, faculty, and staff at the morning ceremony.

“This is your day, and we are here because of you,” Wood told the newly published writers. “You can now talk about your accomplishments and show all your families and friends that you are a published writer. We are proud of you.”



“Hopefully this program has taught you that education is vital. Poetry, writing is a huge part of an education. Writing is key to an education,” said Judge Brian Huff, shown here applauding the newly published writers at the DYS Vacca Campus.



“With your writing, you have taken some powerful steps, and there are many more steps to take. I say take them,” said Sen. Hank Sanders (D-Selma, District 23) as he addressed the newly published writers on the DYS Mt. Meigs campus.



“Continue to tell the stories of your life because your life is also your testimony. I am inspired by each of you, and I admire your courage in sharing your experiences,” said attorney Dafina Cooper Ward on the DYS Chalkville Campus.



(l-r) Sen. Hank Sanders, AWF Executive Director Jeanie Thompson, Sgt. Danial Miller, and DYS Executive Director J. Walter Wood Jr. share a moment after the book event at the DYS Mt. Meigs campus.



Cooperating teacher and Media Specialist Linda McQueen, Principal Arthur Tigner, teaching writer Danny Gamble, and Judge Brian Huff accept a congratulatory plaque during the reception in the Media Center at McNeel School, DYS Vacca Campus.



Cooperating teacher Priscilla Hancock Cooper (l) and cooperating teacher Janet Dixon (r) congratulate Dafina Cooper Ward at a reception following the book release ceremony at the DYS Chalkville Campus.

“This tenth anniversary comes at a time when Writing Our Stories is becoming known across the country,” said Thompson. “Alabama has proven to be a leader in juvenile justice and the arts education.”

Sgt. Miller offered first-hand knowledge of the program’s success. Miller, an eighteen month veteran of Writing Our Stories at the DYS Vacca and Mt. Meigs campuses, recently completed a tour of duty in Iraq with 1-167 Infantry, Delta Company, Alabama Army National Guard. He wrote of his experience in Iraq in the Spring 2007 issue of *First Draft*.

“Putting your thoughts and emotions on paper can calm the world around you,” said Miller. “Writing helps you to vent the pain and hardships you encounter every day. What better way to make a point than by writing it down, using your own words and thoughts?”

Sen. Sanders entertained the crowd with a humorous anecdote from his childhood. “I was the meanest kid in the family,” he said.

“If I had not made some changes in my life, I would have been in prison or dead,” said Sanders, author of the novel *Death of a Fat Man*. “Once I began writing, I began to see things in a much broader way. Through my writing and other things, I went to college, attended law school at Harvard, won election to the Alabama State Senate, and went on to chair the Senate Finance and Taxation Committee.

“With your writing, you have taken some powerful steps,” he said, “and there are many more steps to take. I say take them.”

The program concluded with a reading by sixteen student writers of selections of their poetry and prose published in *Open the Door 10*, the tenth anthology from the students at Lurleen B. Wallace School. One transfer student read from *Happy & Free*, the Vacca anthology.

The celebration continued with the release of *Hidden In Me*, edited by Priscilla Hancock Cooper, on the DYS Chalkville campus on November 13. DYS Superintendent of Education Dr. John Stewart, Thompson, and attorney Dafina Cooper Ward addressed the morning ceremony.

Dr. Stewart surprised the audience with a reading of the title poem from *Let Me Talk To You*, Chalkville’s first anthology. “There’s a poem that’s ten years old that I still use,” said Stewart, addressing the student writers. “Everything you write, everything you share has potential to reach people many years down the road. So many people may use your work that you’ll never know.”

“Writing Our Stories has grown into one of the most well regarded arts programs in schools in our state,” said Thompson. “It’s also one of the best examples of the way two different parts of our society work together to accomplish a common goal. And those two aspects are the arts community, represented by the Alabama Writers’ Forum and your teacher Ms. Cooper, and the juvenile justice community, represented by the Department of Youth Services school district.

“This book can never be taken away from you,” she told the student writers. “It might be stolen. It might be left

Continued on page 22



"There's a poem that's ten years old that I still use. Everything you write, everything you share has potential to reach people many years down the road," said Dr. John Stewart, DYS Superintendent of Education, after he read the title poem from *Let Me Talk To You*, Chalkville's first anthology.

"Putting your thoughts and emotions on paper can calm the world around you. Writing helps you to vent the pain and hardships you encounter every day," said Sgt. Daniel Miller (I), standing here with his former instructor, Mt. Meigs teaching writer Marlin Barton.

behind. But the poems that you've written exist. There is a lot happening with fine young women writers in this country and I want you to know you're part of that."

Cooper beamed with pride as she introduced Ward, also coordinator of the Alabama Community Aids Fund and Cooper's daughter.

"Be brave in sharing your story—whether it's writing, whether it's painting, or just talking with another person—your story is your testimony," said Ward, continuing the day's theme of the long-lasting effect of the students' writing. "Your story is what matters, and you inspire others by sharing your experiences. You have no idea how many lives you will touch."

"In your lives, as you move forward, remember the lessons you have learned here, the good and bad," she said. "Continue to tell the stories of your life because your life is also your testimony. I am inspired by each of you, and I admire your survival and your courage in sharing your experiences."

One published student from *Hidden In Me* returned to campus to share her work and twelve presently enrolled students read their favorite poems from the anthology, the ninth from Sequoyah School.

The Honorable Brian Huff, Presiding Circuit Judge of Family Court, spoke to the Vacca assembly on November 27. "What I'm glad to see through this program and through the publication of this book is that many of you are finding some of the gifts and some of the talents that you have inside that you may not have otherwise known about," he said. "How many here knew that they could write a year ago? This program is helping you discover something about yourself that you didn't otherwise know.

"Hopefully this program has taught you that education is vital," he continued. "Poetry, writing is a huge part of an education. Writing is key to an education."

Two published students read selections from their work in *Happy & Free*, edited by Danny Gamble and Adele Goodwyn McNeel School's eighth anthology. Ten students from this year's classes read one of their favorite poems from the book and shared one of their new poems with the audience.

At the conclusion of each ceremony, Thompson awarded the respective schools a plaque, honoring their commitments to Writing Our Stories.

The Next Ten Years

"We are looking forward to the next ten years and beyond," Thompson said, "because we see how Writing Our Stories helps students learn more productive ways of living—with less anger and frustration and a clearer sense of how to express themselves productively—through a craft-based creative writing program conducted within the regular classroom.

"We know anecdotally that students also improve their reading and writing skills, generally scoring better on the high school graduation exam and staying more interested in school as a result of participating in Writing Our Stories. There is no substitute for the motivation this program may provide an under-achieving student," she said.

"When a young woman sees her name in print next to something she has written—her own story in her own well-crafted words—or when a young man hears exclamations and applause after he reads his own work aloud, this imprints in a way that few things can."

For further information about Writing Our Stories, go to www.writersforum.org/ programs or contact the Alabama Writers' Forum at 334-265-7728.

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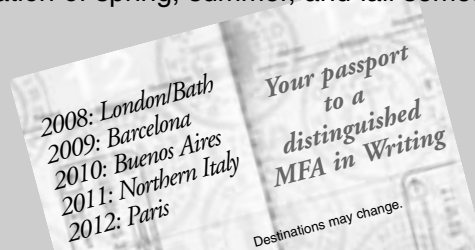
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Greetings, Salutations, and Goodwill

MISCELLANY

Dear AWF:

From its inception, the Alabama Writers' Forum seems to have understood the importance of communicating with its members and others interested in Alabama writing. First produced in 1993, its newsletter, *First Draft*, was a simple black-and-white twelve-pager, as I remember, but it was ambitious, containing feature articles as well as valuable information for writers about contests, conferences, literary magazines, and publishing houses in Alabama. Within two years, the newsletter had doubled in size and had become increasingly useful to Alabama's writers, causing the Board to reflect its growing significance by making *First Draft* the journal, not the newsletter, of AWF. And so it has remained ever since, though over the years its pages have been increased, color has been added, book reviews have grown in number, and more and more feature articles have appeared.

Jeanie Thompson was, of course, mainly responsible for these improvements. But Jeanie, as many of you know, is never satisfied with the status quo, and she was always on the lookout for new means of communication. I remember very well in the mid-nineties, before Web pages became so prevalent, that Jeanie took the Board into a small room at the Auburn Center for the Arts and Humanities, where AWF was then headquartered, and showed us the rudimentary beginnings of an AWF Web page (www.writersforum.org). Although we were not out-and-out Luddites, I remember that some of us on the Board were not sure this was where our energies should be going at the time. We were, of course, quite wrong, and the AWF Web site has become a vital part of AWF's communications efforts. It is especially useful now for reviews of books by Alabamians.

The latest news source from AWF is the electronic newsletter, so handsomely edited by Danny Gamble. It offers information on Alabama writing in an even more timely fashion.

We all owe thanks to Jeanie and to all the others who have through the years participated in the efforts I've just described. Now we can all wait to see what the next new method of communication will be. Something to do with text-messaging, perhaps?

Norman McMillan
Montevallo, Ala.

Dear AWF:

I'm very impressed with the sparkle and professionalism of the Alabama Writers' Forum's Web site. It is attractively designed and easy to navigate. The handy calendar is filled with useful information about literary events of interest to all Alabamians who write and read.

As a native Alabamian recently resettled near Union Springs after a long career of teaching and writing in Florida and Kentucky, I am delighted to see the vigorous literary culture in Alabama. I am, however, somewhat partial to the fall issue of *First Draft* with its crisp and accurate profile of me by Marianne Motes. Bless her heart! It is such an honor to be welcomed home in this way.

I appreciate the good work that Jeanie Thompson and the Alabama Writers' Forum staff are doing for all of us readers and writers in Alabama. I'm glad to be one of you now.

Wade Hall
Union Springs, Ala.

WEB SITE

Dear AWF:

You truly are doing a great job with the online items for the Forum. They seem to have created a good buzz we have not had before. I keep hearing people say, "I saw it on the scroll on the Web site."

Ruth Cook
Birmingham, Ala.

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Dear AWF:

As Tournament Director for the Southern Fried Regional Poetry Slam, I would like to say thanks again for putting the slam up on the AWF site. We had a poet from Trussville in December who is only seventeen years old, but he is a creative and thoughtful writer, and he is now hooked on slam. He found out about the slam on your Web site.

Kirk Hardesty
Briarfield, Ala.

Dear AWF:

The Book Reviews Web page is absolutely marvelous. And what we've been hoping for! I think it will move AWF where we need and deserve to be—a well-known and credible authority in the literary world.

Linda Spalla
Huntsville, Ala.

WRITING OUR STORIES

Dear AWF:

My husband Harold and I have been reading aloud to each other selections from *Happy & Free*. It is wonderful how the Writing Our Stories program has inspired these boys to write from the depths of their souls. The poems and prose make us feel the depths of despair and then the bright sunshine these student writers have experienced.

Carolyn Spivey
Marietta, Ga.

First Draft

Dear AWF:

This is a great article. ("Waving Our Hearts Out to the Heart of Dixie Express," Fall 2007) Thanks so much for the lovely mention. I really appreciate your quote from Tony Earley about writing fiction from a Southern perspective that doesn't fall into the Southern clichés. I love that your article doesn't focus on all the usual suspects, instead tackling the idea of Southern fiction from a broader perspective. Well done!

Michelle Richmond
San Francisco, Calif.

Dear AWF:

I have just perused the Fall 2007 issue of *First Draft*, but my first impression is that it looks and reads great, kind of in the way *Oxford American* did in the old days before it moved to Arkansas.

Anita Garner
Florence, Ala.

Dear AWF:

A quick note to say how much I like the Fall 2007 issue of *First Draft*. I laughed several times reading Anita Garner's article—and recognized myself in there, having read, one more time, a Faulkner novel just last week. I was glad to see Marianne Moates' piece on Wade Hall. Being a Kentuckian, maybe former by now, I have been aware of his work for a good while.

Flo Jackson
Vestavia Hills, Ala.

NEWSLETTER

Dear AWF:

A great newsletter piece, and a wonderful lift for the poetry and spirituality series! ("Jim Mersmann brings 'Spirituality and Poetry' to Montevallo," November 2007) Thanks so much for your extraordinary and generous help. You are a bringer of blessing. I really appreciate it.

Jim Mersmann
Columbiana, Ala.

Dear AWF:

The November e-newsletter looks terrific! The story and "portrait" from DYS celebration is especially strong. Thanks for your skill and stewardship. Godspeed!

Bill Fuller
LaFayette, Ala.

Dear AWF:

The Writing Today e-announcement looks great! One could spend a lot of time checking out the conference if she clicked on all the links. This is an exciting experiment. Many thanks for a great job!

Annie S. Green
Birmingham, Ala.

Send your letters to Danny Gamble, Alabama Writers' Forum,
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or e-mail gambledanny@bellsouth.net, Subject: First Draft.



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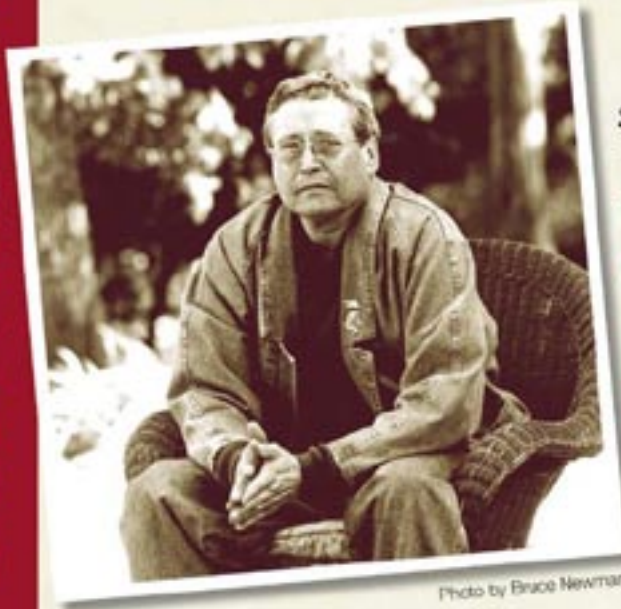


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AlternativeVoices

THE ARTS IN CRIMINAL JUSTICE CONFERENCE

by *Kyes Stevens*



Poet Kurtis Lumpkin (orange shirt) with his class at Staton Correctional Facility.



Poets Katherine Perry (front, left) and Kyes Stevens (back, right) pose with the women at Tutwiler State Prison for Women to celebrate their anthology *Into Daylight*.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF APAEP

In October 2007, more than 250 artists, activists, legislators, incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people, and other professionals from the United States and abroad gathered in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, for the first national arts in corrections conference. The Mural Arts Program of the City of Philadelphia, through the support of the Nathan Cummings Foundation and the Ford Foundation, hosted the Arts in Criminal Justice Conference from October 3-6, when individuals and representatives of organizations from across the country who work in creative services for at-risk youth, youth in detention, incarcerated adults, and aftercare/community re-entry gathered.

I traveled with one of our teaching artists, Barb Bondy, a professor in the Art Department at Auburn University, to present on several panels at the conference about the successes of the Alabama Prison Arts + Education Project (APAEP). Through visiting with other artists-administrators, learning about new programs, and continuing dialogues started years ago with constituents around the country, I am pleased to report that Alabama has much to be proud of in the field of arts in corrections.

The Arts In Corrections conference hosted keynote speakers Sonia Sanchez and Luis Rodriguez, both giving powerful readings of their work. One impressive element included the voices of those who have been incarcerated and those who are still. One day of the conference was spent at Graterford Prison, where panels were comprised of individuals who have been the recipients of arts in corrections programming. It was a powerful reminder of why the work is important. The program functions not to produce some statistic or even a funding opportunity—as one woman on the panel implied as she berated the audience—but to help inmates through the arts on a human level. For those of us in the field, this is a strong lesson to remember, even when writing reports and seeking grants.

Writers on Writing

As a writer myself, I confess I love to go behind the curtain and watch the Wizard pull the levers in Oz. I don't mean I want to know how a writer *actually* writes (where she sits, what kind of coffee she drinks), but I do like to know what other writers think about the process. It's a useful and instructive dialogue, and it builds the community.

In our cover story, we offer insight into our 2008 Harper Lee Award winner Rebecca Gilman's work process. A successfully produced and award-winning playwright, Gilman is one of the most decorated Alabama writers of her generation, and the first playwright to be recognized with this prestigious award. She tells us quite openly how she came to playwrighting and why she sticks with that genre. Gin Phillips' excellent profile introduces Gilman to Alabamians who may not yet know her. People still have time to make plans to join us at Alabama Southern Community College the first weekend in May and take part in the festivities which will include a reading of one of Gilman's plays during her segment at the Monroe County Courthouse (www.ascc.edu).

In keeping with our charge to address issues of craft, we offer you some very practical advice on subjects near and dear to writers—reviewing and self-publishing. Don Noble, Alabama's sage reviewer, outlines *how to do it* if you want to write reviews that contribute to the dialogue in literature today. Anyone who has reviewed books knows that it is a craft, as Noble says, but it also carries serious responsibility as he points out. Noble's methodical approach to reviewing becomes a great refresher for all of us who write reviews, and a great manual for the novice approaching the genre for the first time.

Poet and children's writer Tony Crunk tackles the increasingly complex subject of self-publishing with a welcomed grace, and again, produces a handy tip sheet of what you should and shouldn't do to be successful in this fluid arena. Self-publishing is not the vanity press world of the old days, and Crunk helps would-be self-publishers find their way.

Two Montgomery writers delve into the deeper waters of writing fiction. Kirk Curnutt riffs on that old question—"so what if truth is stranger than fiction?" and Julia Oliver



confesses her love/hate relationship with writing historical fiction, advising would-be historical fiction writers on some of the pitfalls and joys of the medium. Trust that these two novelists know what they are talking about—they have plied their crafts well and earned the right to speak on their subjects.

Poet Jake Adam York, whose prize-winning *A Murmuration of Starlings* is just out from Southern Illinois University Press, ruminates on who is speaking and who is listening on subjects of past racial violence in the contemporary South. Raised in Northeast Alabama, York

has embarked on a series of elegies for slain civil rights workers and other victims of racial violence in his ongoing poetic work. We asked him to tell us about that process, why he hazarded elegy as his form and why these poems are necessary. York offers a very personal testimony within the contemporary discussion of racism in our country today.

Two other stories in this issue focus on the Forum's on-going work with arts in corrections. Kyes Stevens sums up the latest work with adult offenders in prison statewide and comments on her recent participation in the first Arts in Corrections conference in Philadelphia last fall. Danny Gamble gives highlights of our tenth anniversary of the Writing Our Stories program with the Department of Youth Services. Both of these arts in corrections enterprises are good work that writers may do as teachers working within the criminal justice system in Alabama. The Alabama Writers' Forum commends all of these teaching writers and is proud to have been one of the leaders in establishing this venue for employment and professional fulfillment.

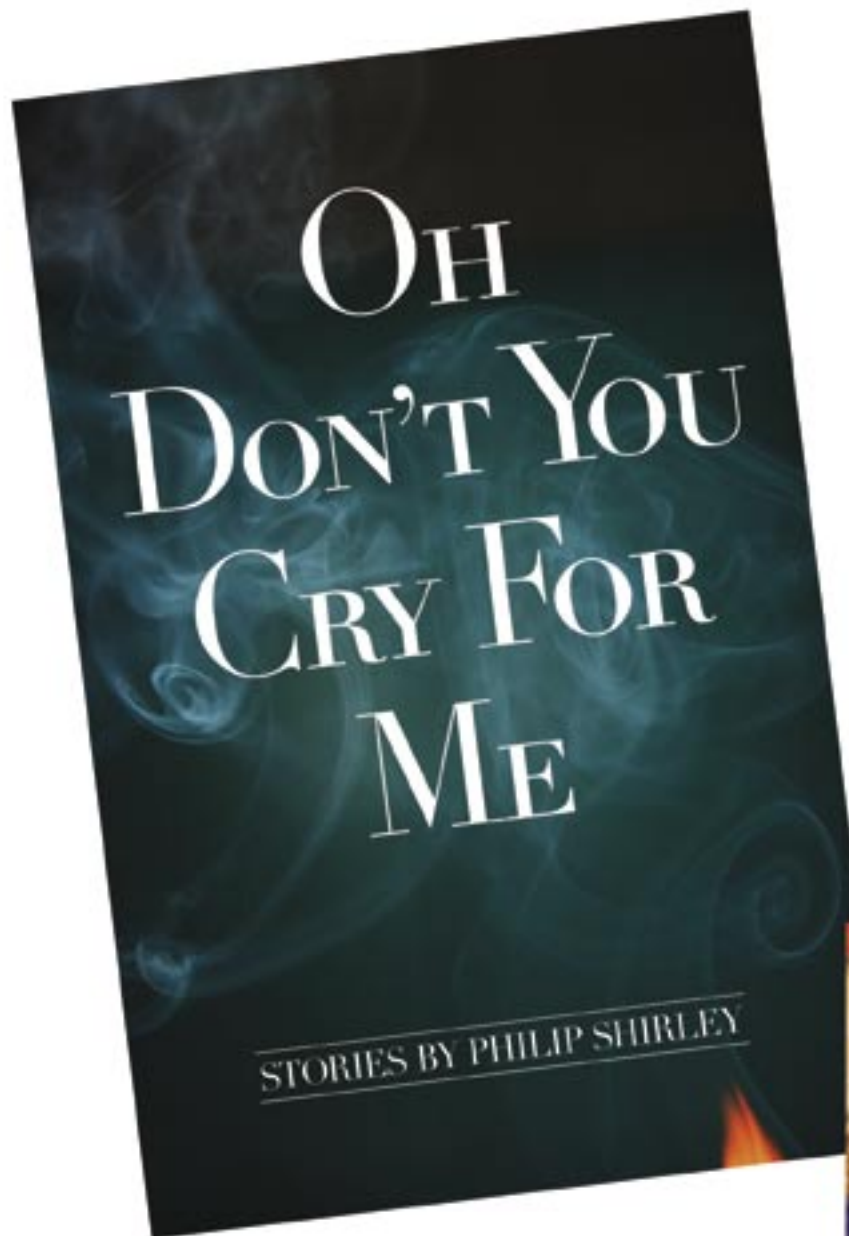
We hope these pieces will spark ideas with you, our readers, for stories to pitch to *First Draft*. Practical advice, literary think pieces, what obsesses us as writers and consumers of literature—this is what *First Draft* wants to deliver to you, our constant companion in Alabama's literary community. Let us know what you think and what you might want to write for us.

Jessie Thompson

“A Memorable Debut
in the World of Fiction.”

— MARK CHILDRESS

Author of *One Mississippi* and *Crazy in Alabama*



PHILIP SHIRLEY

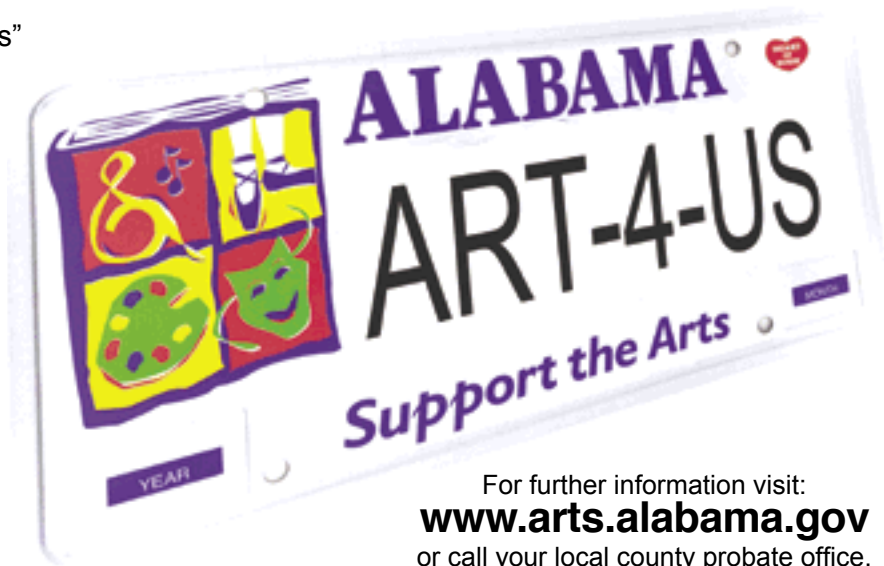
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