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# FIRST DRAFT

*The Journal of the  
Alabama Writers' Forum*



**ERNEST J. GAINES**

# ALABAMA WRITERS' FORUM

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# PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

Alabama's First Family entertains Alabama writers, filling the Governor's Mansion with books. Robert Frost inspires Super Bowl advertising. House Ways & Means Education Budget Chair Howard Hawk salutes the work of budding authors at Mount Meigs. This is an extraordinary season for writers and writing. And it is just getting started.

As a member of the Alabama Writers Forum, you are a partner in this explosion of literary arts. Your membership dollars, your participation in AWF programming, and your love for the printed word are our core resources. You are responsible for helping vault the Forum to national prominence as a model organization other states seek to emulate. Thank you for being a part of this amazing success story.

If you are not yet an AWF member, consider this a personal invitation to join. *First Draft* is distributed where readers gather—at bookstores, libraries, and schools—in the hope we can reach people like you. *First Draft* is among our menu of services to Alabama's diverse community of readers and writers. By joining the Forum, you will receive each issue of *First Draft* delivered to your mailbox, along with other timely and valuable benefits. Membership is a bargain well worth your investment.

Whether a longtime member or a newcomer to the Forum, you will find this issue filled with the information you need to take



Kellee Reinhart

full advantage of Alabama's spring literary season. Our cover story on novelist Ernest Gaines celebrates the work of a powerful Southern voice who will be heard in coming months at several major events statewide. We eagerly await his visit, which you will learn more about on page 9.

Springtime in Alabama is a writer's summit and a reader's fantasy. Where else can you choose among a long (and ever-growing!) list of conferences, symposia, signings, and readings to spend time with some of America's legendary authors and emerging talents? Make plans now for Writing Today, Southern Voices or the Alabama Writers Symposium in Monroeville. Set aside an evening for a reading on one of our college or university campuses. Visit your public library and investigate their spring programming schedule.

Alabama's literary heritage is deep and rich. In the months ahead, another chapter will be written, in a sense, by a community of writers with many faces and many stories. The common thread is their Alabama home, and the chance you will discover them through the programs of the Alabama Writers Forum. Join us for a spring season you won't want to miss. We're saving a place for you.

*Kellee Reinhart is President of the AWF Board of Directors and Director of System Relations for the University of Alabama System.*

Cover and page 6 photos of Ernest J. Gaines courtesy of the University of Louisiana Lafayette

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

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Joy Sailors

Alicia Wesley reading at the presentation of *Let Me Talk to You* at the DYS Chalkville campus (page 2).



Sigrid Estrada

Sena Jeter Naslund will appear at *Writing Today* in April (page 6).



Jason Harris

Governor Don Siegelman commissioned Poet Laureate Helen Norris (page 11).





# AWF and DYS Celebrate Latest Anthologies from “Writing Our Stories”

In November and December, the Alabama Writers' Forum and the Department of Youth Services celebrated the publication of the latest anthologies from “Writing Our Stories: An Anti-Violence Creative Writing Program.”

On November 30, DYS students, staff and guests packed the Mt. Meigs chapel to hear fifteen writers read from *Open the Door II*, the second anthology edited by teaching writer **Marlin Barton**. Of the fifteen readers, all but one had been released from the state's largest juvenile detention facility and came back voluntarily to Mt. Meigs—from as far away as Mobile—to take part in the event.

Two weeks, later, on December 11, a similar scene was played out in Chalkville, Alabama, as students from the Sequoyah School, their teachers and staff, as well as a large number of visitors from the arts and juvenile justice community celebrated the publication of *Let Me Talk To You*, a 56-page anthology of poems, stories and photographs. On that day, four of the fifteen writers published in the book returned to campus to read from their work.

Edited by teaching writer **Priscilla Hancock Cooper**, *Let Me Talk To You* is the inaugural anthology for the Chalkville program.

Cooper is already well underway with her second year of the program. “I am looking forward to putting together the second anthology already,” Cooper said. “These girls have so many stories to tell.”

The photographs included in the book were made during four days of workshops with photographer and Birmingham Museum of Art education coordinator **Suzy Harris**. The girls' photos, in conjunction with the written word, paint a stark, yet hopeful, picture of teenage life at Chalkville and outside, according to Cooper.

Students currently involved in the Chalkville “Writing Our Stories” program sat on the front row of the Chalkville chapel the day of the reading, paying close attention to the girls who read their sometimes startling work. One girl wrote about where she might be someday if she didn't get off the street in a piece entitled “Wondering.”

Another read her poem “Violence,” a stark depiction of emotions that rage within her, making some in the audience squirm.

According to AWF Executive Director **Jeanie Thompson**, the telling of their stories is vital to the survival of these young people incarcerated at DYS facilities. “When someone asks me the purpose

of this program, I say the purpose is saving lives," she said. "Our dedicated teaching writers lead these young people to a place of safety in telling their stories, and to a level of craft in writing that they would not achieve just working on their own."

"That these girls and their families returned to Chalkville to take part in the event shows their sense of pride in their work and their deep connection to their writing teacher, poet Priscilla Hancock Cooper," Thompson added.

Once they are released, Thompson said, she hopes they will use their writing skills to stay better focused in school and, perhaps, even discover a career.

One boy who had participated in the "Writing Our Stories" program at Mt. Meigs during its first year was moved to another facility, but returned to teaching writer Barton's classroom almost a year later. He plans to pursue a career in journalism. "I want to write for a specific type of magazine, so I know I need to study journalism," he told Thompson before the reading.

In addition to helping to heal the pain of committing crimes and instilling a need to ask for forgiveness, Thompson said that the young writers' work helps them find a sense of self-worth. In addition, she said, the writing process helps them understand better why they did what they did in the first place.

"Writing Our Stories' has been a success story," said **J. Water Wood, Jr.**, executive director of DYS, "both for juvenile offenders and for those who work with them." In the introductions to both anthologies, he cites their "their willingness to take part in the creative writing classes, keep pace with assignments and revise their work" as "enhancing their own treatment."

Thompson is quick to point out that the Alabama Writers' Forum is proud of its partnership with DYS. She says the Forum is privileged to have been partners with DYS in this pilot project, now almost three years old, which has grown to three campuses.

"For the teaching writers, it is not just a job, it is a mission. For the students, it is the chance of a lifetime—to discover their own writing talents. Ironically, most of these young people would have

*Continued on page 4*



Mickey Welsh

Mt. Meigs writers autographed copies of *Open the Door II* following their readings.

### ALABAMA GOVERNMENT LEADERS SPEAK TO DYS WRITERS AT EVENTS

Among those who congratulated the newly published "Writing Our Stories" authors at publication events at Mt. Meigs and Chalkville were elected and appointed officials of all three branches of state government. Each one urged the young people to make the most of themselves through opportunities like writing.

Representative **Howard Hawk** (D-Arab), who chairs the House Ways and Means Education Budget Committee, and is also a municipal judge in Arab, and **Maury Mitchell**, Assistant Attorney General for Government Affairs, were the special guests at the reading for *Open the Door II*.

Hawk spoke about his service with the FBI and his interest in law enforcement and then offered an analogy for the boys from the Tom Cruise film *Top Gun*.

Hawk reminded the boys that Tom Cruise's character temporarily lost his ability to engage, as a pilot, after seeing one of his buddies die in a training mission.

"Don't lose your ability to engage," Hawk told the *Open the Door II* writers. "After the experience of being at Mt. Meigs and working in this writing program, go home and engage in life!"

Assistant Attorney General Mitchell had a message for the up-and-coming writers as well as the published writers. After congratulating the authors of the book, he turned to the current class of boys seated on the front row and strongly encouraged them to use this example as fuel for giving their best. Their eager looks of anticipation at the possibility of being the stars next time were evident.

Several days later in Chalkville, the young women published in *Let Me Talk To You* heard invited guests **Judge Sharon G. Yates**, Alabama Court of Civil Appeals, and

*Continued on page 5*



Joy Sailors

Judge Sharon G. Yates, Alabama Court of Civil Appeals, talked with Chalkville writer Alicia Wesley prior to her reading.



Assistant Attorney General Maury Mitchell at the Mt. Meigs signing.

Katie Lamar Smith



Commissioner for Children's Affairs Pam Baker congratulated students on the Chalkville campus.

Joy Sailors

## AWF AND DYS CELEBRATE NEWEST ANTHOLOGIES

Continued from page 3

never had such an opportunity in their home schools on the outside," Thompson said.

Alabama's "Writing Our Stories" reflects a national trend to pair juvenile justice programs with state arts resources, Wood said.

"Our writing program is a model project and we are eager to share the models with others," he said.

Copies of both books will be distributed to educators, juvenile justice professionals and judges in Alabama. Both books are also used as teaching examples with new students, Thompson said. Copies are distributed at no charge while supplies last.



### THIRD CAMPUS ADDED TO "WRITING OUR STORIES"

McNeil School, located at the Vacca DYS facility, is the latest school to become a part of "Writing Our Stories" McNeil School joined the program in November, when teaching writer **Danny Gamble** began teaching creative writing two days a week in **Cynthia Wilburn's** classroom. Although Gamble had not previously worked with high school students, his work teaching college students both composition and literature, and his own wide range of writing credits, made him a good candidate to participate.



Danny Gamble

"I feel very fortunate to be a part of this program," Gamble said. "I'm interested in learning how the program works and am using some of the exercises that both Marlin Barton and Priscilla Hancock Cooper have perfected in their writing classes at the other DYS facilities."

Gamble has published poems and nonfiction. His one-man play, *Exit: Brautigan*, was produced in 1994 in Montevallo. He

holds an MFA in Creative Writing from the University of Alabama.

Cooperating teacher Cynthia Wilburn has encouraged the students who are participating to do their best work and has answered many of their questions outside of the writing class. As with the other residencies, Ms. Wilburn stays with the class while Gamble teaches, thus observing the students' growth and progress, as well as any difficulties that may arise. Following the classroom instruction, small groups of students type their poems or prose in the computer lab while Gamble works one-on-one with others. It is during this important individual attention time that in-depth revision can take place. Most writing teachers agree that individual critiques are great incentive to a student's willingness to try harder.

In July, Gamble will conclude his residency and begin editing the McNeil School's first anthology. In early fall, all three campuses will publish books, marking the third year of publications from "Writing Our Stories."

Look for work from the Vacca campus in upcoming issues of *First Draft*.



## GOVERNOR RECEIVES BOOKS FROM DYS WRITERS

Although he was invited, **Governor Don Siegelman** could not attend the book publication event at Mt. Meigs because of a scheduling conflict, so the Alabama Writers' Forum made arrangements to present *Open the Door II* to him at his office. During the photo shoot, the Governor paused long enough to talk two of the writers, Thomas and Joseph. Both are former Mt. Meigs students with work published in *Open the Door II*, and because they live in the Montgomery area, they could be on hand to help present the books.

Governor Siegelman praised them for their willingness to write their feelings "for others who will come after you." The boys stood straight and tall, but a little speechless, in the presence of the state's highest elected official.

"Little did they know, when they were sentenced to Mt. Meigs, that this would lead to their having a private conversation with the Governor about their writing," Jeanie Thompson, AWF executive director, said. "What young person wouldn't be buoyed by such an experience and feel better about himself?"

Copies of *Open the Door II* and *Let Me Talk to You*, the 1999 anthologies from the "Writing Our Stories" initiative, will be permanently on view at the Governor's Mansion because they



Jason Harris

Mt. Meigs writer **Joseph Donaldson** presented a copy of *Open the Door II* to Governor Don Siegelman.

are included in the Governor's Family Library of Alabama Writers, an on-going project of the Alabama Writers' Forum, Thompson said.

## ALABAMA GOVERNMENT LEADERS SPEAK TO DYS WRITERS AT EVENTS

*Continued from page 3*

**Commissioner Pam Baker**, Department of Children's Affairs, extend congratulations for their achievement. Both women spoke from the heart about their knowledge of how hard it is for young people to tell their stories and how important the book will be for others.



Jay Sailors

Chakville classroom teacher **Janet Dixon**, photography instructor **Suzy Harris** and teaching writer **Priscilla Hancock Cooper**.

In addition to the invited speakers, members of the Alabama Writers' Forum Board of Directors and the Alabama State Council on the Arts, as well as several juvenile court judges and staff, attended the readings and received signed copies of *Open the Door II* and *Let Me Talk To You*. Council members **Wiley White** and **Bernice Price** (both of Montgomery) attended the Mt. Meigs reading and **Ceil Snow** (Birmingham) attended the Chalkville event.

Baker's visit to Chalkville was her first to a DYS facility since her appointment, though she and DYS Executive Director J. Walter Wood, Jr., have had meetings. Baker is the first Commissioner for Children's Affairs ever appointed by a governor in Alabama and serves on Governor Siegelman's cabinet. She is charged with learning about and coordinating children's services in Alabama.

According to AWF executive director Jeanie Thompson, Baker enthusiastically embraced the concept of "Writing Our Stories" as a positive program for juvenile offenders and was invigorated by the day she spent with the writers, which included lunch afterwards with teaching writer **Priscilla Hancock Cooper**, photographer **Suzy Harris**, and AWF board members **Linda Dean** and **Rick Shelton** and others. "I believe we have a new friend and advocate in Commissioner Baker," Thompson said. "All of our guest speakers are advocates for the program and we are happy to afford them the opportunity to meet the writers."

**MORE PHOTOS ON PAGE 21**

*Alabama offers a variety of Spring conferences where one may learn from, listen to and be inspired by other authors, so*

# SHALL WE GATHER

HOOVER

## Southern Voices 2000

FEBRUARY 25-27

The Hoover Public Library's major annual literary event is bigger than ever this year. Friday evening is devoted to mystery and suspense with some of the leading southerners writing in the genre:

**Nora DeLoach, Anne George, Cecelia Tishy** and Birmingham lawyer-turned-author **Steven Womack** (*Sins of the Brother*). Baton Rouge forensic anthropologist **Mary Manhein**, a crime expert and author of *The Bone Lady*, will share tales of real-life crime.

On Saturday the Authors' Conference will be from 9 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. Taking the southern perspective will be **Tony Earley**, author of *Here We Are in Paradise* and the upcoming *Jim the Boy*; Edgar Award-winner **Tom Franklin**; Algonquin Books' cofounder



Tom Franklin

and editorial director **Shannon Ravenel**; novelist **Judy Goldman**, author of *The Slow Way Back*; and **Steve Yarbrough**, Grisham Writer-in-Residence at the University of Mississippi. Others on the program include *Mother of Pearl* author **Melinda Haynes** and syndicated humor columnist **P.S. Wall**. **Peter Guralnick**, author of three books on Elvis Presley; **Andrew Manis**, biographer of civil rights leader Rev. Fred Shuttlesworth; **Leah Rawls Atkins**, author of a book on Birmingham businessman John M. Harbert; and distinguished scholar **Elaine Hughes** will discuss writing biographies as well as the lives of their subjects.

On Sunday at 2:30 and 7 p.m. acclaimed stage and screen actor **Tom Key** will present his original one-man production of *Cotton Patch Gospel*, followed by a discussion with the audience.

Cost of the full conference is \$65; sessions are also priced separately. Call **The Library Theatre Box Office** at **205-444-7888**. Additional information is available at the website [www.hoover.lib.al.us](http://www.hoover.lib.al.us).



Anne George

JACKSONVILLE

## On the Brink

FEBRUARY 26

Jacksonville State University gives readers the opportunity to meet notable writers, usually southerners, and often at the stage of their careers when their work is becoming widely known. "On the Brink is a small, friendly conference where authors spread out to eat lunch with the guests and mingle," coordinator **Gena Christopher** said. The \$30 charge includes the meal.

On the Brink's eight featured writers for 2000 are **Shirley Ann Grau**, young adult writer **Dori Sanders** (*Her Own Place*), Atlanta writer **Evelyn Coleman** (*What a Woman's Gotta Do*); **William Gay** (*The Long Home*), Baldwin County lawyer and surprise novelist **Frank Turner Hollon** (*The Pains of April*), Tommy Hays (*In the Family Way*), and Birmingham lawyer **Mike Stewart** (*Sins of the Brother*).

Contact **Gena Christopher** for more information at **256-782-5856**.



Frank Turner Hollon

FLORENCE

## University of North Alabama Writer's Festival

MARCH 16 & 17

The annual literary conference at UNA will offer creative nonfiction with **Judith Kitche**, poetry with **Leslie Ullman** and a fiction writer unconfirmed at press time. The Writer's Festival is free and open to the public. For more information, contact **Lynne Burris Butler**, Department of English, University of North Alabama, Florence, AL 35632-0001; **256-765-4238**. The email address is [lbutler@unanov.una.edu](mailto:lbutler@unanov.una.edu).

BIRMINGHAM

## Writing Today

APRIL 7 & 8

**Ernest Gaines**, grand master, will lead an outstanding line-up of authors for the Writing Today conference at Birmingham-





Ernest Gaines

Southern College. Gaines won the 1993 National Book Critics Circle Award for his most recent novel, *A Lesson Before Dying*. The dramatic story of a wrongly-condemned young black man was adapted by playwright and novelist **Romulus Linney** for the stage and is now in its premiere production at the Alabama Shakespeare Festival in Montgomery. **Martha Andrews Ross**, director of Birmingham-Southern's Special Events Office, hopes to have Linney confirmed for the program.

**Claudia Hunter Johnson** is screenwriter in residence at the Florida State University School of Motion Picture, Television, and Recording Fine Arts Film School in Tallahassee. Johnson has written screenplays for commercial and public television, documentaries and other films. She is also a successful playwright, with a great deal of teaching experience. She writes fiction and nonfiction for print as well. Her book, *Stifled Laughter: One Woman's Story About Fighting Censorship*, tells the story of her fight to keep literary classics in the classroom.

Other writers on the program include **Ishmael Reed** with seven novels and several collections of poems and essays in print; **Sena Jeter Naslund**, creator of *Abab's Wife: Or, The Star-Gazer*; and **Tom Franklin**, *Poachers*. A workshop on Saturday will feature *Belles' Letters* contributors.

For more information, contact the Special Events Office of Birmingham-Southern College, **Martha Andrews Ross**, director. Phone **205-226-4921** or **800-523-5793** or write: Special Events Director, Arkadelphia Road, Birmingham-Southern College, Birmingham, AL 35254.

## BIRMINGHAM

### Alabama Bound

APRIL 29

Birmingham Public Library offers the opportunity to meet more than 50 Alabama writers and publishers at Alabama Bound: A Book Fair Celebrating Alabama Authors and Publishers.

Books will be available for purchase and can be signed by their authors on the spot. Authors will also read from and talk about their books. The event is free and open to the public.

For more information call **205-226-3606**, or write Birmingham Public Library, 2100 Park Place, Birmingham, AL 35203.

## WRITING IS PART OF MY IDENTITY

### Sena Jeter Naslund's *Abab's Wife: or, The Star-Gazer*

began with a single line, "Captain Ahab was neither my first husband nor my last," and a single image of a woman on a Nantucket's widow's walk looking out to sea for her husband's ship. When the woman gives up her watch and looks up, "her gaze traveling the stars," says Naslund, she begins "her own spiritual journey."



Sena Jeter Naslund

In such visionary beginnings are all the elements of Una Spenser's epic story, a saga that parallels but is independent of Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*.

*Abab's Wife* has received wide critical praise and a large—and still growing—readership. Its epic-scale story covers issues, personalities, and events of Una's 19th-century day, from slavery, feminism, and religious tolerance to Margaret Fuller, Emerson, and scientist Maria Mitchell. Cannibalism, astronomy, ship and sailing lore, popular literary history, and period lighthouse technology also make appearances, making *Abab's Wife* every bit as encyclopedic as Melville's classic.

But *Abab's Wife* has its own identity and compulsions. A *New York Times Book Review* writer suggests that Melville's book has revenge in its heart, but Naslund's is about "the pursuit of happiness—as opposed to, say, the pursuit of a large white whale."

Naslund, a native of Birmingham, credits her "wonderful teachers at Norwood Elementary School, Phillips High School, and Birmingham-Southern College" who encouraged her to "enjoy reading and writing." She says, "I think I was born to write. As a very young child I made up stories, which my friend Nancy and I acted out; I told myself stories in bed at night when I couldn't sleep; I wrote a cowboy newspaper; I wrote a pioneer novel at age nine....Writing is part of my identity."

In fact, it was at Phillips High School that Naslund wrote a book report on *Moby-Dick* for her ninth grade English class. In it she identified the sea as an important character in Melville's work, something equally true of *Abab's Wife*.

Naslund will be a featured guest at Birmingham-Southern's Writing Today conference this spring. *Abab's Wife* will be reviewed in the spring issue of *First Draft*.

## MONROEVILLE

**Alabama Writers Symposium**

MAY 4-6

What are the challenges Alabama faces and has faced in its development? Contemporary authors will be joined by scholars of literature and history to put into perspective the Monroeville conference theme of "Alabama Challenges."



Thomas Rabbitt

Among the authors are celebrated newcomers **Melinda Haynes** and **Tom Franklin**, as well as **Michael Knight**, and **Clyde Bolton**.

Poet **Jeanie Thompson** will moderate a panel of poets: **Thomas Rabbitt**, (*Enemies of the State*), **Natasha Tretheway**, author of *Domestic Work*,

forthcoming from Gray Wolf Press, and newly-named Alabama Poet Laureate **Helen Norris** (*Rain Pulse*).

Scholars will include **Larry Allums**, **Don Noble**, **John Hafner**, **Wayne Flynt**, and last year's Eugene Current-Garcia Award recipient **Phillip Biedler**.

Conference coordinator **Donna Reed** remarked that "everybody enjoys visiting so much that we're just going to have a quiet jazz band Friday night as an alternative to *To Kill a Mockingbird*." A limited number of tickets are available to attend the local production at the Monroe County Courthouse. For more information call 334/575-3156, ext. 223 or email [dreed@ascc.edu](mailto:dreed@ascc.edu). Conference information will be available on the Alabama Southern Community College website, [www.ascc.edu](http://www.ascc.edu).



Phillip Biedler

## FROM THE FIELD

**TO WRITE BETTER**

BY CAROLYN HAINES



I write because I love writing, but I also make my living writing. So I have to blend the "art" with the practical. Thus I go to conferences. Some of those I attend are designed to teach writing skills, allow for that all-important networking, and offer survival tactics such as market updates, experts on various techniques, and information on contracts and tax issues. Others are organized more from a reader's point of view with focus on love of writing and the importance of the written word in our culture.

Recently I was a guest speaker at the Rocky Mountain Fiction Festival in Denver. This is an organization of writers with emphasis on popular fiction, predominantly mystery. Several agents attended and were eager to discover the next great talent. A conference is a great place to "interview" an agent—to make sure he or she has the same goals you do.

Editors from Signet, Dell, HarperCollins, St. Martin's Press, and Harlequin were there, and they spoke at length about where fiction in their houses is headed. They also met individually with authors, giving the writers a chance to "pitch" their story ideas.

No editor is going to buy a book simply because she's met the author, but like any other business, establishing a rapport is vital. While the editor gets an opportunity to hear a writer's book idea, the writer also gets a chance to see how an editor operates. The "mesh" can be tested—from both directions. So many writers think that hooking the editor is the most important thing, but it's very important to respect your editor. This is the person who

not only buys your book but also pushes it through all the phases of publishing. A good working relationship built on mutual respect is vital. (The same is true of an agent, of course.)

I think it's equally important to put aside the marketing aspect of writing and return to the reason most of us picked up a pen—or turned on a computer: love of the written word. Listening to other writers talk about their craft, or art, renews that core of creativity in each of us. At such conferences, publishing and marketing are put aside for a few days of simply enjoying the company of other like-minded folks. Here is where a beautiful turn of phrase or a book so finely written that it is painful to read takes center stage.

I'll never forget attending a conference many years ago in Tuscaloosa. John Irving had come to talk about his work. The topic he picked was plot. For openers, he read from his work in progress at the time. I completely abandoned all of my dreams of writing for the joy of listening to a master writer at work. Once he'd read the opening, he pulled out the plot threads and told the audience how he intended to weave them into a story. While I learned something practical, the evening was much, much more important than that.

Conferences come in all sorts of packages—the elegant hotel or the three-day dude ranch. I'm greatly reminded of something my riding instructor told me when I was first learning to ride. She told me to ride every horse I had an opportunity to saddle. And she told me to take riding lessons from other instructors.

*Continued on page 26*

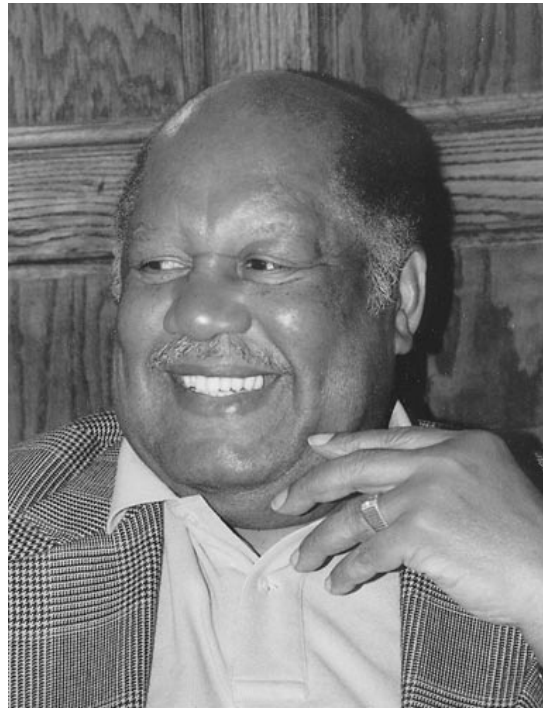
*“My books are always about being a man.  
I can’t imagine writing about anything else.”*

**ERNEST J. GAINES**

Theatre in the Mind, Alabama Shakespeare Festival

January 22, 2000

# ERNEST J. GAINES



Ernest J. Gaines was born on River Lake Plantation in Oscar, Louisiana, in Pointe Coupée Parish on January 15, 1933. He remembers working in the fields at the age of eight for fifty cents a day. School, held in the church on the plantation, was available only five months of the year—when there was no planting or harvesting to be done. After completing sixth grade there, he attended St. Augustine Catholic School in New Roads, Louisiana, through the ninth grade.

His parents had gone to California after World War II to find work and opportunity and they sent for him. He continued his education in California where he discovered the library, denied to him in Pointe Coupée because of his race, and began his lifelong love affair with books and reading. Gaines graduated from San Francisco State College in 1957 after serving two years in the Army. In 1958 he won a coveted creative writing fellowship to Stanford University where he studied under Walter Stegner and Malcolm Cowley.

When asked how he got into writing, Gaines will tell you that he has been writing all his life. On the plantation where he lived as a child, only a few of the old people could read and write and he was asked at an early age to read and write their letters. At San Francisco State and later at Stanford he was taught how to put his ear-

lier experience into the novel and short story form. To date he has published eight books.

Gaines has won many awards for his writing, including the 1994 National Book Critics Circle Award for *A Lesson Before Dying*. In 1993, he received a MacArthur Foundation Fellowship and in 1996 was named a *Chevalier de L'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres*. In 1998 he was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Letters. He is the recipient of numerous honorary doctorates.

Currently Gaines serves as Writer-in-Residence at the The University of Louisiana Lafayette after a year's sabbatical in France, where he taught the first class ever in creative writing at the University of Rennes. During that year he traveled extensively, reading from his works and lecturing.

*A Lesson Before Dying* was made into an Emmy award-winning movie by HBO, and is currently in its world premiere stage production at the Alabama Shakespeare Festival (“The Back Page,” page 29). Gaines participated in a Theatre in the Mind program with adaptor Romulus Linney at the Alabama Shakespeare Festival on January 22. He will speak at The University of Alabama in Huntsville on March 11 (“Events,” page 6).

## ERNEST J. GAINES BIBLIOGRAPHY

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*A Gathering of Old Men*  
*A Lesson Before Dying*



*This article originally appeared in the December 5, 1999, edition of The Dothan Eagle.  
It is reprinted with permission.*

## With Trip to “The Big House,” Alabama Writers Have Arrived

**A**s a crowd of merry Alabamians swirled around her, **Mary Ward Brown** gazed wide-eyed at the understated grandeur of the dining room of the governor’s mansion. It was a long way from Browns, where she lives outside Selma, crafting her elegant short stories on a new blueberry Apple I-Mac computer. “I have never been here,” she said. “I’ve never been invited.”

Neither had most of the other guests who glided across the polished oak floors of 1142 South Perry Street, feasting on a sumptuous buffet during their moment in the sun. They are writers and lovers of words, publishers and publicists, readers and artists. They represent a world as far removed from politics and government as the earth is from the sun. Last Wednesday, those worlds collided, right there in the atrium, where the clinking of silver forks against the fragile state stemware called the guests’ attention to **Governor Don Siegelman** and his wife, **Lori**, who stood on the sweeping stairway to their home on the second floor.

The first couple set the mood that evening, and the gathering of writers was more an intimate reception at the home of word lovers Don and Lori Siegelman than an event at the governor’s mansion. The artists were awestruck, as they should have been, as this was a watershed moment in the history of Alabama literature. Never before had a governor acknowledged the rich tapestry of Alabama storytelling, and this was the first such celebration of the weavers of those tales in the stately halls of Alabama’s highest office.

The Siegelmans did this, and were themselves a little awestruck by the collection of talent under their roof.

**Helen Norris** was in the south drawing room in the front of the mansion that was once the First Lady’s parlor, featuring oil portraits of all the wives of the state’s governors. She wrote *The Christmas Wife*, which was produced as a Hallmark Hall of Fame special. Nearby was Mrs. Brown, whose collection of vivid stories,



*Governor Don Siegelman and First Lady Lori Allen Siegelman (right) congratulate Randall Williams, his wife Hilda and their sons Horace and McCormick on ten years of Black Belt Press during the Siegelman’s reception at the Governor’s Mansion.*



*AWF Executive Director Jeanie Thompson (second from left) and her husband, Representative Bill Fuller, celebrate with writers Mary Ward Brown (left) and Kathryn Tucker Windham (second from right) at the Governor’s Mansion reception for Alabama writers.*

*Tongues of Flame*, has touched all who have read them.

The state poet laureate, **Helen Blackshear**, was visiting with friends nearby, as was **Kathryn Tucker Windham**, whose body of work is capped by the series of ghost stories that has kept generations of youngsters checking their closets before bedtime.

The Siegelmans have decided to transform the parlor into the Alabama Room, and have commissioned bookcases that will hold a collection of signed works by the state’s best writers, a gift from the Alabama Writers’ Forum.

The change marks a tremendous commitment to the literary community from the Siegelmans, and more important, it comes from the heart, not from any political motive that the public has come to expect from its elected officials.

Among the writers were **Wayne Greenhaw**, who has produced many fine works, but whose personal essay about a ride to Orion with Jimmy Evans and Steve Young to pick guitars with an elderly bluesman ranks as my favorite. Many people worldwide know the ride all too well, although they don’t realize it. Steve Young wrote about the trip in a song called “Seven Bridges Road,” made famous by the supergroup, the Eagles.

I found **Peter Huggins** chewing on an oversized shrimp in the foyer, joining the celebration briefly before rushing off to teach a class at Huntingdon College. He’s a poet and an Auburn University English professor I met at a writers’ symposium in Monroeville. **Bill Cobb** was there, as were novelist **Sandra King Conroy** and **Aileen Henderson**, who writes stories for children.

As **Bettye Forbus** and I spoke with the governor to thank him for having us to the mansion and for recognizing the 10th anniversary of Black Belt Press and honoring the state’s most talented

*Continued on page 11*

# THE MANTLE PASSES...

For her installation as Alabama's sixth Poet Laureate, **Helen Norris** was regal in a deep magenta suit and an orchid corsage which had been sent to her by **Evelyn Hurley**, former President of the Alabama Writers' Conclave, which selects the recipients of this honor. Immediate past Laureate **Helen Blackshear**, who was present, has described her successor as possessing "a literary style that flows like music...She is a very funny and lovable person."

The ceremony took place in the festively Christmas-decorated Alabama Room of the Governor's Mansion. **Governor Siegelman** personally served punch and cookies to about forty guests before he invested Ms. Norris with a gold medallion and a framed certificate.

"I thought that was charming of him, to pass those trays himself," she told me later, "and it will probably get him some votes." Clearly, the Governor and First Lady were charmed along with the rest of us by Helen's droll acceptance speech, which she gave without notes.

A coterie of Helen's relatives, friends, colleagues, and fellow members of writers' groups (such as Pen Women, Alabama Writers' Forum, Press & Authors Club, Kitchen Poets, and Creative Writers of



Alabama's new Poet Laureate Helen Norris, Governor Don Siegelman, and Virginia Thompson, Helen's niece.

Montgomery) were among the gathering. President of the Alabama Poetry Society, **Barry Marks**, arrived bearing a single yellow rose, which the recipient took as "a symbol of the immortality of poetry" because it stayed fresh for three weeks. Others there included Writers' Conclave president **Kay Blankenship**; poets **Jeanie Thompson**, **Mary Halliburton**, and **Debbie Parvin**; fiction writer **Fay Gibbons**; **John Curbow**, who encouraged her to write poetry and brought out her first book of poems, *Whatever Is Round*; and River's Edge publisher **Mary Moran**, who included several of Helen's poems in a recent anthology.

During the four years Helen Norris will serve as Poet Laureate, she will enthrall and raise the literary consciousness of students and other groups throughout Alabama. She will also continue to write poems and prose. As former Laureate and long-time supporter of literary arts, **Ralph Hammond**, wrote in his letter of nomination: "I do not know of another Alabamian who has such worthy credentials as a writer." Congratulations, Helen, and Alabama.

*Julia Oliver is a novelist in Montgomery.*

authors, I felt a hand on my shoulder. It was **Charles McNair**,

## ALABAMA WRITERS HAVE ARRIVED

*Continue from page 10*

a fellow Dothan boy, author of *Land O Gosben*," and one of my favorite characters.

"Governor," Charles said, "I want to thank you for having all these writers to your home. No other governor has ever done this."

Mr. Siegelman was moved, and repeated a comment he had made earlier. Hearing it again only strengthened its impact on me.

"When we moved in, there wasn't a book in the house," the governor said. He wasn't trying to be mean. He was just incredulous, as we all were. The house has been inhabited by many governors since Big Jim Folsom established the official residence decades ago. You'd think at least one book—at least Harper Lee's *To Kill A Mockingbird*—would have been left behind.

## FIRST DRAFT

No future governor will be able to say that. When the Siegelmans leave—and it will be up to the voters to decide how far in the future that moving date will be—they'll leave behind a library of the best literature our state has to offer.

Regardless whatever else Don Siegelman accomplishes in his public life, he's already established a lasting legacy. And he and his wife have set themselves apart as the best friends the state's literary community has ever had in Alabama's highest office.

As one of the last groups left the mansion that night, Charles McNair held the door, playing host. "Y'all come on back to the big house any time now," he joked.

We all laughed. But no one doubted that Charles' words echoed the Siegelmans' sentiment. Alabama writers have arrived, and will always have a home in the governor's mansion.

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

## ALABAMA VOICES SPEAK

**A**labama Voices 5, an annual public arts and humanities series sponsored by the Alabama Writers' Forum and the Auburn University Center for the Arts & Humanities, will be taking place in winter and spring of 2000.

Poets **Natasha Trethewey** and **Charles Ghigna**, novelist and short fiction writer **Nanci Kincaid**, and young adult writer **Aileen Kilgore Henderson** are among the half dozen writers invited to participate in this year's series. A grant from the Alabama State Council on the Arts will support the programs, which will take place in Jasper, LaFayette, Eufaula, and at the Tutwiler Prison for Women in Wetumpka and in other locations.

Past Alabama Voices programs have brought Alabama writers—including **Shirley Ann Grau**, **Andrew Hudgins**, **Han Nolan**, and **C. Eric Lincoln**, among many others—to communities around the state for readings and signings. This year's series expands the idea of writer-in-the-community programs by taking writers to host sites for longer periods of time and more intensive programming. Alabama Voices writers may spend several days or make repeated visits to a community, and they will be presenting in multiple venues, including public libraries, bookstores, senior citizen centers, and public schools.

LaFayette High School, for instance, will host **Natasha Trethewey** in workshops for both students and teachers. After two school-wide sessions in which she will work with all students enrolled in English and composition classes, Trethewey will lead more two to four intensive workshops with selected small groups of students. She will also work with English and journalism classes to produce and publish a school literary magazine.

**Nanci Kincaid** will lead a three-to-five-day workshop for women in the Tutwiler correctional facility near Wetumpka. Kincaid worked at Tutwiler last spring and looks forward to being back there in May 2000.

Other writers in the series will be matched with locations and will work with local hosts in scheduling public school programs, library reading-discussion sessions, and community-wide readings.

For more information, people may call the Alabama Writers' Forum office or the Auburn University Center for the Arts & Humanities (334-844-4946).

*Jay Lamar is Associate Director of the Auburn University Center for the Arts & Humanities.*

## HUNTINGDON OFFERS NEW CREATIVE WRITING PROGRAM FOR EVENING STUDENTS

In the fall of 1999, Huntingdon College launched "Evening College" courses in creative writing, providing an outlet for aspiring writers in the Montgomery area. According to **Pam Stein**, Associate Director of Evening College, students can work toward a 30-hour certificate in creative writing, or they may simply take a creative writing course in poetry, fiction or nonfiction writing.

Local writers who make up the Evening College creative writing faculty include award-winning fiction writer **Marlin Barton** of Montgomery, poet **Peter Huggins** (*Hard Facts*) of Auburn, and **Jerry Lawrence**, creative writing teacher at Booker T. Washington Magnet High School in Montgomery.

In conjunction with the creative writing program, Huntingdon College offers the Rhoda Ellison Lecture Series, which brings writers to campus for public readings. In December, poets **Jeanie Thompson** and **Natasha Trethewey** gave the first reading. Stein said that this spring poet **Louie Skipper** (*Deaths that Travel with the Weather*) and novelist **Melinda Haynes** (*Mother of Pearl*) will make appearances.



Poets Jeanie Thompson (left) and Natasha Trethewey

On April 7, Huntingdon will present "Alabama Women Their Stories: Voices from *Belles Letters* and *Mother of Pearl*." According to Stein, there has been a great deal of interest in this one-day conference at which novelists and short story writers will talk about the nuts and bolts of writing and publishing, and also the task of writing personal or family stories.

"There will be plenty of time for one-on-one interaction with the writers," Stein said. In addition to the usual format of workshops, a luncheon interview will feature authors **Loretta Cobb**, **Julia Oliver**, **Anita Garner**, and **Judith Richards** and the publishers of *Belles Letters* (Livingston Press).

For more information, call 334-833-4451.



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## Debut Novella an Impressive Find

I respect Sonny Brewer's literary judgment. Therefore, when the Fairhope bookseller and publisher invited me to lunch to discuss his latest project, I happily agreed. Brewer, his partner Kyle Jennings and I met at a downtown restaurant just off Dauphin Street, and the weather being fine, we chose to sit in the courtyard. As we went through the rituals of drinks, menus and orders, I could see that both Sonny and Kyle were excited. Breaking the tension, I asked, "So, what have you got?"

Sonny answered with a story. One day a young man was in his shop, Over the Transom Books, trolling among the shelves. Though this customer was something of a regular, Sonny knew him only by sight. He paid the man little heed, being engaged in a lengthy conversation with another patron about publishing. After that person left, the young man, who, as it turned out, had been following the conversation closely, approached the counter. "Will you read my manuscript?" he asked. "Not for free," Brewer replied. At this point in his story Sonny chuckled and remarked that he's read hundreds of such unsolicited manuscripts, most of them "junk."

The young man, whose name is Frank Turner Hollon, was willing to pay for the privilege of getting a candid assessment. The next morning, Hollon returned to the shop and placed his manuscript on the counter with the cash on top. Then he left. "I read the first paragraph and the second page," Sonny said, "and then I ran Frank down outside and told him, 'If you sustain this, you've got something!'"

By the time he finished reading the short manuscript, Sonny was so taken with it that he decided to publish it himself, and to sign a contract with Hollon for two more books. So it is that Over The Transom Publishing Company's first title, *The Pains of April*, will be released this month in a hardcover

edition of 3,000 copies.

I asked Sonny what possessed him to undertake such an expensive and risky venture. "I want to introduce this author to the world," he declared. "He's that good?" "Best thing I've read in 15 years," Sonny replied. Knowing Sonny as well as I do, I realized that *The Pains of April* deserved my attention.

At 103 pages, this novella can be polished off in a couple of hours. Dynamite comes in small packages, however, and *The Pains of April* is dynamite. Readers will find it difficult to forget. The subject is simple—an old man in a nursing home reflecting on his situation. The prose style is direct and refreshingly free of literary artifice. Yet Hollon's well-chosen

words roll through one's consciousness with terrific resonance, building to a compelling crescendo.

The narrator of the tale, who is never named, muses on his life in the nursing home, his long legal career, his family and his fellow residents. These latter include the randy Mr. Weber, whose zest for life is undimmed, and Gus Robinson, passive and afraid. On several occasions these men sneak out of the nursing home, one time to go fishing and another to get tattoos. What is arresting about

*The Pains of April*, is not the comedic release of these kinds of scenes, but rather the quiet and wise thoughts of the narrator on the most ordinary subjects.

Though the title suggests a sad book, *The Pains of April* is far too complex to be so easily categorized. It is, fundamentally, a book about life. A very good book about life, as it happens. *The Pains of April* deserves to be noticed. Sonny Brewer's eye for prose is as good as ever.



*Frank Turner Hollon signing copies of The Pains of April in front of Over The Transom Books in Fairhope.*

Ed George

*John Sledge edits the Mobile Register's Books page.*

# NEW MEMBERS JOIN FORUM BOARD

The Alabama Writers' Forum Board of Directors welcomed five new members for the 1999-2000 year. Announced by President of the Board **Kellee Reinhart** at the fall board meeting, the incoming members hail from all sections of the state and bring diverse talents and interests to the Forum.

In Montgomery, **Linda Henry Dean** has been director of education for the Alabama Shakespeare Festival since 1996. At ASF she administers the very popular SchoolFest program for students, the ASF Academy, Camp Shakespeare, Theater in the Mind, teacher seminars, and the young playwrights workshops.



Linda Henry Dean

Writers' Representative

**Aileen Kilgore Henderson** is the author of three award-winning young adult novels published by Milkweed, including *The*



Aileen Kilgore Henderson

*Monkey Thief*, which was named by the New York Public Library as one of its "1998 Books for the Teenage." A resident of Brookwood, Alabama, near Vance, she is vice-

president of the Guild of Professional Writers for Children in Tuscaloosa and a member of

the Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators. Her new book, a compilation of letters and diary entries she wrote while serving as an airplane engine mechanic in the Women's Army Corps during World War II, will be published by the University of South Carolina Press.



Anne Rutledge

Huntsville resident **Anne Rutledge** is the author of two books of poetry, *Soul on Fire* and *Double the Pleasure*, as well as many individually published poems and essays. She is a longtime member of the Huntsville Literary Association's board of advisors and a frequent lecturer on the campus of the University of Alabama-Huntsville. Recipient of the artist of the year award from the African-American Arts Alliance, she is currently at work on *The Sacred Warrior from the Red Hill*, a book about Emory O. Jackson, editor and publisher for many years of the *Birmingham World*.

**John Sledge**, serving with Aileen Henderson as a writers' representative on the board's executive committee, is an architectural historian with the Mobile Historic



John Sledge

Development Commission. A frequent lecturer on local history and historic preservation and past president of the Historic Mobile Preservation Society, he is also book review editor for the *Mobile Register*. His column, "Southern Bound," appears weekly in the *Register*.

**Lindsey Stricklin** is associate professor (retired) in the English Department at the University of North Alabama. He is active in the Lauderdale-Florence Public Library Friends group, serving as chair of the planning and programming committee, and on the T.S. Stribling Committee, which promotes renewed interest and recognition of the Pulitzer-winning author. Long involved in local history work, he has been a catalyst in the establishment of the Edith Newman Culver Memorial Museum in Waterloo, Alabama.

AWF board members work with Executive Director **Jeanie Thompson** to shape and guide the Forum's present projects, including Alabama Voices, the DYS projects, and *First Draft*. They also help create and launch new programs and work to spread membership in the Forum. Serving as representatives of the Forum at literary and arts events all over the state, they work especially hard in their own communities, where many are already involved in developing and supporting readings, publications, and conferences. Officers of the board are **Kellee Reinhart**, president; **Brent Davis**, immediate past president; **Jay Lamar**, vice-president; **Bettye Forbus**, secretary; and **Ed George**, treasurer. 

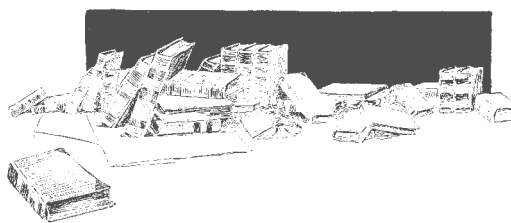
## SPECIAL PROGRAMMING OPPORTUNITY

### THE DRAUGHON SEMINARS IN STATE AND LOCAL HISTORY

The Draughon Seminars are annual public lecture/discussions that are free to public libraries, local history and heritage organizations, and other public groups. To host a lecture requires only a phone call, letter, or email to the AU Center for the Arts & Humanities, the outreach office of the AU College of Liberal Arts. Once a date is confirmed with the speaker, publicity materials, books, and flyers will be sent.

Center staff are available to help with publicity and other details.

To schedule a program or for more information, contact, Center for the Arts & Humanities, Auburn University, Pebble Hill, Auburn, AL 36849, 334-844-4946, fax: 334-844-4949, email: [lamarja@mail.auburn.edu](mailto:lamarja@mail.auburn.edu)



# R E V I E W S

JAY LAMAR, *Editor*

## ***This One and Magic Life***

by Anne Carroll George

Avon, 1999

288 pp. Hardback, \$22

After successfully publishing her Southern Sisters mystery novels, Anne George has written her first literary novel, *This One and Magic Life*, which delves into the past century of a memorable and compelling Southern family. Replete with tomato sandwiches, gardenias, and jubilees, this deep South story, set outside Mobile, unveils the family's dark side: mental illness, illicit affairs, murder, addiction. Do not be mistaken, though. Despite the secrets and sadness, this is an upbeat story, written in descriptive, poetic prose, of forgiveness and acceptance. In an uncanny, surreal manner the voices of the dead play an active role in the present as the story switches from first person to third person and travels in time across the century.



Gathering together at the old homestead overlooking Mobile Bay, the family mourns for Artie, an artist who wanted to be cremated. Here the characters reflect on past and present family relationships. As Dolly, Artie's surrogate daughter, wanders through the empty rooms, she "feels somewhere in the house there is a message for her, a magic potion, maybe, that says, 'Dolly, drink me.' And she will drink and understand the people who have lived in this house. Her family. Her place in the family."

Exploring the influence of place and the past on contemporary Southerners, Anne George enters seamlessly into the Southern literary tradition as her characters search for a better understanding of one another.

*Lanier Scott lives in Birmingham and teaches American literature and creative writing at Mountain Brook High School.*

## ***Dowsing for Light***

by Kennette Harrison

Elk River Review Press, 1999

76 pp. Paper, \$12.00

Earth, sea, sky—we are all swimmers in a physical universe where we struggle to know whether what pulls us when we take up the divining rod of an engaged consciousness is beckoning us to it or leaving us behind. In her new collection of poems, *Dowsing for Light*, Kennette Harrison affirms that, while life is all tension between the two possibilities, ultimately "we can read together/ from the book of Earth/ exchanging death's rasp/ for the legacy of threshold."

In this densely textured collection, elemental images occur and re-occur: "water," "blood," "bloom," "bird," "sky," as the poems carry us "moonward," finally pinpointing "star." Harrison says that we leave behind us a "wake" of "abandonment," but it is a "heavy flowering" of abandonment. This, the final poem in the collection, "Multiple Epiphanies," reiterates what preceding poems have promised: If when we thirst we sacrifice the green sapling's "Y-shaped" branch for "dowsing," if when the divining fails, music happens; if when the salmon run "upstream" they leave behind the "spill" of "roe" like "rubies"; then we are neither pointlessly leaving nor are we truly left.

When Jesus bleeds and dies because we doubt, when a husband leaves his middle-aged wife despite her faith in him, his wound-like "orange tarp" receding in the distance, we are not as empty nor as bereft as we feel. Though Harrison does not allude to her directly, I am reminded in "Before asphalt and concrete" of Mary Magdalene, in fact, wringing her hands and fretting before the tomb because Jesus is gone. He will "return," though not in a way, not in an identity she can immediately recognize. *Dowsing for Light* does argue a rich "return" on the suffering we experience in response to loss.

Life's parameters are extreme. One minute the world is a place where "Hollywood seems more credible/than God," Harrison writes. The everyday mysteries that drag at us can be mean—"whether to search statistics for answers/ recycle the garbage, forego cholesterol/ turn off the tube and read...." But then a mother "sprinkles our bed with saved rain." With such blessings, we are launched from an earth alive with peonies and birdsong and hidden pockets of clear, clean water into a cosmos where "The hiss of space/ is collecting in dishes" from which "we lap/ star messages/ like kittens." "Promise" is everywhere: "This hand of more/ than five parts/ how it fits the other/to make a church, a steeple." This book is beautiful and wise.

*Susie Paul is a poet and teacher in Montgomery.*

## ***Them Bones***

by Carolyn Haines

Bantam Books, 1999

366 pp. Paper, \$5.99

Carolyn Haines has published what she obviously hopes is the first of a series of Sarah Booth Delaney novels, and I hope so too. She has the three things a mystery writer needs most: the quirky investigator, the memorable confidante sidekick, and the picturesque setting.





Thirty-three years old, Sarah Booth, as she must be called, is a self-described “daddy’s girl,” which is to say, a Mississippi Delta debutante, spoiled but tough, who was supposed to marry in a practical way and spend her days in marital financial security controlling men, flirting, decorating her house, shopping, traveling, and so on. But Sarah Booth, an independent cusssette who has tried to make it as an actress in New York City, is single and broke. She, of course, falls into the investigating business by accident.

She shares her massively, fatally mortgaged house with Jitty, the ghost of a slave who was Sarah Booth’s great-great-grandmother’s nanny. Jitty is very utilitarian about what Sarah Booth ought to do to save her home, Dahlia House; she ought to marry Harold Erkwel, banker, whether she loves him or not. Jitty is a stretcher, but fun. To promote the ambiance of sexuality in Dahlia House, this 150-year-old black ghost wears seventies clothes: hiphuggers, bell bottoms, psychedelic patterns. Too bad only Sarah Booth can see her.

The Delta town of Zinnia is the place. Haines knows the territory, with its intrigues and guilts, racial and social. The cursed Hamilton family of this novel is no less complicated or bloodied than the House of Atreus, and this is what Haines intends.

This novel is not quite a cozy read—there is too much passion, sex, and violence for that. Sarah Booth is a red-blooded belle in every way. But the novel does occasionally give off a whiff of the “romance.” The mystery man, and suspect, Hamilton Garrett the Fifth, is handsome, tormented, and dangerous. When he catches her snooping, he seizes Sarah Booth by the shoulder and forces her on knee. She looks up. “The face that stared down at me was wild with fury... contorted with anger... Green eyes burned with fevered emotion... blood suffused his olive complexion... he was a dangerous man... not a man to tamper with... the leanness of hip and thigh spoke of physical strength.” He leaves real bruises. Oh my. It is also a little much to have Sarah Booth responding to this in her womb. She is “a woman with a womb that was dictating orders.”

In spite of these two minor points, *Them Bones* is not “for” female readers. I enjoyed it start to finish and look forward to more Delaney novels that explore the unique society that is the Delta with its racial issues, hierarchies of poverty and wealth, aristocrats and rednecks, and transsexuals.

*Don Noble is host of APT’s BookMark.*

### **High Adventure**

by Sam Harvey

Black Belt Press, 1998

264 pp. Paper, \$17.95

High adventure, you might chuckle. How quaint. After all, you read a daily newspaper, immersing yourself in the latest crises, chilling tragedies, and most galling op-ed pieces.

But you’ll find yourself drawn into *High Adventure*, the story of Porter Harvey, a resourceful, hard-working, and engaging newspaper editor in Guntersville, Ala., whose ambition was to create a weekly in his own image: unpretentious,

dependable, and wholly original.

Written by Harvey’s son and successor as editor, Sam, *High Adventure* is an engrossing account of his father’s journey from childhood near Rome, Georgia, to studies that took him to Emory and Harvard; work for newspapers in Dodge City and Birmingham; and his arrival in Guntersville on a Trailways bus with little more than a dream to start a weekly newspaper that suited him and his readers. Porter Harvey died at 91—only one year after he astounded friends and family by celebrating his birthday with a bungee jump. High adventure, indeed!

Though one leg was crippled by infantile paralysis, Porter was nonetheless energetic and ambitious. The book records not only his life, but everyday life in the South in the early decades of this century. Porter’s night clothes are fashioned from a flour sack. The ball and glove he receives for his ninth birthday cost a dime each. Even as a child he rises at five to work his sweet potato patch.

In 1941 he published the first edition of the *Guntersville Gleam*, named for the way the city lights reflected on the local lake. His wife, Alice, a Kansas girl he’d brought to Alabama, would rise before dawn and stir up water and flour for glue to affix mailing labels to the paper. The first issues were delivered to the post office in a child’s red wagon. Slowly and not so surely at first the *Gleam* grew.

It wasn’t just any paper. Even to this day it looks, well, antediluvian. There are no large, screaming headlines. The local gardener who’s developed an unusual way to tie up his tomatoes gets the same treatment as a visit by the governor. Every story is a local one, written and reported by the modest-sized *Gleam* staff, which included Porter until nearly his death. There are pictures, but the words have always been given prominence in this paper.

What’s more, everyone who dies gets a personalized obituary. It didn’t seem right to Porter Harvey that most papers gave attention only to the deaths of the famous or well known. He had the ability to find something interesting about everyone. Once he mentioned that the deceased had stuffed a bean up his nose as a child and it affected him the rest of his life.

Though he was a somewhat reluctant editorial writer—reporting proved much more satisfying—as early as 1954 Porter came out in favor of giving blacks the vote. (His son, Sam, as student editor of the *Crimson and White* in 1950, encouraged the University of Alabama to admit black students.)

The story of the *Gleam* is captivating, but one might read *High Adventure* just to learn of Porter’s thoughts on achieving longevity. They include swallowing diluted hydrochloric acid as an aid to digestion; ingesting incomprehensible amounts of Metamucil; jangling, limb-flapping aerobic and anaerobic exercises, performed *au naturel*; and a strict lunch rotation of cheese, beans, and peanut butter. And, oh yes, standing on one’s head is recommended, even for septuagenarians.

Though it is a thoroughly local newspaper, *The Advertiser-Gleam*, as it is known today, is read all over the nation, especially by journalists and writers. Its devotion to the written word and fascination with the stories of plain folks make it a most satisfying read.

The same can be said of *High Adventure*.

*Brent Davis is immediate past president of the AWF.*



***The Pains of April***  
by Frank Turner Hollon  
Over the Transom Publishing Co.  
103 pp. Cloth, \$17.95

Baldwin County resident Frank Turner Hollon is a lawyer by profession who writes on the side. Does he ever. My initial reaction when I got this book was “Hh great, another lawyer with fantasies of being the next John Grisham.” After reading the jacket blurbs, the reaction changed to “another Confederate widow.”

Wrong on both counts.

The narrator is a nameless man living in a nursing home somewhere on the Mississippi Gulf coast. But it could be anywhere. Although he recalls his grandmother’s death within the first dozen pages and several other deaths occur throughout the story, *The Pains of April* is not about death. It is much more.

It is about being young, being in love, being a husband and parent. It is about friendships—past and present. And it is very funny. A late-night jaunt to a tattoo parlor by the narrator and three cronies is hilarious.

The memories are both painful and joyful but even as the narrator recalls them he also knows that “there are so many things to learn.”

*Drew Cotten is a graphic designer and recovering editor in Montgomery.*

***A White Preacher’s Memoir: The Montgomery Bus Boycott***

by Robert S. Graetz  
Black Belt Press, 1998  
156 pp. Paper \$14.95

Graetz’s memoir of the turbulent year between December 1, 1955, when Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat to a white man on a Montgomery bus, and December 21, 1956, when “Negroes in Montgomery, Alabama, re-boarded the buses,” serves as a realistic reminder of the tensions and senseless violence that embroiled an Alabama city just forty-four short years ago. Half memoir and half testimonial, Graetz’s book faithfully records the incidents surrounding the famous bus boycott from the perspective of a self-described “Northern white intruder” who had come to Alabama to serve as a white pastor to an all-black congregation at Trinity Lutheran Church on what is now Rosa Parks Boulevard in Montgomery.

By culling from personal memories, his log at Trinity, and clippings from Montgomery newspapers, Graetz tells the story of a segregated Alabama. From Graetz, readers learn that at the time Montgomery law required 70 percent of the bus-riding popula-



tion—blacks who worked in the downtown area—to deposit their ten-cent fare at the front of the bus, and then exit and re-enter the bus at the back, where they were allowed to sit only in the last ten rows. According to Graetz, bus drivers often made great sport out of leaving black passengers at the side of the street after they had paid. Drivers also regularly spoke in offensive language to black passengers and treated them abusively and violently. When altercations occurred, the police were normally called, just as they were when Mrs. Parks refused to stand. Graetz reports an incident in which one man was shot by the police, and the coroner’s report called it “justifiable homicide.”

Most disturbing is the fact that many whites in Montgomery in the mid-fifties, according to Graetz, found Christian justifications for acts of terror and violence, not only against black people, but against Graetz and other white people who fought for an end to legal segregation. Disturbing too is Graetz’s retelling of the lengths and depths of that segregation that often left him and his family in dangerous and uncomfortable situations. Because their parish was black, the Graetz family were also considered black, and were therefore subject to numerous acts of vandalism like twice having their home bombed, being followed and chased, and having their tires slit. That year the Graetz family endured constant threats to their lives; even the lives of their small children were threatened because Graetz served as a driver for blacks left without transportation by the successful city-wide boycott.

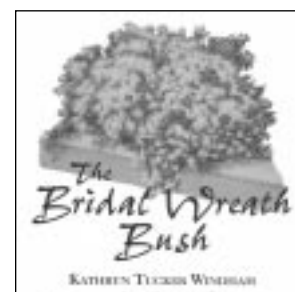
In *A White Preacher’s Memoir*, Graetz writes with a humble and understated voice, mentioning in passing how he personally knew and worked with Reverends King and Abernathy, how Mrs. Parks swept up the shards of glass in his kitchen after Trinity’s parsonage was bombed, and how *Life* photographer Lee Griggs shot the well-known photo of the station wagons of the car pool which were lined up behind Graetz’s home. He lovingly mentions his pride in the fact that his two small children, Bobby and Margee, can be seen in the picture. Most moving is Graetz’s dedication of the book to the memory of his son Bobby, who died of AIDS. In that dedication Graetz sums up the purpose of such a memoir: “As we remember the courage of those African-Americans in Montgomery, who sacrificed their own well-being for the sake of generations yet to come, let us pledge ourselves to stand in the face of evil and to reach out with the arms of love to embrace all humankind.”

*Barbara A. Baker is an assistant professor of English at Tuskegee University*

***The Bridal Wreath Bush***

by Kathryn Tucker Windham,  
illustrated by John Solomon  
Sandridge  
Black Belt Press  
32 pp. Hardcover, \$12.95

Years ago, James Wilson Tucker told his daughter a story. He told it only once. Now, more than seventy years later, Kathryn Tucker Windham re-creates that story in *The Bridal Wreath Bush*.



The focal point of the book is the romance of Hiram and Sarah. The star-crossed lovers meet while working on neighboring plantations and eventually fall in love. But all great love stories need tragedy and separation, as well as love, to fully touch the reader, and this story is no exception. However, in the end, Windham shows us that true love never dies—instead it transcends time.

John Solomon Sandridge's charming illustrations, done in warm earthy hues, combine with Windham's narrative to provide the reader with a feeling of nostalgia.

Ultimately, *The Bridal Wreath Bush* is a beautiful story of hope and eternal love. It should be read, more than once, with someone you love.

*Donna Booth is author of the just-published Alabama Cemeteries: A Guide to Their Stories (Crane Hill).*

### **Nancy Swimmer: A Story of the Cherokee Nation**

by Clyde Bolton

Highland Press, 1999

Cloth, 24.95; limited edition (signed, numbered, leatherbound.), \$75

*Birmingham News* columnist Clyde Bolton has received many honors, including the All-American Football Foundation's Lifetime Achievement Award in Sportswriting. In what may seem a remarkable dichotomy, Bolton is also a gifted writer of literary fiction. His fifth novel sheds a bright light on a dark period in this country's history, when the continuous influx of white settlers into frontier Georgia precipitated the relocation of Indian tribes to Oklahoma.

Born in January 1812, near New Echota, Nancy Swimmer was conceived when her Cherokee mother, Rain, was raped by a white marauder from Tennessee. At the time, Rain's husband, Staring Otter, was at Horseshoe Bend, fighting on the side of General Andrew Jackson against the Creek Red Sticks. In 1830, President "Chicken Snake" Jackson would sign the Indian Removal Bill to exile the tribes east of the Mississippi River to the West.

Nancy's lively narrative is enriched with details of time and place. Her earliest years are spent near the Ostanaula River which "plods so slowly that one may study the reflections of the overhanging trees on its surface and name the birds on their limbs." Determined to read and write, she learns Sequoyah's syllabary. After her marriage at age 14 to Charley Marley, a preacher and visionary who is three-quarters Cherokee, she is asked by Elias Boudinot, the leader of the Treaty Party and editor of the *Cherokee Phoenix*, to write articles for his newspaper. But the heady environment Nancy has gained access to is fast crumbling; she survives much danger and humiliation even before she embarks on The Trail Where They Cried. As an ambitious woman who does not give up on herself, Nancy Swimmer holds her own with other spirited, fictional protagonists who come to mind.

*Julia Oliver, a founding member of the Alabama Writers' Forum, lives and writes in Montgomery.*



### **The Society of Friends**

by Kelly Cherry

University of Missouri Press, 1999

192 pp. Paper, \$17.95

An accomplished poet, novelist, translator, essayist, and short story writer, Kelly Cherry, in her latest collection of stories, has turned to Winesburg, Ohio, for a structural model. An array of largely inconclusive narratives is poised on a central theme: the tribulations, some petty, some not, of decent middle-class Americans, their anxieties, their attempts to do right, in a neighborhood in Madison, Wisconsin. The benighted naturalistic milieu in Winesburg has given way to a Middle-American Arcadia, drug- and crime-free, bottled-water- and cappuccino-fueled, with a bookstore where local and visiting authors read from their works, a kids' ballet troupe, "Tiptoe Toddlers," a Quaker meeting house, festive block parties and parades (one sporting a giant wedding cake), even a folksy mayor. Cherry's characters "get by," as in the Beatles epigraph, "with a little help from their friends." Like the Beatles, Cherry's view of friendship is tintured with mild irony, for in rendering these people as they are, that is, naively Middle-American contemporary, insulated from anything distasteful (like cigar smoke, guns, or the homeless), she has to achieve some distance on them without jeopardizing their basic goodness. I believe her subject accounts for the frequent fluctuations in tone—from mild irony, through wit, lyricism, pathos, to surging black bile.

Much of the book's moral relevance is built around Nina Bryant, a writer/professor figuring in seven of the thirteen stories. Divorced and childless, she has adopted the daughter of her niece, lavishing affection and care on the girl out of love and obligation. Her mother and father were both self-absorbed violinists. Her life once had a dark side. We learn that she was violated by her brother as a child. She has been in psych wards, has even tried suicide once; yet, unlike many victims these days, she refuses to dwell on her misfortunes. We are not asked to feel sorry for her; instead she gains our respect for her intellectual honesty, her sense of obligation, especially regarding her daughter, her warmth and humor—all positives. In "As It Is in Heaven," Nina nurses her terminally ill mother, looks after her daughter, and carries on a conversation with her mother's and her father's ghosts, learning much about her own past. An audacious foray into magic realism, this story builds to a fine resolution. Nina thinks her ghost father materialized in order to connect with her, which he never really did while he was living. But no, he's here to carry off his dying wife to a Heaven of pure being, where "you don't listen to music; you are music," or, better, eternally playing a Beethoven quartet. Nina remains committed to becoming, to perpetuating her ongoing self through her writing and her daughter, and as it turns out, through a second marriage to a history professor who wants to "live with someone who is not going to forget what I have been to her." In the last story, "Block Party," she has to have her ailing dog put to sleep. Significantly, she can't evade the finality of death, as she does through the telling of a ghost story in "As It Is in Heaven," the "language of herself" collapsing into "a despair of meaninglessness"; yet she remains committed to her husband and her daughter.



Two stories, especially, move with dramatic intensity, "Chores" and "How It Goes." In "Chores," a bereaved husband and father is simply hanging on; in "How It Goes," an advertising man whose wife suddenly tells him she wants a divorce is staving off traumatic violence. The immediacy of their plight does not allow for mediation. Yet since they are part of the book's larger scheme, the author-narrator can tell us later on (in "Block Party") that they are recovering, that in keeping with the becoming theme, their stories have not achieved closure.

In another, much longer epigraph, Chekhov tells us "life's real tragedies are enacted off stage" because we need to distance sickness, poverty, or bereavement. "But there is no one with a hammer" dinning into one's head that unhappy people exist, "so the happy man lives happily away." Not quite true, Cherry quietly insists, even though her hammer is muffled in felt. Yet nobody is really off the hook. As the nurse sees it in "Not the Phil Donahue Show," we have "the dream of our essential empowerment so at odds with the insomniac knowledge of our own helplessness." How to live in the face of this helplessness is what Kelly Cherry's book is all about.

*Charles Rose, who lives in Auburn, has published stories and reviews in Crazyhorse, Shenandoah, The Georgetown Review, and Southern Humanities Review, among other journals.*

### **Jerome Cochran: His Life, His Works, His Legacy**

by John T. Morris, M.S., M.D.,

and Barbara Ann McClary, B.S., R.N.

The Mulberry River Press

313 pp. Hardcover \$39; Paperback \$29

Jerome Cochran is hardly a household name in Alabama. The Medical Association of the State of Alabama does have a lecture named in his honor. But a movement to erect a monument of Dr. Cochran on the State Capitol grounds never reached fruition. His influence, however, continues to pervade modern medicine in our state.

Dr. Morris, a retired Cullman physician, and Ms. McClary, a registered nurse, have collaborated to produce a richly researched biography of this giant of Alabama medicine. Born in Tennessee, reared in Mississippi, he received his medical degrees from the Memphis Botanic Medical College and the University of Nashville. After serving as a surgeon in the Confederate Army, he embarked on a remarkable medical career that would forge Alabama medicine into a cohesive and organized profession. Dr. Cochran distinguished himself as a private practitioner, professor, and public health officer, but his greatest genius was in organization. He organized Alabama public health and the state medical association. He successfully lobbied the legislature. According to his biographers, "Cochran controlled every aspect of organized medicine in Alabama."

Cochran was described as a man of "fairly small stature" with "sallow complexion." He was "chronically ill all his life." He witnessed the deaths of his children and friends. Always, he persevered.

He demanded the highest ethics of all physicians. Ethics were "the very soul and life blood of the profession." Without strong ethical principles, he saw medicine as having "degenerated, almost

completely, into a trade." He was "firm almost to obstinacy, and unselfish almost to the verge of improvidence."

In addition to the personal drama of Dr. Cochran, this book portrays Alabama in the last half of the nineteenth century, a time of pivotal change in which infectious diseases stalked the land, killing youngsters, creating a life expectancy about half of that we know today. The heroics of the fight to order society and defeat plagues make for entertaining and educational reading.

*David Hodo practices medicine and psychiatry in Selma.*

### **Where the Wild Animals Is Plentiful: Diary of an Alabama Fur Trader's Daughter, 1912-14**

by May Jordan, edited by Elisa Moore Baldwin

University of Alabama Press, 1999

263 pp. Paper, \$34.95

*Where the Wild Animals Is Plentiful* is a vivid description of life in southwest Alabama early in the twentieth century, as seen through the eyes of a thoughtful twenty-three-year-old woman. When she accompanied her father on his winter fur-buying trips, May Jordan was expected to do the cooking, work on the furs, and guard the mule-drawn wagon during her father's expeditions on foot. However, May made time to keep a diary. Not only did writing make her feel less alone, for she writes to imagined readers, but it was also her way of claiming the wilderness, its sunrises, its swamps and forests, even the thoughts of the animals by whose deaths her family lived.

Elisa Moore Baldwin's dedication to her task as editor of *Where the Wild Animals Is Plentiful*, which she believes is the only diary written in this period by a woman from the rural South, is evident in her seeking out and including so many photographs of people named in the text, as well as in her helpful introduction, glossary, and notes. We are in Baldwin's debt for making available to us this vibrant voice out of Alabama's past.

*Rosemary M. Canfield Reisman co-authored Contemporary Southern Men Fiction Writers, published in 1998 by Scarecrow Press.*

### **Unforgotten**

by D. J. Meador

Pelican Publishing Company, 1999 (1-800-843-1724)

400 pp. Hardcover, \$25

Daniel J. Meador, an Alabama native with degrees from Auburn, Alabama, and Harvard and a military lawyer in Korea during the Korean War, has written a memorable novel of that war called *Unforgotten*. Into this novel he has stirred scenes of small-town Alabama life and Korean War combat. His main character, after service in Korea, practices law in Birmingham until he is nominated for a judgeship on the Federal court of appeals. However, as happens in real nominations, his past, or his perceived past, comes back to haunt him and affect his nomination.

Meador captures the beach breezes on the Gulf Coast during the 1950s, the odor of gunpowder and Korean cooking, and the smell of fear in a courtroom. The book is dedicated to the "memory of those Americans who served in Korea under the United Nations Command, 1950-53, and for whom there was no homecoming:

54,246 dead; 8,177 missing.” The author, who became blind in his adult years but continued to serve in a distinguished capacity as a lawyer and law professor, has given us vivid and realistic descriptions of the landscapes of Alabama, Korea, Charleston, and the Gulf Coast.

Former dean of the University of Alabama School of Law and currently James Monroe Professor of Law Emeritus at the University of Virginia, Meador is author of a previous novel, *His Father's House*. His first book portrays an Alabama family in a story of sus-

pense which stretches from the Civil War through World War I to East Germany before the wall came down. That book has been optioned for motion-picture adaption and was also published by Pelican. Both books combine serious themes with a story, and it is the story in each one that keeps you reading to the end.

*Charles Centerfit Hart studied at Washington and Lee and the University of Alabama School of Law before returning to his hometown of Gadsden in 1978 to practice law.*

## BOOKS IN BRIEF

Willie James King's most recent collection of poetry, *Wooden Windows* (SRLR Press, Austin, 1999), includes work that has been published in the *Elk River Review*, *Obsidian II: Black Literature in Review*, and *Parnassus*, among many other journals. A teacher of English and theater arts at Lanier High School in Montgomery, he reaches in these poems to grasp experience—widely and democratically understood—turning it this way and that to discover its meaning and significance. In his introduction Yusef Komunyakaa writes, a “feeling of inclusiveness...pervades each trope” in these poems, which “force us to focus our contemplation, to venture observation.”



The poems in Joseph Whitten's *Muled Memories* are elegiac witnesses to the people and places of the author's Sand Mountain home. Forebears and neighbors who've “gone on” are remembered and celebrated for their faith, their strength, their humor and endurance. Poems on cats, Christmastime, and class reunions are set beside studies of wild birds and observations of wild weather. In “From Where I Stand,” the speaker watches

“The mountains blaze/where once spring blossoms sang.” Recognizing that “There is no doubt/it's all downhill from here,” he still gathers in the view, and “what a view!”

Lowell Harrelson's *Rainbow Junction* is a reminiscence of another sort, an expression of the author's “desire to record certain childhood experiences within the context of a story.” Set on Sand Mountain, Alabama, in the 1950s, it focuses on the struggle of good and evil played out over social change. The young narrator, 11-year-old John Preston Williams, Junior, is the son of the new minister at the First Baptist Church in Rainbow Junction. The boy makes friends with Willie and Skeeter, “the big dogs” who know all about fishing and other worthwhile pursuits. Together they learn about violence and prejudice, as well as love and justice.



Jemison, Alabama, resident John A. Velke III is a private security professional who has spent twenty years investigating early private detective work in the United States. His *Baldwin-Felts Detective Inc.* (published by Velke in 1998, www.mhpress.com) covers mountebanks, desperadoes, thieves, spies, and insurgents, and many of the great characters and cases of the century, including the Hatfield and McCoy feud. Velke's book, to borrow from a Roanoke newspaper's account of a local case, is “romantic and cannot but make one wonder how men can consent to follow a calling so fraught with danger as that of detective.”



Other compelling adventures are documented by Anne Carlisle Carmichael, a Montgomery native who has edited a collection of letters by a young man swept up in the Yukon gold rush of the late 1890s. Unfortunately, Robert Hunter Fitzhugh, who left his native Virginia about 1886 and lived subsequently in Kentucky, Alabama, and Illinois before striking out for the Klondike, did not survive the rush. But his letters home, published for the first time in *Hunter: The Yukon Gold Rush Letters of Robert Hunter Fitzhugh, 1897-1900* (Black Belt Press, 1999), did.

They are rich in humor and language and marked by a keen eye for natural beauty and a developed sense of drama. They are also a very personal record of people and experiences encountered by a young man eagerly open to them.

Haiku is a terrifically demanding form, confoundingly complex in its simplicity. Yet this mystery is at its heart, note Charles, Mary Elizabeth and Christopher Rodning, a husband-wife-son team whose most recent book is *Swaying Grass: Haiku* (Scots Plaid Press, 1998). Photographs of the Florida Everglades are interwoven with the three-line poems and sumi-e style Oriental ink paintings, their juxtaposition both based on and illustrative of the Japanese term *shibui*, “great refinement underlying commonplace

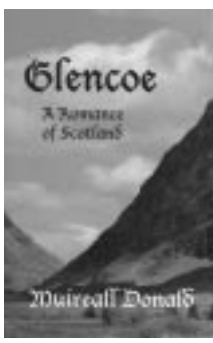


appearances.” The Rodnigs, who live on a farm in Semmes, Alabama, prod us toward recognizing that nature has the quality of limitlessness and yet is profoundly vulnerable.



In *Then Comes the Dawn* (Professional Press, 1997) Fort Payne writer Dorothea Williamson recalls the overwhelming fear and worry she and her family experienced when her son, Stacy, then 11 years old, suffered a stroke. This is one in a long series of tragedies recorded in the memoir, but loss and pain that might have devastated another family are opportunities to find new hope and strength in a bed-rock faith.

Since when have handsome Scottish Highlanders and their lovely captives from rival clans not made a reader’s heart beat faster? For its plot, Muireall Donald’s *Glencoe: A Romance of Scotland* (Laughing Owl Press, 1998) draws on the historical



incident of a late 17th-century massacre of MacDonalDs by the Campbells at Glencoe. The survivors of the massacre and their hostages play out revenge and romance amid rugged mountains and bitter winter weather.



In 1998, Mary Kay Remick published *Searching for Blanche* (Pen Oak Press), a novel that addresses substance abuse, phobias, and depression as it follows the fortunes of Belle Reve, a woman who lands in New Orleans in search of a streetcar named Desire and ends up in a taxi with an ex-Jerseyite driver named Art Barkoff instead.

Remick’s just-published new novel, *Sweet and Sour* (Pen Oak Press), concerns two cousins, Nickel “Nicky” Summers and Penny Perfect, whose childhood rivalry provides the basis for a fast-moving story that makes hay of its Southern characters and themes.



# AWF/DYS Celebrate Latest Anthologies



Guests at the Mt. Meigs signing included J. Walter Wood, Jr., Executive Director of DYS (above), and (right) Dr. John Stewart, Superintendent of Education for DYS, and Wiley White, member of the Alabama State Council on the Arts, who said, “Writing Our Stories’ is the best program the Council has ever been involved in.”



# A N N O U N C E M E N T S

## BOOK REVIEWERS CIRCLE

The Book Reviewers Circle organizational meeting has been scheduled for Saturday, March 11, at 1 p.m. at the Olive Garden near the Galleria in Hoover. Details will be sent to those who responded to the notice in the last issue of *First Draft*; anyone who is interested but has (and maybe will continue to) put off responding is invited to simply show up. Those wishing to discuss the date and/or meeting may call or email **Jay Lamar** at 334-844-4947 or [lamarja@auburn.edu](mailto:lamarja@auburn.edu).

## CHAPBOOK CONTEST ANNOUNCED

The Alabama State Poetry Society announces the first annual John and Miriam Morris Poetry Chapbook Contest.

First prize: \$100 and 50 copies of printed chapbook. \$15 reading fee includes copy of winning entry. 20-24 pages, with name and address on title page only. Include SASE. Send to ASPS Chapbook Contest c/o NDU, Route 1, Box 219C, Brierfield, Ala 35035.

ASPS members are currently at work on WordStock, a fall poetry and art festival. The Society's Second Love Poem Chapbook,

featuring members' work. Send \$8.00 to NDU at the above address.

## EUGENE WALTER REMEMBERED

KaliOka Press has announced the publication of *Moments With Eugene: ... a collection of memories*. Eugene Walter, poet, artist and winner of the Lippincott Fiction Prize for his novel, *The Untidy Pilgrim*, is remembered in this collection of wonderfully entertaining tales by "ordinary" friends and acquaintances as well as distinguished contemporaries in the world of literature. His life embraced such notables as Isak Dinesen and George Plimpton and equally cherished Nancy Evans, the "plant lady." The book includes the words of more than 50 contributors including Pat Conroy and Eugene's former publisher at Methuen Publishing, London.

### DEADLINE REMINDER


Applications are due March 1 for Alabama State Council for the Arts 2001 Fellowships. Guidelines and forms are available online at [www.arts.state.al.us](http://www.arts.state.al.us) or call 334/242-4076.

The hardbound book, edited by **Rebecca Barrett** and **Carolyn Haines**, will be available May 1 from Baker & Taylor or by faxing an order to the publisher at 334-649-9992 or [www.kaliokapress.com](http://www.kaliokapress.com).

## NEW LITERARY PRIZE ANNOUNCED

The Knoxville Writers' Guild and the University of Tennessee Press announce the annual Peter Taylor Prize for the Novel. The Prize includes a \$1000 cash award, publication of the novel by the University of Tennessee Press, and a standard royalty contract.

The goal of the Peter Taylor Prize competition is to identify and publish novels of high literary quality. The competition is open to both published and unpublished novelists and manuscripts submitted to the contest will be read and judged anonymously. Renowned author George Garrett will judge the 2000 competition and novelist Doris Betts will be the judge in 2001.

For complete guidelines write to the Knoxville Writers' Guild, Tennessee Book Awards—The Peter Taylor Prize, P.O. Box 10326, Knoxville, TN 37939. 



Don't forget the Third Annual

## ALABAMA WRITERS SYMPOSIUM

May 4-6 in Monroeville, The Literary Capital of Alabama

Featuring the presentations of the

Harper Lee Award

for Alabama's Distinguished Writer 2000 to

## HELEN NORRIS

and the

Eugene Current Garcia Award

for Alabama's Distinguished Literary Scholar 2000 to

## DON NOBLE

Hosted by ALABAMA SOUTHERN COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Register online: [www.ascc.edu](http://www.ascc.edu) or call 334/575-3156, ext 223

email [dreed@ascc](mailto:dreed@ascc)

# E V E N T S

## AUTHOR APPEARANCES

### JACKIE MATTE

**February 15, 4 p.m., Auburn**

Matte will read from her new book, *They Say the Wind is Red: The Alabama Choctaw, Lost in Their Own Land*, at Pebble Hill. Sponsored by the Auburn University Center for the Arts and Humanities.

Call **334/844-4947**.

### ALLISON JOSEPH

**February 16, 7 p.m., Birmingham**

Poet Allison Joseph will read at the UAB Honors House as part of the UAB Writers' Series in conjunction with the Birmingham Area Consortium for High Education (BACHE). Joseph's BACHE residency extends from the 16th through the 18th.

For more information, call Robert Collins, **205/934-4250**.

### MICHAEL HARPER

**February 21, 7:30 p.m., Mobile**

Michael S. Harper, Professor of English at Brown University, will deliver the Charles Boyle Literary Lecture/Reading in the Gautrelet Room on the Spring Hill College campus.

For additional information, call Michael Kaffer at **334/380-4641**.

### CAROLYN HAINES

**February 25, 6 p.m., Birmingham**

Romance, mystery and mainstream fiction writer Haines will read at the Alabama School of Fine Arts, 1800 Eighth Ave.

Call **205/252-9241**.

### NATASHA TRETHERWAY

**February 27, 2 p.m., Florence**

A poetry reading by the NEA Fellowship recipient will be at the Florence-Lauderdale County Public Library, 218 North Wood Avenue in Florence.

The event is sponsored by the Friends of the Library.

Call **256-764-6629**.

### ERNEST GAINES

**March 11, 7:30 p.m., Huntsville**

Ernest Gaines, author of *A Lesson Before Dying*, will speak in Chan Auditorium on the UAH campus. Admission charged. The event is sponsored by the Huntsville Literary Association in cooperation with Oakwood College, Alabama A & M, and UAH.

Call Marjorie Masterson at **256/859-1209**.

### H.E. FRANCIS

**April (TBA), Birmingham**

Fiction writer Francis will read at the UAB Honors House as part of the UAB Writers' Series.

For more information, call Robert Collins, **205/934-4250**.

### DR. MARGARET DAVIS

**April 11, Mobile**

Dr. Davis will present Father Abram Ryan: Confederate Poet of the South, on Mobile's beloved poet and priest Father Abram Ryan (1839-1886) at Stewartfield on the Spring Hill College campus.

For more information, call **334/380-3870**.

### JEANIE THOMPSON

**April 16, 2 p.m., Florence**

The author of three books of poetry, Thompson will read at the Florence-Lauderdale County Public Library, 218 N Wood Avenue in Florence. The event is sponsored by the Friends of the Library.

Call **256/764-6629**.

### THOMAS RABBITT

**April 16, 7 p.m., Florence**

Retired University of Alabama creative writing professor Thomas Rabbitt will read from his new poetry collection at the Florence-Lauderdale County Public Library, 218 N Wood Avenue in Florence. The event is sponsored by the Friends of the Library. Call **256-764-6629**.

## CONFERENCES AND WORKSHOPS

*(See article on page 6)*

### SOUTHERN VOICES 2000

**February 25-27, Hoover**

Call 205/444-7888.

### ON THE BRINK

**February 26, Jacksonville**

Call Gena Christopher at 256/782-5856.

### UNIVERSITY OF NORTH ALABAMA WRITER'S FESTIVAL

**March 16 & 17, Florence**

Call 256/765-4238.

### WRITING TODAY

**April 7 & 8, Birmingham**

Call 205/226-4921 or 1 800 523-5793.

### SOUTHERN WOMEN WRITERS CONFERENCE

**April 13-15, Rome, Georgia**

Featured writers include **Peggy Prenshaw, Lee Smith** and **Jill McCorkle**. Contact Emily Wright, English Department, Berry College, 706/233-4081 or ewright@berry.edu.

*Continued on page 26*

Writer Kelly Cherry spent fall 1999 as eminent scholar at  
The University of Alabama in Huntsville humanities center.

# “I WANT TO LIVE MY LIFE AS A WRITER.”

Cherry has nothing but praise for the university, the state, and the people she met during her months in Alabama. “My colleagues were very kind and congenial. My students were wonderful. Some of them are very good poets and I hope that they will pursue publishing their work.”

Unlike Wisconsin, she said, “Everyone in the writing community in Alabama seems to know one another.” Readings took her to the University of North Alabama, the Florence-Lauderdale Public Library, Alabama A & M, Calhoun Community College, and the Auburn University Center for the Arts & Humanities. In Huntsville, she was invited to read with local poets Susan Luther and Bonnie Roberts. John Shaver at Shaver’s Books “hosted a lovely book signing for me. I felt like an actress with my name on a marquee. Southern hospitality is taken seriously here.”

Before coming to the state, she was “certainly aware of novelists Vicki Covington and Nanci Kincaid. I’ve been delighted to discover that the University of Alabama Press is keeping their novels in print through its Deep South series. It is wonderful to see that commitment to writers.”

## IN PRAISE OF SMALL PRESSES

Cherry is no stranger to university presses. Her curriculum vita reads like a “Who’s Who” in Contemporary American literature and most of her work in the last fifteen years has been published in either small or university presses. Cherry, who has been one of LSU’s “Yellow Shoes” poets since 1977, especially praises university presses for “being loyal to writers



Kelly Cherry

in a way that is kind. My most recent collection of short fiction, *The Society of Friends*, and my memoir, *Writing the World*, were both published by the University of Missouri Press. I have had some rather different experiences with large presses—one even wanted me to change my name.”

## ARTISTIC HERITAGE

Born in Louisiana, Cherry grew up mainly in Virginia. Her parents were professional violinists who called themselves “fiddle players.” She says of her upbringing: “we were poor and were allowed to dream and we were surrounded by beautiful music. Like them I wanted to live my life as an ‘artist’ at an early age.”

To steer their elder daughter in a different direction, away from the uncertainty of an artistic career, her parents encouraged her to attend the New Mexico Institute of Mining and Technology in Socorro, where she studied math and science. Cherry jokes that she would have “six transfers to five different schools” before becoming a DuPont Fellow at the University of Virginia at Charlottesville.

## MAKING THE WRITE CONNECTIONS

While at Virginia, she became part of what was dubbed a “bootleg poetry seminar” with Henry Taylor and Richard Dillard. George Garrett joined the faculty during Cherry’s second year at Virginia and she took her first “real” writing class. “Creative writing was not taught to undergraduates at universities then,” she said.

During her early years as a writer she made friendships that have lasted a lifetime. “George Garrett, Abe Rothberg,



*“My great ambition in life  
is to have a screen porch  
on which to write my poems.”*

Fred Chappell, Richard Dillard, and Henry Taylor were good friends to my work when the world at large was not.” She emphasizes, “My advice to new writers is to read, write, and make good writing friends who will sustain you in the tough times.”

**WRITING THE WORLD**

In 1965, Cherry made her first trip to Russia. “While I am a Southern writer with a Southern literary tradition, the first writers I stumbled onto were the Russian writers. I found them at an early age and have always loved their works.” She intended to visit the country to pay homage to her beloved writers. Instead she found herself living an Anna Akhmatova poem when she fell in love with the Latvian composer Imant Kalnin. The two wanted to marry but could never get permission from the government. During the twelve years the two were struggling to marry, a period described in Cherry’s memoir, *The Exiled Heart*, she completed her MFA at the University of North Carolina-Greensboro, “A place that was pure heaven. It is still one of the best places on earth to me.”

**FILLING THE SHELVES**

In her early thirties, Cherry decided to “take Beethoven as my role model because he worked in many musical forms. I spent several months thinking about a bookshelf I wanted to write.”

After publishing 27 books, including six collections of fiction, two memoirs, five collections of poetry, five chapbooks, and two translations of classical drama, Cherry still says, “I haven’t finished my bookshelf yet. I hope that what I am doing



Kelly Cherry at the University of North Alabama.

is original. And I hope that I keep finding new ways to say what I’ve always felt that I wanted to say.”

Cherry has been a fellow at both Yaddo and Bread Loaf, earned a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship, and was the first recipient of the Hanes Prize (the poetry award for the Fellowship of Southern Writers). As recently as October 1999, she was featured at Colgate University’s prestigious “Living Writers” lecture series. She candidly admits that her career has “lasted long enough to see everything possible about myself and my work, both good and bad, in print.

Cherry, who is both the Eudora Welty and Evjue Bascom Professor at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, reached a turning point this fall when she decided to retire after 23 years of teaching. Acknowledging

that “teaching has helped my personal life. I’ve enjoyed it. I have students whom I love and am proud of; they have become good friends,” Cherry adds, “I’d like more time to write, but I’d still like to be a visiting professor at a university. My experience at UAH has been wonderful.” In fact, Cherry has accepted the Wyndham Robertson Writer-in-Residence position at Hollins University for Spring 2000.

Cherry and her fiancé, fellow Southerner and writer Burke Davis III, would like to make the South their permanent home someday. They look forward to one day finding a farmhouse somewhere south of the Mason-Dixon. Cherry says, “My great ambition in life is to have a screen porch on which to write my poems. I want to live my life as a writer.”

*Pam Kingsbury is an Alabama Humanities Foundation speaker who lives in Florence.*

**EVENTS***Continued from page 25***ALABAMA BOUND: A BOOK FAIR CELEBRATING ALABAMA AUTHORS AND PUBLISHERS****April 29, Birmingham**

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See guidelines online at [www.arts.endow.gov](http://www.arts.endow.gov) or contact the NEA at 202/682-5400.**TO WRITE BETTER***Continued from page 8*

"Every horse moves differently, so experience as many as you can. Another person may say what I'm saying, but she'll word it differently. That may be the language that you understand."

I feel much the same way about writing conferences. I've never attended one where I didn't learn something valuable. In Denver I learned hard facts about print runs in mysteries, the problems confronting series characters in a market glutted with same, and the dangers of selling a series character to television. I also had a chance to sit around with my writer friends and hear where their careers are headed, and to share the excitement of new contracts and new potential and the wild and addictive excitement of the seed for a new book.

Conferences are a lot of hard work. Normally concurrent sessions are held and choices must be made. Time must be maximized. But I always come away with a sense of power and a renewed desire to write—and to write better.

*Carolyn Haines is a novelist and publisher in Semmes, Alabama.*

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## THE BACK PAGE

# The Novel Way to a Play

When Ernest Gaines published *A Lesson Before Dying* in 1993, his long-time friend and fellow Southerner Romulus Linney congratulated him on the fine novel and proclaimed it Gaines' most dramatic work because it was "built like a play." Little did he know how prophetic his words would prove for Gaines, himself, and the Alabama Shakespeare Festival, which premiered Linney's stage adaptation of Gaines' novel on January 21, 2000, as part of its Southern Writers' Project (SWP).

The road to a successful stage adaptation such as this one is long, circuitous, and unpredictable. Gaines himself originally set out to write a novel about 1988, but as he considered the idea of young Jefferson's conviction and death sentence, he moved the action to 1948 because civil rights lawyers, the press, and public sentiment would intervene today to publicize and defend a man wrongfully convicted of murder. The novelist did not know whether Miss Emma would be Jefferson's grandmother or godmother, what statement Jefferson would finally make, or how Grant would teach him. The diary was an inspiration along the way, as was the radio. What was not a surprise for Gaines was the setting and the theme, for all his work centers on Pointe Coupée Parish, Louisiana, his childhood home, which he has fictionalized as St. Raphael Parish with its county seat of Bayonne (New Roads), and on the issue of what it means to be a man, especially a black man, in the modern world.

ASF Artistic Director Kent Thompson became aware of *A Lesson Before Dying* when ASF Board member Virginia Roddy of New Orleans suggested that he read the book, because it seemed perfect for ASF's SWP. As she persisted, Thompson finally read the novel and heartily agreed, at which point ASF began the laborious task of negotiating theatrical rights for an award-winning work. Because Gaines' *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* had proven to be such a resounding success in its television adaptation, all of Gaines' works are optioned upon publication. Gaines was interested in the possibility of a stage adaptation, but the rights were already held by Hollywood. Persistence proved vital once more, for ASF managed to strike between Hollywood options and gain the theatrical rights to the novel just before HBO optioned the piece, which it subsequently produced for television in 1999.

During the summer of 1997, Thompson was headed to the Sewanee Writers' Conference, where Gaines also serves on the faculty; they planned to discuss the adaptation. Thompson had a last-minute personal conflict, but serendipity prompted a conversation at Sewanee

between Gaines and Romulus Linney, so that one evening Thompson got a phone call from Linney, with whom he had worked as a freelance director in New York City during the 1980s, asking if Linney could do the adaptation. As Thompson tells it, "I told Romulus I would have to discuss it with Ernest Gaines, and Romulus said, 'hang on... hey, Ernie, Kent wants to know...,'" and the deal was settled over the phone.

Linney brought a world of practical experience and dramatic expertise to bear on Gaines' novel. He knew the action had to start as close to the climax as possible, occur in as few settings as possible, involve as few characters as possible, and proceed with as much



Isiah Whitlock Jr. and Jamahl Marsh in *A Lesson Before Dying*.

Scarsbrook/ASF

conflict as possible. These necessities meant that the black communities of the plantation and Bayonne that provide the essential context for the novel cannot appear in the stage version. Grant's Aunt Lou becomes just a memory, not a clear pressure to do his duty, and her role is subsumed by Miss Emma and Grant's fiancée Vivian, a responsibility that noticeably alters the balance of each of their characters. How to handle the execution and the diary were two more major challenges, because no one wants to watch an electrocution and because

Linney felt that writing or speaking pages from a diary would be unexciting. So theatre subtly changed the pressure points of the story, but not their power or effect.

Because Gaines was first inspired by the voices of people he wrote letters for as a child in the quarters of River Lake plantation, where five generations of his family have lived, the speaking voice is an ever-present strength in his work, a strength that Linney knew would lend itself to stage. He therefore used as much of Gaines' actual dialogue from the novel as he could and sent drafts of the play to his friend for approval and suggestions. Minor script revisions continued into the rehearsal process, as did the thoughtful analysis of the play's potential and effect, which manifested itself when Thompson and Linney inverted the second and third scenes before the play's first preview performance. Such insight often occurs in the new play development process, for only when the whole play comes together with sets, costumes, lights, sound, and actors can its full potential be weighed.

So another SWP world premiere comes to the stage. When Kent Thompson came to ASF, one of his first objectives was to institute a new play project for the classical repertory theatre. ASF's Southern Writers' Project is its way of offering new plays for the theatre of tomorrow.

*Susan Willis is dramaturg at the Alabama Shakespeare Festival*

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