

*The Journal of the Alabama Writers' Forum*

# FIRST DRAFT

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*Ahh... Summer!*

FY 02

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## From the Editor

We hope this number of *First Draft* finds you happily in the midst of working your way through the stacks of books that have accumulated during the year. If you're not sure what book to delve into next, never fear: this issue is full of titles to add to your stack.

As we begin *First Draft's* ninth year of publication, we'd like to say a word about the journal's editorial objectives. The mission of the Alabama Writers' Forum is to "advance the art of writing by promoting writers, educating young writers, and cultivating Alabama's literary arts." *First Draft* helps accomplish that mission by striving to be a well-written, accessible resource about Alabama books, presses, literary events, and people for writers and readers all over the state.

Since last fall, *First Draft* has grown, and color now appears in sections of the magazine. The range of articles and columns has grown to include regular features by Denise Trimm of the Alabama School of Fine Arts and attorney Ed George. We thank them for a year's worth of ideas and advice. We look forward to adding regular features on Alabama's literary journals and welcome the introduction to *Aura* by Christopher Giganti that appears in this issue; *Black Warrior Review* and *PMS: poemstorymemoir* are but two of the journals that will be featured in the coming year.

*First Draft* has always tried to take note of the work of young writers, and Alabama School of Fine Arts student Lil Plott inaugurates regular student contributions to the book reviews. Alabama has a vigorous literary community, testified to by stories such as Tracey Thomas's piece on young readers in Sylacauga. Soon we will profile Beville State's Read Alabama! The Tradition Continues, Bay Minette's Alabama Athenaeum, and Icons of History in Sylacauga. Other features in the coming year will include literary songwriters, romance writers, book arts, illustrators, and MFA programs.

To keep the book review section in the best possible shape, we will add a couple of new section editors—for poetry and history—in order to ensure equitable coverage and high standards. We will also cease reviewing self-published or vanity press books and institute more rigorous word lengths.

We look to you now, as always, for ideas, books to review, feedback, and support. *First Draft* must be responsive to your interests and needs. We count on you to share those with us when we survey the readership this fall. Finally, we deeply appreciate your sharing *First Draft* with colleagues, friends, and family. The wider our readership and the broader our subscription base, the more diverse our contents and expansive our format. Please let us know what you think and, until the next issue, all best for a great summer.

Jay Lamar  
*Editor*



Jay Lamar

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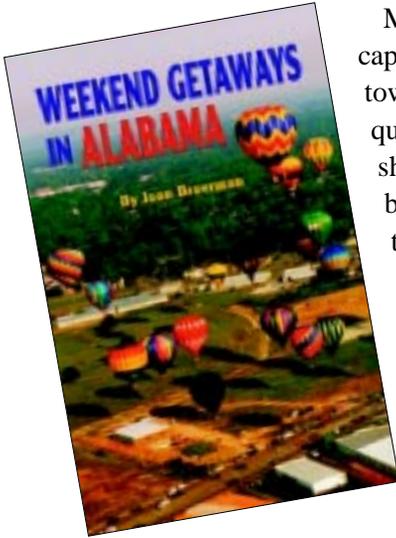
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# Where Do the Writers Live?

by Joan Broerman



Monroeville may lay claim to being the literary capital of Alabama, but readers in other cities and towns have their favorite authors and will quickly point with pride to those books on the shelves of their libraries and bookstores bearing by-lines of native sons and daughters or even to the morning paper with a list of latest awards featuring, yes, authors with Alabama ties. Tourists spent 6.1 billion dollars in Alabama in 2001, and some of those travelers asked for directions to the homes of native writers: Helen Keller, Harper Lee, Truman Capote, Zelda Sayre Fitzgerald, and others.

When I began researching my book, *Weekend Getaways in Alabama*, I already

had several shelves of titles by Alabama authors in my personal library. As a children's author, I'd read Brookwood resident Aileen Kilgore Henderson's prize winning middle-grade novel, *Summer of the Bonepile Monster*, and chuckled when the main character, Hollis, measured kudzu to see how fast it grows. I'd pondered that myself. Han Nolan's National Book Award nominee, *Send Me Down a Miracle*, a young adult novel, is set in a small Alabama town created by the Birmingham-born author, but authentic in its southern-ness. Brenda Moore's picture book, *Together on the Mountain*, gave me a taste of life in the mountains of Alabama thirty years ago. Sister writer Anne Dalton was caught up in

archaeological digs and took me along to a number of re-enactments and historical seminars while she completed her book, *Massacre Island*, a middle-grade page turner based on a Dauphin Island mystery. I knew enough about the people and history of my adopted state to be intrigued, and writing about the state meant delving deeper, learning secrets, finding untold stories—the fascinating side trips of any research effort.

As my husband and I criss-crossed Alabama and put 9,000 miles on our white GMC van, we collected books on rivers, forts, architecture, politics, sports, and civil rights. We gathered maps and histories of towns that still exist and towns that used to be. I read in the car, at rest stops, in motels and hotels, and, blissfully, in the hammock in our backyard when the schedule allowed us a respite.

We visited the home of Helen Keller and wandered around Monroeville, thinking we might be walking the very sidewalks traversed by Harper Lee and Truman Capote. In 1776, naturalist William Bartram recorded what he saw in great detail, and his words led us down the trails the Creeks called the “great trading

*From north to south, Alabama scenes offer beauty, history, inspiration.*



path.” Those trails became the Federal Road and brought settlers to Greenville, the oldest Alabama town NOT on a river. What better place to read the ghost tales of Selma’s Kathryn Tucker Windham than in a circle of lamp light in the lobby of the Hotel Talisi—and contemplate the next day’s travels: would we catch a glimpse of ghosts in Selma or Cahawba or maybe at Sloss Furnace when we returned to our home in Birmingham?

*Rivers of History* by Harvey H. Jackson III became the influence that changed the structure of *Weekend Getaways in Alabama*. Because we live in the center of the state, it seemed natural to use a hub and spoke outline with the state’s largest city, Birmingham, as the hub. Jackson, head of the history department at Jacksonville State University, kept me spellbound with his tales of the people and events that impacted the development of a major river system. I realized that hub and spoke no longer worked for me. So I threw that draft away and instead began at the Gulf of Mexico where Mobile was founded 300 years ago, freeing myself to move readers up the rivers, the way the early explorers and settlers arrived.

A translated copy of *Iberville’s Gulf Journals*, a diary kept by Pierre Le Moyne d’Iberville as he explored the Gulf Coast, took me back to Mobile’s earliest days. Then seasoned travel writer Gay Martin returned me to modern days with her *Off the Beaten Path* series and kept my feet marching toward the deadline that loomed at the end of my year of journeying. As children’s science writer Sandra Markle says (well, she may not be an Alabama author, but she said it while speaking at a writer’s conference in Birmingham), “Things are never done; they’re just due.”

Turning in the manuscript for *Weekend Getaways in Alabama* to my editor at Pelican Publishing was not the end of the trail for me. Side trips that threaten to lure a writer from an assignment with an established deadline still called my name. My imagination begged to return to the American Village in Montevallo, the Burritt Museum in Anniston, Early Works in Huntsville, and be set loose. I still had unanswered questions about the people I’d met, the ones who greeted me during my research and the ones who whispered to me in the letters and diaries they left behind. In Mentone most of the

bed and breakfasts are owned by people from out of the state. Some of the innkeepers are from out of the country. What brought them here? Why? Across the state in Demopolis the ghosts of the Napoleonic refugees summon. What were they thinking the first time they saw those chalk white cliffs? I want to visit Moundville again and travel back mentally, to be there when the corn is harvested. What is that like? What happens next? Are there celebrations? War?

In Alabama inspiration flirts with the shadows on a path atop Cheaha Mountain, glistens on rain slicked rocks after a shower in Buck’s Pocket State Park, and beckons around the bend of each river. Summer brings symphonies outdoors to play under the stars. The fragrance of wisteria and magnolia scent botanical gardens and backyards alike. How, I wonder every day, could one live in Alabama and NOT write?

When the tourists arrive and ask, “Where do the writers live?” The answer could be, “Next door.”

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*Joan Broerman is a travel and children’s writer who lives in Birmingham. Weekend Getaways in Alabama was published by Pelican Publishing (2000).*



# Profiles

*First Draft* is pleased to present this bumper crop of profiles of people who make things happen in the state for all of us who write or love books. From novelist Oxford Stroud, whose passing we mourn, to 2002 Eugene Current-Garcia Award recipient Trudier Harris-Lopez, to fiction writer Michael Knight, memoirist and scholar Jan Willis, poet Sue Walker, children's writer and poet Tony Crunk, and programmer extraordinaire Martha Andrews Ross, they testify to Alabama's fertile literary soil.



## Jan Willis

### *Baptist to Buddhist*

BY PAM KINGSBURY

Jan Willis, born in the "colored section" of Docena, Alabama, left the South to attend Cornell University

in 1965. As a child, she was warned not to roll down her car windows lest KKK members throw acid in her face; as a teen, she watched the Klan burn a cross on her lawn; and as a college student, she joined black student protests at Cornell.

After graduation from college, Willis felt she had two choices—"peace or piece"—she could return to Nepal (where she had spent her junior year) or join the Black Panthers. Leaving the violence of the late '60s, she was the only woman among sixty monks learning the chants and rituals that are the essence of Tibetan Buddhism.

Dr. Willis is Professor of Religion and Walter A. Crowell Professor of Social Studies at Wesleyan University in Middletown, Connecticut, and the author of five academic texts. In *Dreaming Me*, her first "trade" book, she recounts her spiritual journey and transformation from Baptist to Buddhist.

**Pam Kingsbury:** How did *Dreaming Me* come about?

**Jan Willis:** Alex Haley was a friend of my family's. *Dreaming Me* started as a search for our roots .... I didn't try to follow one line all the way back to Africa. I wanted to track the eight lines of my great-great-grands. Doing the work for the book was an emotional roller coaster ride. And there were problems because some of the older people in the family couldn't tell me names.

A commercial publisher—all of my other books had been with academic presses—asked me to do this fam-

ily history. I kept telling them, "No, I am an academic writer." My students had always commented "She tells a good story" on my teaching evaluations. I had written in a ritualistic way as a Tibetan teacher and had received an NEH fellowship. Once I decided to write the memoir, everything came together. Alex died before I could tell him I had started a memoir.

**PK:** As a child, were you encouraged to write?

**JW:** My mother told me to keep quiet. She feared for my safety. I didn't keep diaries. I didn't get my feelings out in that way, but I was encouraged to pursue math and music because they were universal languages.

My mom was a great storyteller. My dad is a great orator and debater. He's self-educated. He has a quick mind and common sense. He was the youngest deacon at his church.

My mother worried about my soul, pushing me toward church while my father urged us (my sister and me) to think for ourselves. He would raise questions that helped get my mind turning. He wanted us to have the education he was denied.

**PK:** Do you see *Dreaming Me* as part of the Southern literary tradition, the spiritual literary tradition, or the non-fiction prose tradition?

**JW:** All three!

Eudora Welty is my favorite writer. She uses rich details and what an eye she had! I followed her practice of reading chapters of the book aloud with a good friend sitting on the sofa listening to the language and details. The book follows spiritual traditions, and the book was certainly influenced by *Roots* and the slave narratives. A narrative form allows the writer to get directly to universal feelings and emotions.

**PK:** What response have you received from Southern readers?

**JW:** I've gotten lots of e-mails telling me how much the book has been appreciated, mirrored a life, and it's been really very gratifying.

**PK:** You call yourself a "Buddhist Baptist."

**JW:** (Laughter) It's becoming that kind of world. I spoke in London to a Buddhist group. We were in a church basement and there were about forty to forty-five black Caribbean Buddhists. I had never been in a black Buddhist community that large. Our upbringing showed. There was an amen corner, and they could finish the stories for me. There were no contradictions, and it was a relief not to abandon both methodologies.

The lessons of counting our blessings and loving our neighbors call on both deeply embedded traditions. All traditions produce positive human emotions.

**PK:** You were part of the great migration out of the south during the Civil Rights movement. What changes have you noticed on your trips home?

**JW:** There have been some tremendous changes in the country as a whole, and the changes in the South are particularly noticeable. Clearly, pockets of Birmingham have changed. The southside of Birmingham and UAB come to mind immediately. Folks are more mixed, and it's nice to see them getting along earlier on in life.

**PK:** Do you think you'd ever like to move back to Alabama?

**JW:** During the Connecticut winters, I wonder how I got stuck up here (laughter). I have to dig my car out of the snow to go to school! My family is still in Birmingham and Atlanta, and it would be nice to divide my retirement between Europe and the south.



## Michael Knight

### *Staggering Good Luck*

BY GLENDA CONWAY

Michael Knight spent several days in central Alabama this past April as a featured presenter for the Birmingham Area Consortium for Higher

Education's 2001-2002 Visiting Writers Series. During his visit, he sat a while with interviewer Glenda Conway in Montevallo's Orr Park talking about his work.

Knight, a native of Mobile, is author of a novel, *Divining Rod* (Dutton), and a collection, *Dogfight and Other Stories* (Plume), both published in 1998. His third book, *Blackout and Other Stories* (Grove/Atlantic), is slated for release late this year or early in 2003.

An assistant professor of creative writing at the University of Tennessee, Knight, 32, lives near Knoxville with his wife, Jill, who is production manager for *Metro Pulse*, an arts and entertainment weekly. They are looking forward to the birth of their first child this summer.

**Glenda Conway:** I read your story "Birdland" when it came out in the *New Yorker* [during November 1998]. I don't mean to gush, but I thought it was a wonderful story. The following day I walked around asking my colleagues if they had heard of you. It was almost as if you had come out of nowhere.

**Michael Knight:** I came from Mobile, although I haven't lived there since high school.

**GC:** "Birdland" is set in a town named Elbow, Alabama. Is Elbow actually based on Elba, a real Alabama town with a similar name?

**MK:** Not specifically. I began writing the story at a time when there had been tremendous floods in Elba. Around the same time I was talking to someone about these floods and she thought I said "Elbow." So that was how I got the town's name for my story.

**GC:** In "Birdland," Elbow is the winter home of a flock of parrots that squawk the residents' angry responses to a losing season on the part of the University of Alabama's football team. How did you get the idea for these birds?

**MK:** I had read an article about parakeets that had gotten loose in Georgia and decided to incorporate them into a story, until I figured out that parakeets can't talk. So I changed them to parrots—talking, racist parrots.

**GC:** My view is that placing a story in the *New Yorker* is "proof" of one's success as an American fiction writer. Did your publication of "Birdland" have an effect of this sort for you?

**MK:** Definitely. The story came out not long after my books, and I think it helped them sell. Subsequently, I had sto-

*Continued on page 8*

# A Cabin Built for Writers

by Sherry Kughn

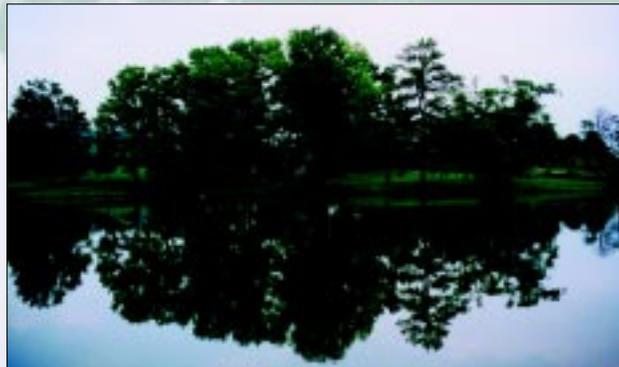


*Roberts worked for thirty-three months on what could be Alabama's first writer's cabin with every detail designed with the writing craft in mind.*

John Roberts built a cabin for writers behind his home on Old Sulphur Springs Road in the community of Wellington in Calhoun County. He built it for writers needing solitude or for groups of writers planning, say, a literary project.

Roberts, a friendly and practical man, is marketing the cabin only through ads in writing magazines and through the recommendations of those who have stayed there. The cabin rents for \$125 a night — less if a visitor decides to stay longer. He recently said with a chuckle that he probably wouldn't live long enough to recoup the more than \$35,000 he spent, but in conversation, it's obvious his goals are more altruistic. He wants to provide for fellow writers what he needs for himself--seclusion, time, or a place to bond with other writers.

Whatever his reasons, Roberts worked for thirty-three months on what could be Alabama's first writer's cabin with every detail designed with the writing craft in mind. He chose



*Seclusion and beauty, the main features of the cabin*

furniture and decor to enhance the serene feeling of an old log cabin. He added the modern conveniences of computer plug-ins, ample desk space, a microwave oven and an indoor bathroom. He left out modern distractions like telephones and televisions, but he will make an exception depending on the writer's desire. "I'll loan my remote phone," he said, "if somebody needs one."

Accommodating to a fault, Roberts said he has already rented the cabin a few times, and he loaned out his fishing pole for use in the adjoining lake. He even fried up the visiting writer's fish and, knowing that storytellers have a penchant for exaggeration, writers never have to worry that he won't confirm their fish tale.

Roberts and his wife, Dianne, own a modern brick

home that fronts the twenty acres they call a horse farm. The only horse in sight, though, is an old fellow that usually hangs around a barn near the lake. The horse appears more of a decorative touch than an excuse to call the place a horse farm. The Robertses call their rolling property



*Roberts is a busy man who pursues writing, manages his small farm and works for Calhoun County's Habitat for Humanity as building superintendent.*



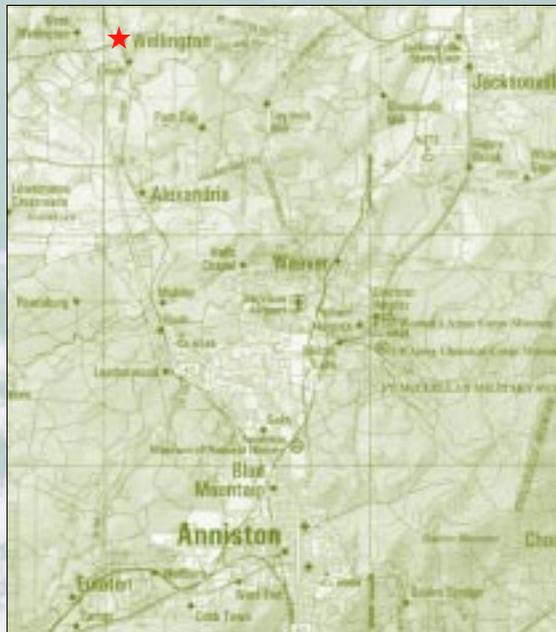
*The wood stove once warmed Mrs. Roberts' ancestral home in Maine. Its owner, her great-great grandfather, Capt. Lincoln Jewett, was a famous sea captain of the six-master schooner, The Eleanor Percy.*

Broken Pines because of the devastation during the Blizzard of '93.

Wellington, which is twelve miles northwest of Anniston, is an appropriate setting for a writer's cabin. Clyde Bolton, longtime *Birmingham News* sports writer and an author, lived there as a youngster. The late Tom Sims, famous creator of "Popeye, the Sailor Man" comic strip and the syndicated column "Ohatchee USA," lived only about eleven miles away.

Possom Trot, where Pulitzer Prize winning journalist Rick Bragg lived, is about seventeen miles away. Could it be the creative spirits flow through this area as abundantly as its streams and creeks?

Roberts is a Hoss Cartright-like fellow who boasts one minute about cutting and hauling his own lumber while in the next breath he wistfully hopes readers like his literary works. He talks steadily during a tour of the cabin on a late summer afternoon. He describes the "bluing" of the lumber, which means allowing it to mildew, and he tells how a wooden panel camouflages the microwave. His cattail brown eyes seem to dance as he shows off the modern bathroom. The six-foot-four, 250-pound construction superintendent for the county's Habitat for Humanity project has a few writing achievements under his tool belt. He supported his family for years working as a technical writer at Anniston Army Depot, from which he's now retired. He's won awards in poetry and short story writing from the Alabama Writer's Conclave and the Birmingham Quill Club. He's even done some writing for a travel magazine.



During a visit at the Roberts' home, Dianne is the quiet counterbalance to her husband's gift of gab. She's from Maine, home to lots of writer's cabins and resorts. She doesn't write, but her beauty and sweet manners are likely inspiration for Roberts' love poems. She is supportive of her husband's zeal about the cabin and helped him haul back from Maine her late parents' old wood stove, which is a decorative centerpiece in the cabin. Dianne smiled while looking toward the trees that screen it from their house. She approves of its setting against a backdrop of Southern pines and hardwoods, one of the choicest spots on their little Ponderosa.

After the cabin tour, Roberts and another visitor talk in the background as the old horse, silhouetted against the lake and a coral sunset, shudders his mane perhaps out of annoyance at the sound of human voices. This place dictates that peace and quiet rule. The writer's cabin may not hold the secret to landing a six-figure contract with a publisher, but it certainly displays a few of the intangible benefits of the writing life.

For more information about visiting John and Diane Roberts' writer's retreat, go online at [Alabama-Writer's-Retreat.com](http://Alabama-Writer's-Retreat.com) or call 256-435-8001. The cabin can accommodate a group of up to six if they don't mind sharing one bathroom.

*Sherry Kughn is executive secretary at the Anniston Star. She has written for the Star in addition to various magazines and journals. She is also co-founder of "Accent on the Author" at the Anniston-Calhoun Public Library.*



*The lumber in the cabin was "blued" by deliberately mildewing the wood and allowing it to dry in the sun. The process gives the lumber a blue-ish, slightly marbled look.*

ries accepted by both *Esquire* and *GQ*. I am certain that having the three stories published in a row made the University of Tennessee look kindly on me.

**GC:** Did you follow any kind of master plan as you pursued your writing career?

**MK:** I always wrote fiction and poetry, and I always had great teachers, but when I was younger writing never seemed to me something I could do for a living. After graduating from Hampden-Sydney College, I was going to apply to law school. Susan Robbins, one of my teachers—who wrote a terrific novel, by the way, *One Way Home*—encouraged me to work on my M.A. at the University of Southern Mississippi. She said it wouldn't do "any damage" for me to accept the offer.

**GC:** And she was right?

**MK:** Yes. At Southern Miss, my writing changed. I think it grew up a lot. There were two stories in my first collection that I wrote there.

**GC:** What do you mean your writing "grew up"?

**MK:** My work got leaner—thanks to the brothers Barthelme—less interested in showing off in prose, less plot-conscious.

**GC:** From Southern Miss, you went on to the University of Virginia, where you received an M.F.A. in creative writing. Did your writing continue growing up there?

**MK:** At Southern Miss, I was still a very imitative writer, stealing from such writers as Raymond Carver, Tobias Wolff, and Richard Ford. While I was, of course, stealing from other writers at UVA (and am still stealing today), I think I began to trust myself more—thanks to George Garrett and Deborah Eisenberg. I began to believe in what I had to say about the world. This was also, I'm sure, a function of growing up a little at each place.

**GC:** You were published while attending graduate school, weren't you?

**MK:** Yes. I won the *Playboy* College Fiction Writing Contest for "Gerald's Monkey," and I also had a story accepted by the *Crescent Review*, which published Madison Smartt Bell's first story. Timing has had a lot to do with my success. I've really been staggeringly lucky.

**GC:** In *Divining Rod*, the primary romantic relationship is an illicit one that ends in tragedy. Your protagonist, Simon, is killed in the opening chapter; then the rest of the book is told as a flashback. Do you feel that the death that frames your novel portrays a moral response to adultery?

**MK:** No, I don't think so. At least there is not a deliberate moral stance in *Divining Rod*. But I do feel that all forms of art are implicitly philosophical. If I hadn't felt that what Simon and Delia were doing was wrong, he might have survived his pages. I have a tremendous amount of sympathy for Simon. In real life I would like to drink a beer with him, rather than condemn him.

**GC:** So you see Simon as a sympathetic character?

**MK:** To a certain extent, I do. There's a respectable element in Simon that understands his actions as wrong. But his feelings for Delia are bigger than his guilt.

**GC:** How long did it take you to complete *Divining Rod*?

**MK:** It took me about two years, maybe a little less. I originally began a very different version as a short story, but it didn't work. Between the short story and the finished product, I wrote an entire draft in first person—that is, in Simon's point of view. But not enough of the story was getting told. I had to rethink the whole thing. Still, the bulk of the writing—or at least the bulk of what got left in the book—took about three or four months.

**GC:** Have you noticed that quite a few of your stories feature characters who are recovering from loss?

**MK:** I suppose so. I know that many of my characters have injuries. It seems to me that a complete character wouldn't be particularly interesting. The best sorts of characters, I think, are defined by their injuries—whether they are internal or external.

**GC:** It seems that nearly every one of the stories in *Dogfight* includes a dog that is integral to the plot. Would you say that dogs are important in your life?

**MK:** Definitely. In a literal sense, I grew up with three dogs when I was a kid. There were always three dogs. My idea of the world has a lot of dogs in it. I think there is a sort of purity about dogs, that lets them function as a kind of guide for people, as an example of something that is very uncomplicated.

**GC:** Can you tell me a little bit about what to expect from *Blackout and Other Stories*?

**MK:** It has eleven stories that are stylistically and thematically different from *Dogfight* and *Divining Rod*. "Birdland" will be included in it. There's also a story set during the Civil War that's kind of a retelling of the Rumpelstiltskin story. Another story is told in first person by a failed writer who is writing about what he wishes he could write. It's a love story.

**GC:** Who are the writers who have most influenced you?

**MK:** First, I need to tell you that if you were to ask me this same question again two days from now, I'd probably give different answers. F. Scott Fitzgerald is the person who made me want to write; I remember wanting to write sentences like he wrote in *The Great Gatsby*. Walker Percy is somebody whose fiction I really love; his characters are people I recognize. And Raymond Carver is the writer I started reading in college. His prose is deceptively simple. He's the writer who made me think I could do it. There's also an Irish writer named William Trevor whom I think is brilliant. His stories are as perfect as Chekhov's.

**GC:** I have to ask this: do you have any stories that are perfect or even close to perfect?

**MK:** No. If my stories were not published in *Dogfight*, I'd still be working on them. My goal is to get my stories to a point where I'm no longer embarrassed by them.

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*Glenda Conway is an associate professor of English at the University of Montevallo specializing in rhetoric and composition. She believes that Michael Knight's "Now You See Her" may be a perfect story.*



PHOTO COURTESY RON COUNCIL

## Martha Andrews Ross

### *Making "Writing Today" Happen*

BY RUTH B. COOK

Each spring on the campus of Birmingham-Southern College, Writing Today presents an impressive program of writers, editors, agents, and others connected to the fascinating world of publishing. Planning is a yearlong process during which Birmingham-Southern's Director of Special Events works closely with Writing Today's volunteer Advisory Committee to invite speakers and plan conference workshops.

From 1989 through her retirement at the end of the 2001 conference, Martha Andrews Ross served as Director of Special Events and venerable keeper of records for Writing Today. Through those years, Alabamians came to know that if they needed to track down a particular writer for a reasonable purpose, chances were good Martha could deliver the needed information.

Her card file became a vast networking record. "You have to figure out who knows whom because these people aren't listed in the phone book. You have to find out where they are teaching or at least where they spoke last. I'd write down addresses and telephone numbers and a reminder of who had recommended whom," says Martha. "I'd write down when they were invited, how I got the name and who else might be connected to them."

She collected her handwritten notes in a variety of ways. "After a person like Algonquin editor Shannon Ravenel spoke at Writing Today, I felt comfortable calling her back about ideas for later conferences. Everyone she recommended was wonderful." Martha also mentions Birmingham-Southern graduate Howell Raines, Executive Editor of *The New York Times* and author of several books, who has helped link the conference to prominent literary figures.

"Often, our speakers wouldn't know exactly how to get in touch with someone they recommended, but they could give me the name of someone who would know. We used any lead we could get—a cousin or whoever. It didn't matter as long as we could establish a link." If that didn't work, Martha checked other conferences and called their coordinators for information. Everything relevant went onto the Rolodex cards.

Not long ago, Martha watched an episode of the television series "Judging Amy" that echoed her feelings exactly. The title character was not happy about her social work files being transferred to a computer. She insisted she could pick up "vibes" from her paper files or glance at a note she once scribbled in a corner and have it tell her something, even a long time later.

Martha could definitely pick up vibes from her well-thumbed three-by-five cards. "I could tell if a number was current by what was written in red pen or pencil, or maybe blue or black ink. So many names were written on the cards, with little notes to myself. It would be difficult to transfer something like that to a computer."

She acknowledges that the Internet has made it easier to locate writers since most now have websites, but she admits she enjoyed the "sleuthing down" part of her job, too. "In the early days, we dealt more directly with the writers, and that was fun, but as conferences became bigger and more popular, everybody got an agent and I had to start dealing with speakers' bureaus."

Over the years, Martha enjoyed talking directly to writers about Writing Today. "I'd make our case that we are a small, literary conference that is not out to use someone's name to make a big bunch of money. I'd explain that our purpose is to have people in the community experience good literature by excellent writers. Most writers responded well to that."

Martha usually took her conversations with well-known writers in stride. "They're just people," she says, "but one time I did freeze. Someone had given us a telephone number in New York for Arthur Miller, and I didn't realize it was his home number when I left a voice message. A few days later, I picked up the phone and this voice said, 'This is Arthur Miller. Did you call me?' For a second or two, I couldn't think of a single thing to say—Arthur Miller is like Shakespeare—for us, in our time, I mean."

Writing Today was not able to coordinate its calendar with Arthur Miller's, but names like Willie Morris, William Styron, John Barth, Gay and Nan Talese, Horton Foote, and Joyce Carol Oates spark a variety of memories for Martha. "Peter Taylor was just the nicest, grandest gentleman ever, and he enjoyed everybody he met," she says. "He was using a cane the year he came, and it was not easy for him to get around, but he was so open to everybody." She laughs about Shelby Foote getting on a bus in Memphis to come to the conference after his plane was grounded in an ice storm, and she describes the late Gwendolyn Brooks as a charming and wonderful woman as well as an excellent poet.

Sometimes Martha had to think creatively on short notice. "There's always a question about airplanes and the weather since our conference is in March or April. One writer didn't want to fly to our part of the country in the spring because of the tornadoes. We considered sending a car for this person or finding somebody in that area to act as chauffeur." Another time a writer's spouse broke a foot, and the

*Continued on page 11*

# Aura: Literature Lives

“Well, who are you? Where are you? How are you?” she asked between lips as red as scarlet begonias, her skin as white as Peruvian flake, and her eyes as luminous as an aquamarine lava lamp.

“I’m Sonny; he’s Dicer. We are here, and he’s depressed and brooding.”

“Going down the road feeling bad?” she asked melodically. “I’m China Cat Sunflower, and karma placed me here to cheer you up. What’s this?”

She turned down the volume a bit and took the tape case off the dashboard.

“John Prine? Never heard of him. Here, I have a tape. This one’s from Hartford, last year’s show.”

She pulled a tape from her jacket pocket and replaced Prine’s ironic mourning. I immediately recognized the Chuck Berry chords introducing the Grateful Dead’s “Alabama Getaway,” although played at a much more mellow pace than the version on *Go to Heaven*.

“Hey, we’re from Alabama,” I said, leaning over the front seat to catch a closer whiff of her patchouli, unnecessary since her scent permeated the van as soon as she stepped in.

“Told you. Karma sent me here, and now I’m going to cheer you up. See, out with the old depressing music and in with the Dead. The Dead will cheer anyone up. That’s their mission—to spread joy throughout the world. See, ‘Alabama Getaway’ for the Alabama Getaway Boys. You’ve gotten away and now you’re on the road. The road’s a good place. I stay on the road about six months out of the year. Just as long as tour lasts. Let’s see...” She rolled her eyes to the ceiling, bit her lower lip, and rolled her tongue over her upper lip as if in a state of extreme calculation. “We began in Tempe on March 25, we had a month off in August, we went out again, and we returned home for two nights in San Rafael on October 30, just in time for Halloween. Uncle Jerry really likes this song. He opened with it in San Rafael. Wow, man, karma. ‘Alabama Getaway’ for a homecoming last year, and now we’re hearing it on my homecoming this year. Far out.”

From Danny Gamble’s forthcoming novel *Trippers and Askers*. The excerpt was recently published in *Aura*.



It is no secret that the modern state of literature has left many cynical as they compare today’s writing to the writing of the past. Many claim that literature is dead, or that literature cannot achieve those things of which it was once capable, transforming eyes and minds as if by magic.

*Aura Literary Arts Review* was founded in 1974 and has, throughout the 28 years of its existence, fought diligently against the cynicism that would claim the death of art. The publication has also become more and more a work blending national and international writers and visual artists with the writers and visual artists of Alabama and the Birmingham area. With each issue the publication finds itself closer to home, publishing local artists such as Danny Gamble, Adam Vines, Chris Screws, and

Tonya Wise.

Of course, it is only through the support of the Alabama State Council on the Arts, the UAB Board of Student Publications, local and statewide advertisers, and the donations of patrons that *Aura* is able to continue in this struggle to find quality art on a local scale.

*Aura* now publishes essays, novel excerpts, plays and screenplays, as well, and submissions are accepted year-round. With the Fall 2002 issue of *Aura* due out this September, we ask any writers and lovers of the arts to consider either submitting to *Aura* or becoming a patron for only \$25. A patronage includes a one-year subscription to the magazine, as well as recognition within the magazine. We also welcome businesses seeking a place to advertise.

For further information, call us at (205) 934-3216, or mail any correspondence to: *Aura Literary Arts Review*, HUC 135, 1400 University Blvd, Birmingham, AL 35294.

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*Christopher Giganti is a student of English at the University of Alabama at Birmingham and Editor-in-Chief of Aura.*

couple had to leave early, so another speaker had to step in.

Diplomacy was also a tremendous part of Martha's job. One writer accepted an invitation to the conference and then called back to decline. "He said he just didn't think he had anything to say, and I wanted to shout, 'Just say anything, or let us ask you questions' or something, but don't back out." She juggled delicate squabbles between writers and headed off a potential crisis or two, always finding the right words and actions to unruffle feathers and maintain the integrity of the conference and the college.

One of the reasons Martha loved working with Writing Today was her love of reading, but ironically, the job kept her so busy she rarely had time for an entire book. "I had to satisfy myself with the *New York Times* book section. People would say to me, 'Oh, you're so well read,' but I wasn't. I didn't have time to read. I scanned the reviews, and I tried to keep up with who was writing what so I could do my job."

After the 2001 conference, Martha retired from this de-

manding position and passed the duties—along with her Rolodex file—to Annie Green, who successfully maneuvered her way through coordinating the most recent conference in April. "I decided I wanted to slow down and have more time with grandchildren and friends and family," says Martha. "Still, the conference is something I loved, and I knew I wanted to stay involved."

Recently, she was asked to become a member of the Advisory Committee and happily accepted the invitation. Now she sees herself as having the best of both worlds. There is time in her life to read more books, and she looks forward to contributing her own well-researched suggestions for conference speakers in the future.

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*Ruth B. Cook is the author of North Across the River: A Civil War Trail of Tears (Crane Hill, 2000) and corporate trainer for Communication Skills Consultants, LLC in Birmingham.*



PHOTO COURTESY KATIE LAMAR SMITH

## Tony Crunk

### *New Domains*

BY KATIE SMITH

All writing explores domain of some sort — be it physical or psychological. Tony Crunk's writing is no exception, except that his explo-

ration takes readers to common places with uncommon subtleties and depths.

Crunk, a poet and children's author who is an assistant professor of English at the University of Alabama-Birmingham, grew up in the small western Kentucky town of Hopkinsville in a secure, closely knit family. It was, he claims, an ordinary and uneventful childhood.

His father drove a "star route" (a privately contracted rural route) for the postal service and his mother worked part-time as a bookkeeper, and both were appreciative of the written word, but not necessarily literary in their own right. Crunk's fondness for writing came from his grandfather, a Southern Baptist preacher with a bent for literature.

"My parents were definitely strong supporters of education, but my grandfather was the one in the family who would sit in a chair and read. I think I got my fascination with reading and writing from him," says Crunk. "He wrote his own sermons and gospel songs, so I guess he was a poet in a sense and he was certainly a creative guy."

Crunk himself first began writing in high school, though he didn't initially pick writing as a career. Philosophy was his un-

dergraduate major at Centre College in Danville, Kentucky, and he went on to the University of Kentucky to earn a master's degree, also in philosophy. But his creative appetites were not fully satisfied by philosophy, so he proceeded to the University of Virginia to earn an MA in literature and an MFA in creative writing.

"Swapping from philosophy to writing was not such a radical change, really. It was more a gradual groping that led me to literature," Crunk explains.

"I really wanted to be a fiction writer and my first real forays into creative writing classes were courses in fiction," he continues. However, fiction didn't come naturally. "I couldn't do it. I'm not wired somehow for it. I just made more progress in poetry than I did in other genres, so I stuck with it. It seemed a better fit."

The fit was obviously excellent. Crunk's work has been published in numerous literary publications including the *Paris Review*, *Poetry Northwest*, *Quarterly West*, and *Virginia Quarterly Review*. And in 1994 Crunk won the Yale Younger Poets competition with his first book of poetry, *Living in the Resurrection*.

MA in hand, he traveled to University of Montana, where he taught for six years. But an affinity for home brought him back to Kentucky in 1998 where he taught at Murray State University for a year and spent another year researching Kentucky history.

*Living in the Resurrection* mixes poetry and short prose and draws on Crunk's Kentucky childhood memories as well as his adult travels. As the book progresses, it chronicles the coming of age process and the friction between longing for home and longing to escape it. It also celebrates simple, ordinary things—from objects to moments—with an eloquence that won the praises of many of Crunk's peers, including James Dickey who wrote the foreword to *Resurrection*.

"The central question of the book is 'How do you grow up?'" says Crunk. "At some point we all realize that the world as we know it is not the only world, and we have to decide how much we want to stay there and how much we want to go out and explore."

Moving from poetry aimed at adults to stories ostensibly for children did come naturally for Crunk. Though he has no children of his own, Crunk notes, "I was a child once myself," and children's books are, for him, "one of those old loves."

"Kids' books are where we all start," he says. *Curious George* sent me off on the path to adulthood."

"I'm visually oriented when I write poetry, so I am really attracted to picture books," he continues. "There are so many different ways you can work the relationship between words and pictures. I really think that in some ways children's books are one of the most creative, vibrant forms of literature we have going these days."

However, Crunk admits that he started his first children's book, *Big Mama*, as a form of escape, or at least a change of pace. "A few years ago I felt the need to do something a bit different from poetry and it had to be something a little more

light-hearted than what I'd been doing," he explains. Operating under what he calls the "seductive" misconception many people have of children's books—that they are easy to write—Crunk set to work on *Big Mama*.

"They're a lot more challenging than they seem, or they are for me," he says. Luckily, his background as a poet helped. "The kind of writing you do for a children's book is in line with poetry because it has to be pared down, minimalistic style. It really was a short step from poetry to kids' books. And it was fun, it was just fun."

Crunk's children's books are certainly fun to read and, like *Resurrection*, draw on his rural, small-town past. *Big Mama* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1999) is based on a woman from Crunk's own childhood whose porch and life were open to all the neighborhood's children. *Grandpa's Overalls* (Orchard Books, 2000) takes a whimsical, humorous look at the adventures of a pair of errant overalls.

Lately Crunk has been shopping around a manuscript that tilts back to an adult audience, one that again combines poetry and prose to chronicle change. The focus of the manuscript is *The Land Between the Lakes*, a National Recreation Area in western Kentucky and northwestern Tennessee.

*Land Between the Lakes* is a strip of land between the Tennessee and Cumberland rivers. The two rivers were dammed, first by the Tennessee Valley Authority and then by the U.S. Corps of Engineers, to form Lakes Kentucky and Barkley. Beginning in the 1930s when the first lake was formed, the law of eminent domain was used to expropriate the land, resulting in the relocation of more than 22,000 people.

"Not many people outside that little corner of the country know about how these people were forcibly removed, and I think the story worth telling and timely because it is still happening all over the country," says Crunk.

While he's looking for a publisher, Crunk continues to work on new poems and children's books, and he is thoroughly enjoying teaching at UAB. He finds working with students especially rewarding and enriching, and he also finds Birmingham and Alabama to be exceptional new domains to explore.

"Alabama's great on about 5,000 different counts," he says. "First of all, it's the South, and it's the first time I've lived in the 'real' South. UAB has been a really rewarding place to teach. The people here are great, Birmingham is a wonderful town, and the landscape is gorgeous."

"But the thing I have been most impressed with is the writing community and its support," he continues. "I've lived for significant periods of time in four different states and visited many others. There is more going on here in terms of support of writers and literature than any place else I've been to or known about. It's an incredibly rich state for writing and the arts and I've been thrilled to discover that. It's a good place."

Perhaps that means Crunk won't be too upset if Alabama's literary community invokes the law of eminent domain and lays claim to his talents for the public good.

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*Katie Lamar Smith is co-author with Dot Moore of Oracle of the Ages: Reflections on the Curious Life of Fortune Teller Mayhale Lancaster (NewSouth, 2001).*



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# Oxford Stroud

## *A novelist in his letters*

BY CAINE CAMPBELL

Oxford Stroud's first novel, *Marbles*, ends with Silas embarking on World War II duty with the Eighth Air Force in England. It was the publisher who ended it there, cutting out a fairly lengthy account of Silas's service as a B-17 bombardier. At the time the author grimly called the excision "major surgery." Following publication of *Marbles*, Oxford began making the substantial remnant into a second novel, *How I Ended World War Two*. His agent Alison Bond shopped it around beginning in late 1993. On March 25, 1994, Oxford wrote to me at my place in Kerr County, Texas, "Here's a letter to Alison from a publisher rejecting the second novel. She and I can't feel very optimistic."

He put the manuscript aside and took a breather by writing a short poem. He wrote me, "Was inspired to do this little poem when I was home [Camden] last month. Maybe a bit too sentimental, and if you take the last line rationally, it's a lie. But like a good metaphysician I'll take the Socratic point of view: that the soul is immortal, has known all, has experienced all; and all this life is—from cradle to grave—is a remembering, a recovering of what is already deeply embedded in our very essence. Keeps the poem from sinking—???"

*Oxford Stroud making music with Bettye Campbell (left), wife Mary Anne, and Caine on guitar*



### VISITATION

On a cool November afternoon  
I drove home alone and  
Parked between the old homeplace  
and the shedding sycamore—  
These two old friends together  
Facing winter once again.  
When in a flurry  
A chilly wind unhinged  
A golden heritage  
From whose host a single leaf  
Dropped kindly by  
To remind me that  
Leaves do fade but  
Golden memories cannot die.

I wrote him back, "‘Visitation’—the poem. Now that is art. It brings to mind the scene in *Cyrano*—he's been stabbed, he's dying. Roxane sits there with him beside a tree. He doesn't tell her that he's dying. And random leaves fall down about them."

In no time Oxford was back to writing prose. His working title for his third novel was simply "the Jody stories." That's how *To Yield a Dream* began.

In April, 1994, he wrote me, "Yes, I'm still grinding along with Jody—but slowly. I'm trying to discover an over-all pattern—design—that makes it into a whole, a real unit. Ain't easy. Reckon it's there at all?"

I wrote back, "Whether to continue to plug away on the



*Caine and Oxford at work (left) and at play (above)*

novel? Charles Dickens: 'Ride on! Rough-shod if need be, smooth-shod if that will do, but ride on!' "

"I'll trudge on," Oxford agreed in his next letter. "What the hell. Once you get old enough, you understand there is really nothing to be afraid of except one's own timidity. To be honest, to be fair, to be kind—okay. But to be timid—that's no fun and a waste of energy. As soon as my gray ashes are in the jar, I'll be remembered not—which is exactly as it should be; is this not *encouraging in itself?*—except for my invention of Kudzu tea and praying God into the Prince Albert can. Plus—perhaps—one other hopeful honor: a newly coined word. Now, really, wouldn't this be nice? When my grandson asks, 'Granddaddy, what did you do in this wide, wonderful world?' I can take down the dictionary and point to *cosmosis* and say, "By God, I made the *Webster's Dictionary!*"

In October, 1994, Oxford was toying with a technique that ultimately he did not adopt. He wrote, "I think I'm going to go with the Spencer point of view. I assume from our chat the other night that you think it will work. Somehow the straight 3rd person leaves me flat. The narrative coming through Spencer [a talking ant] gives a tone of character, and Spencer—though in the background as Jody's conscience—is also a *real* character in the story, which, as a matter of philosophical and human fact is true: the two are inseparable—the thinking-meaning part of the mind and the judgmental, the latter of which the young usually have in an amount of zero, thank God. I figure that the reader, falling under the plain, unpretentious cosmic consciousness of Spencer, will instinctively read with greater depth and attention. Does that make sense?" Although he only briefly considered writing from the ant's point of view, in time Oxford did abandon the third person and completely rewrite in the first person, an older Jody's point of view.

Shortly after New Year's Day, 1997, Bettye and I, returning to Texas from Georgia, dropped in on Oxford and Mary Anne at their place in Auburn just long enough to eat lunch. On the first of February, Oxford wrote, "Glad to see you the other day, but it still seems all very strange, like a little piece of a dream that floats in from way out in left field; you are about to catch it and it goes away." To which I replied, "You made me remember a scene in Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited*. Charles and Julia were soon to depart Brideshead, the old English country place. 'Once before,' Charles said, 'I went away, thinking I should never return.' And Julia answered, 'Perhaps years later, to what's left of it, with what's left of us.' "

In August, 1998, responding to a suggestion from Alison Bond, Oxford began the arduous and tricky job of removing the numerous flashbacks that had characterized the structure of the novel almost from the time he had started writing it. "I'm trying to fix up the beginning as a 'launching pad' into a straight narrative right 'back-up-into' the past *Present*," he wrote. "I keep feeling I'm wasting my time, but what the heck. Putting all the rest in straight chronological time is really a major undertaking."

Then on September 7: "I've got to remember that the main story is Jody and Jo Anne discovering the full impact of

love—which has got to be the most profound, enigmatic, universal (add your own adjectives) of all forces in human nature. It's *in* everything. No wonder the Greeks insisted (unlike the Jews and Christians) on many gods. How—thinking Greek—could anyone be so insane as to hem all these wonderful, terrifying forces up together in one ecclesiastical hut?" And still later: "What I'm doing now is kind of like pulling weeds and transplanting flowers, all of which is good for the garden and hard on the gardener."

The gardener stayed at it. When the novel was completed, early in 2000, I had moved from Texas to Jackson County, Georgia. Our correspondence then turned to the eternally elusive matter of finding a publisher. Even as one press after another declined to take up the novel, the gardener continued working around the edges and borders, seeking always a better word, a turn of phrase that worked to his satisfaction. In the summertime 2001, NewSouth, Inc. Books decided to acquire *To Yield a Dream*. Still Oxford continued to rewrite. As he lay dying and it was time to roll the presses, a few small but absolutely essential changes by the author were incorporated at the last minute. It was also Oxford's last minute, in a manner of speaking, but the crop was at last being laid by.

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*Novelist Caine Campbell writes letters from his home in Georgia. Stroud letters and poem © 2002 by the Stroud Estate; Campbell letters © 2002 by Caine Campbell.*

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## SUE WALKER

### *Renaissance Woman*

BY BREWSTER MILTON ROBERTSON

Poet-playwright-author-editor-academician-lecturer Sue Walker has amassed to her credit an astounding array of published essays, criticism, fiction and poetry,

gracing a veritable Who's Who of literary publishing. Her poetry alone has distinguished the pages of nearly 100 well-respected journals and magazines. The wide-ranging list of her speaking engagements span a landscape stretching from Maine to California.

And, most impressively, as either editor or author, over the past twenty years she has published eight books. Walker's eighth volume, *Blood Must Bear Your Name*, has just been published by Amherst Writers and Artists Press. Revealing and profoundly affecting, the volume brings under the burning glass issues of Walker's adoption and her profound sea change brought on by her breast cancer in 1996. These two seminal aberrations dominate the tapestry of the poet's enormously interesting life.

Ironically, Walker seems unmindful to what extent the initial secrecy of her adoption has roiled the surfaces of her subconscious. "I had an idyllic childhood in a small town like Foley (AL). My father, Louie Brannan, was a lawyer...a politician, really. Like most southern girls, my daddy was my hero. My earliest recollections are of my mother...reading to me," Walker notes. In sharp contradiction, her lyric, "*Mama Said*," offers the insight: "Mama died without ever / revealing my birth mother's name."

When Walker was perhaps six or seven, the issue finally came to light while she was playing Monopoly with a playmate. "She became furious when I acquired ownership of both Boardwalk and Park Place. She stomped off sneering, 'You think you're so smart, you don't even know you're adopted.'" Confronting her mother, Walker was "too smart to buy" her mother's lame cliché that she (Walker) had been 'chosen,' rather than a mere accident of birth.

Walker recalls that as a child she loved the sound of poetry: "I loved to hear it. When I had my tonsils taken out, my mother read Robert Louis Stevenson's 'I Have A Little Shadow' over and over and over. It kept me from crying. After I learned to write, I liked to write little rhyming things...like childish apologies when I was bad. These were awful...like: 'Please don't be mad, I'm sorry I was so bad.'" She adds, wryly, "I'm afraid that hardly qualifies as a 'burning bush' experience."

Although she continued to write poetry, it was her school-teacher grandmother taking her to school when she was hardly more than a baby that Walker credits with influencing

her to enter the University of Alabama at Tuscaloosa to become a teacher.

"I had been editor of my high school paper, so writing wasn't really anything new," but her interest in poetry and writing continued while she was still an undergrad.

After graduation, Walker taught school for a year in Foley. "I tried to get into grad school at Tulane in Literature. They required both German and French and wouldn't admit me in Lit because I only had Spanish. So I got an M.Ed. while studying for my French exam—they finally admitted me to the M.A. program in English Lit."

Working on her Ph.D., Walker was writing poetry, which her creative writing professor would read. "He would tell me, 'finish all this Ph.D. crap and write.' Once, he told me that he had taught Shirley Ann Grau and that I was better than she was. I thought 'Yeah, sure!' Around campus, he had quite a reputation...I thought he just liked my legs."

It was during grad school at Tulane that Sue Brannan met a British expatriate physician, Ron Walker. Married in 1973, they moved to Tampa when Ron took a position there.

"I finished my dissertation (*Love, Music, & Time in the Fiction of Carson McCullers*) in Tampa. All through this, I still wrote poetry, but it wasn't front and center. And—a surprise addition to Wesley, my son from my earlier marriage—in Tampa, I gave birth to our twin sons, James and Jason! My sons are the finest chapters I've produced!"

In 1979, Ron and Sue moved back to Mobile because Sue's father was having carotid artery surgery and her mother was having surgery for a tumor in her stomach. "As an only child, there just wasn't anyone else. They had taken care of me, I wanted to take care of them."

At the time, with no positions open at the University of South Alabama, Sue took a job as editor of the *Alabama Sun*, a regional magazine, and loved it. Then a job at the University of South Alabama opened up in 1980.

"I simply couldn't handle two full-time jobs—so I resigned from the magazine. I soon realized I had lucked into something that I did not want to give up—I really missed the editing. So, in 1981, I started a small journal, *Negative Capability*—I was able to handle this and still teach. Over the years, the journal has grown...one year it was ranked number three by *Writer's Digest*."

The journal led to publishing books and the beginning of Negative Capability Press. "We've published a couple dozen books—mostly poetry, but also a book of essays on Marge Piercy, which is still selling well. There is also an anthology on words and healing that won the Gorgas Award from the Alabama State Medical Association." Walker beams with pride. "I edited this book with Rosalyn Roffman from Indiana

University. My parents had just died and I didn't know how to deal with death, how to make something positive out of it...so I put out a call for papers, asking: 'Is there a connection between healing and words?' My initial idea was that this was to be an issue of *Negative Capability*, but the book grew into its own thing.

Walker's bout with cancer provided a rude wake-up call to her mortality. In the poem *Letter From a Foreign Place* from the new collection, *Blood Must Bear Your Name*, she eloquently expresses outrage at her illness.

And I hate the lingo  
 DX=diagnosis  
 BC=breast cancer  
 IDC=invasive ductal carcinoma  
 MRM=modified radical mastectomy  
 mets=metastases, not a baseball team  
 I can live without a breast,  
 adjust to mutilation, a prosthesis,  
 but I can't conjugate the verb "to die,"  
 in a language without the word  
 tomorrow.

I refuse to dwell in this place.

During her post-op therapy, Walker rethought her priorities. "After six months I finally stopped my chemo. This was not false bravado...I certainly had no intention of being foolhardy"—she hastens to point out that she had completed all but one treatment—"but the chemo really messed up my head...gave me this weird dyslexia...scrambled the patterns of putting words to paper...I just

couldn't endure not being able to read or write."

After the cancer treatments, she decided it was time to make some changes.

"I decided I needed to concentrate on my own writing. So, after 20 years, I put the journal *Negative Capability* into hibernation for a while."

Shifting her priority to writing, Walker has currently under submission to LSU Press a proposal to do a book entitled: "*The Chiastic Deep Ecology of James Dickey*."

Recently she negotiated a summer sabbatical to work on a Mobile/Tensaw Delta coffeetable book for the University of Alabama Press.

Then there is her secret love, a historical novel in progress under the working title *Shades of Saffron*. The Saffron Knight was an old-time metaphor for yellow fever. Set during the epidemic in Mobile in 1878, the novel's narrator is a boy of thirteen. His mother recently dead of fever, his physician father is working with Dr. Josiah Nott (a real person) to combat the fever.

Still questing for new frontiers, Walker recently began offering services as a developmental editor, assisting writers in preparing manuscripts for submission. "I'm too busy to think of slowing down. I fantasize myself a post-modern reincarnation of Octavia LeVert or Hilda Doolittle (the F. Scott Fitzgerald Parisian expatriate, once married to Ezra Pound). I still have a lot of living and writing to do." She flashes her best Octavia-Hilda-Sue Mona Lisa smile.

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*Brewster Milton Robertson divides his time between Beaufort, South Carolina, Apopka, Florida, and Bay Minette, Alabama. His reviews have appeared in Publishers Weekly and many other journals.*



## Trudier Harris-Lopez

*Eugene Current-Garcia Award 2002*

BY JANICE LASSETER

Trudier Harris-Lopez, the 2001-02 winner of the Eugene Current-Garcia award, is a scholar of international renown. The J. Carlyle Sitterson Pro-

fessor of English at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, Harris-Lopez was born in Mantua, Alabama, the sixth of nine children. After the death of her father when she was six years old, the family moved to Tuscaloosa. She graduated

*magna cum laude* in English from Stillman College in 1969. It took her only four years to earn her Ph.D. in American literature and folklore from Ohio State University. She has professed English at the College of William and Mary, the University of Arkansas, Emory University, Ohio State University, and has twice been a Visiting Professor in Poland. She began her work at Chapel Hill in 1979.

Her scholarship is prolific. She has published six books (two more are forthcoming), edited five books (with two more forthcoming), co-edited eight more, contributed twenty-eight books to scholarly collections, and has twenty-

six journal articles in print. The volume of her scholarship matches its exceptional quality. It is difficult to exaggerate the importance of her work in African and Afro-American literary scholarship as well as her assessments of the old guard. She began her career with a dissertation on folklore in Ralph Ellison, Charles Chesnutt and Jean Toomer. Since then her writing about black women has forged a new understanding of the way black women are portrayed in the writings of both male and female writers. She has also given us new insights into the writings of James Baldwin, Margaret Walker, Alice Childress, Alice Walker, Zora Neale Hurston, and Gloria Naylor, to name a few.

Of much importance are the reference monographs she has edited which make available the rich resources of African and Afro-American literature to scholars, students, and the general public. Some of these are *Afro-American Writers after 1955*; *Afro-American Poets since 1955*; *The Oxford Companion to African American Literature*; and *Afro American Writers From the Harlem Renaissance*.

Harris-Lopez has won numerous awards not only for scholarship but also for teaching. Largely because of the plethora of scholarship she has contributed to American letters, she has been awarded eight scholarly awards and/or fellowships in addition to the Eugene Current-Garcia Prize. She has also won two teaching awards. Her reputation as a scholar/teacher is one of the reasons Harris-Lopez was included in *Notable Black American Women*. The biographical essay in that book reveals Harris-Lopez's continuing input into international education. She spent a recent summer touring Kenya as part of a fact-finding study mission with a group of educators.

As a part of the ACETA Steering Committee, I reviewed her nomination for the Eugene Current-Garcia award. In a recent interview, she exemplifies the attributes for which the award was created.

How do your roots in Alabama affect your scholarship?

I am constantly aware of my roots, that is, what it means to be the daughter of cotton farmers in Alabama. I am always reminded of how far that *seems* away from academia and the implicit obligation it carries for me to do well. I contemplate opportunities that were and were not available to my family in Alabama and know that everything I do is in some way inspired by my relationships to them. My parents, with their second- (father) and tenth- (mother) grade educations, are ever my inspiration, especially my mother, who, after my father's death, was left to raise seven small children alone (my two older sisters were out of the home by then). Everything I do, I do to honor them.

How do you perceive your role as a scholar?

One of my roles as a scholar is to encourage consideration of works that do not usually get included in classroom teachings or critical writings, such as works by Alice Childress or Carlene Hatcher Polite. More generally, I am interested in offering interpretations of works or ways of reading them that others may not have considered. I strive to offer new interpretive paths, if you will, down

which future travelers can go in considering various literary works.

What do you believe is the place of scholarship in the literary arts? Why do we need it?

Scholarship encourages dialogue about literary works and inspires sustained focus on various literary works; it is an essential part of the creation of a body of knowledge about creativity and the function of imagination in worlds that are often too mired in the practical and the mundane. Scholarship can obviously enhance an author's reputation as well as make less accessible authors more generally available to readers who would like an entree into their works. Scholars serve as interpreters and guides and can offer, in their best manifestations, passage into the life of the mind.

What do you make of Alabama's influence on Ralph Ellison's writing?

I think we can safely say that without Tuskegee Institute and Ellison's experience there a significant portion of *Invisible Man* would have been missing. Ellison's experience at that black college was crucial to his conceptualization of African American leadership in the 1940s as well as to his understanding of the rituals and traditions from which black people needed to extricate themselves in order to participate fully in American democracy.

Of all the writers you've written about, whom do you find most intriguing?

I always say that writing about James Baldwin is comparable to catching a tiger by the tail. No matter what I say about his works, there always seems to be more to be said. I can never comfortably turn him loose, so I return to him again and again. I find Raymond Andrews, a Georgia writer, equally intriguing. He published wonderful novels, such as *Appalachee Red* and *Rosiebelle Lee Wildcat Tennessee*, that vividly evoke the African American folk tradition. His novels fascinate me as a folklorist, and I am constantly challenged to articulate the connections between orality and writing that are the mark of his creativity. I am also intrigued by Toni Morrison, Zora Neale Hurston, Alice Walker, Henry Dumas, and Randall Kenan, all mostly southern writers. I treat all of them in my new collection of essays, *South of Tradition*, which will be coming out of the University of Georgia Press in the fall of 2002. In the introduction to that volume, I talk about the particular "holds" that some of these writers have had on me over the years.

Her sense of the scholar's role in this interview illustrates how ably she fulfills the purpose of the Eugene Current-Garcia Award, which is to recognize and reward women and men of letters who have distinguished themselves by scholarly reflection and writing. The respect of her peers in the academic community is clear. Her example signals to the citizenry at large the lasting importance of the pursuit of knowledge and of the contribution of literature to the culture.

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*Janice Milner Lasseter is professor of English at Samford University and past-president of the ACETA.*

# Reviews



## Alabama Architecture: Looking at Building and Place

by Alice Meriwether Bowsher  
Photographs by M. Lewis Kennedy, Jr.

University of Alabama Press, 2001  
\$39.95 Cloth

What do Dreamland barbecue, Gaylesville United Methodist Church, the Lineville Water Tower, Fort Morgan, and the AmSouth-Sonat Tower in Birmingham have in common? All are beautifully represented and given new meaning and appreciation in Alice Bowsher's unique and intriguing book, *Alabama Architecture: Looking at Building and Place*. This book, published in cooperation with the Alabama Architectural Foundation, seeks to "illustrate those buildings and places that have influenced our lives by their purpose and design." It succeeds in not only illustrating those places but also in bringing them to life.

The text is richly illustrated by photographer Lewis Kennedy's images. Thanks to the generous donations of many groups and individuals, this book has the look and feel of a much more expensive book than the \$39.95 list price. The color photographs are vibrant and masterful, conveying a real sense of both the architecture and the place that we call Alabama. Kennedy's photographs have a way of making you look at familiar places with new eyes and wanting to see new places with your own eyes.

Bowsher's organization of the book is one of its key strengths. She has structured the book in ten chapters representing the "language of architecture." Headings such as place, balance, light, proportion, and context provide new ways of looking at Alabama buildings. Each chapter has a short introduction to the architectural theme,

which gives way to the beautiful photographs with short, but descriptive, captions. Bowsher understands that the architecture can speak for itself without overpowering historical or technical detail.

Bowsher suggests three ways in which the book can be read: one can simply look at the pictures, read the short introductory text for each chapter and the picture captions, or use it as a springboard to visit the places and buildings depicted. Each of these ways will leave the reader with the "sense of discovery" that Bowsher intended. This is a book for all who love and appreciate the diversity of the Alabama experience.

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*Debbie Pendleton is assistant director of Public Services at the Alabama Department of Archives & History in Montgomery.*

## Espresso Evenings

by Edward M. George

Court Street Press, 2002  
\$15.95 Paperback

Whether prose or poetry, the truism applies: what makes writing compelling is concrete detail. Edward M. George's second book of poetry, *Espresso Evenings*, won me over when I got to his "Grandpa's Guitar":

Just an old Silvertone 6-string  
acoustic  
probably mail-ordered from  
a Sears Roebuck catalog.

My father's guitar was a 6-string Silvertone from Sears, too. Now we're talking, Ed. Details like this involve the reader in a shared reality. Many of the poems in this volume come to life with such sensory details, from the "pale young bearded men" in the title poem to "The smell of stale grease and dried sweat" in the penultimate "Jail." We recognize "the heavy double doors" and "oiled oak floors" of old school buildings, and childish first kisses "that tasted like Juicy Fruit." Such details draw us into the bittersweet nostalgia of "places that I best not visit too often." Visiting them with George is a pleasure.

George is at his best when writing of the personal and real. The strongest section of the book is the first, "Memories." In "The Blizzard," literally concrete details combine with beautifully appropriate simile to add pleasing surprise to the comfortingly familiar. Two country boys caught hitchhiking in a freak Mississippi snowstorm help their savior to maintain traction on the slippery road by weighting his trunk with

... bricks  
and concrete blocks until  
the Chevy sat like a mother hen  
its tail feathers scraping the snow.

The Chevy hatches it riders as planned near the Helena Bridge, and they make their way up to Memphis

and back to Alabama, where the narrator wakes with his cheek "pressed hard against a seam in the plastic seat protector" and knows he's home by "the shape of the tree limb hanging above us." Chickens, plastic seat protectors, and tree limbs let us know where we are, too.

Working within a familiar context in this first section, George takes some poetic chances that enrich his poetry. The slant rhyme of *greens* with *tea* in "Little Joe's Café," for example, breaks up the quatrains of rhymed couplets enough to escape monotony and make the "fatback bacon and a mess of greens" real, not just generic soul food. In the free verse of "A Southern Boy in Boston," another slant rhyme of *friends* and *sex* opens up interesting possibilities, which the speaker pursues. In "Labor Day Trip," alliteration emphasizes the contrast between the "desperate drunkenness" of four young buddies and the "three dozen wide-eyed white-hairs" they inadvertently join.

The second section, "Musings," and the third, "Observations," experiment with ideas—sometimes needing more development, as in the too brief (and slightly self-important) "The Messenger" and "The Bicycle Ride." Many of the experiments are successful, though. The "Musings" section contains the fine poem "Grandpa's Guitar." In other experimental forays, we see the influence of e. e cummings in eccentric capitalizations and meaningful layouts. Another influence, perhaps, from A. E. Housman's *A Shropshire Lad*—or maybe Frank Sinatra's "It Was a Very Good Year"—shows up in "The Girl from Mississippi" in the truncated two-line endings to the stanzas and closing lament.

The last section of the book is "Observations." When George shows us, as he does in the wonderful "At the Pink Pussycat," his observations strike home. The speaker in this poem reveals his own feelings through actions as he observes "a tad too much flesh" on a stripper who, he admits, nevertheless "drew me in" by her attitude. Finally, he must

"slowly turn and look around at every other everyman sitting in the neon glow." He doesn't have to belabor anyone else's feelings when he concludes that "the wonder of it all made me marvel." The wonder lies in the magic of the chubby, bruised dancer's appeal to a roomful of men, and George captures it for us.

*Espresso Evenings*, although uneven, shows that Ed George is growing as a writer, out of comfortable, familiar baby boom resonances. I look forward to his third volume of poems. It should delight readers with a fully developed idiosyncratic personal voice speaking recognizable truths.

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*Karen Pirnie is a free-lance writer who also teaches English at Auburn University Montgomery.*

## Dances in Straw with a Two-Headed Calf

by Bonnie Roberts

Elk River Review Press, 2002  
\$14 Paperback

In the Preface to *Dances in Straw with a Two-Headed Calf*, Bonnie Roberts says that her collection of poems is "about love that connects and heals," even love that is sometimes designated a "failure." It is a love that is a harmonious engagement with the world, and Roberts shows us how to live in a participatory relationship, one that connects man and nature, a woman's magnificent body, a sheltering tree, and a two-headed calf that is dancing.

The initial poem of the book artfully links van Gogh and Jesus, who "do not condemn / women's faces," but another face, that of Mother Earth, is conjoined in the poet's lived experience of being. The locos of knowledge in Roberts' rendering the world is the human body, and she finds grace in its vulnerabilities, its sufferings, even its "dis-ease."

Roberts knows that in order to overcome suffering, it is necessary to *face*

existing circumstances, whatever they may be, and to enter into a communion with nature. "In the Tear's Salt," the poet sees that "[w]e are fingerless crests in God's innumerable body." "[W]e embrace, as grains of salt afloat / or clumps, loosening from the sea floor" and "enter the dark shine of the non-poisonous, / snake-eyed phosphorous, / awakened by the albino underside of a wading foot." By interacting with all that surrounds us, we grow beyond the narrowness of our human vision, awake to ourselves, and know the power of our embodied terrain.

Roberts does not simply speak *about* the world; she addresses it and awaits its response. The cries of the earth intertwine with human speech as the poet interprets the more-than-human language of the universe. In "Shacks on Highway 231, Along the High Red Clay Embankments," she says that "words are for those who never wrote a word / or sang a song." They are for everything and everyone "who simply lived."

In conjoining man and nature, Roberts' poetry touches the sublime. Her lines become life and articulate both the external and the internal, everything that can be seen and felt and known, and she holds it open to view. "You and I long to heal, give succor, / love in purity, even when it stings or aches" she writes in "Unmitigated Oak Leaves and Snakes."

Roberts unravels the "coded universe" in the poignant and powerful third section of the book. In "Who Will Father Me Now," she says:

My father died.  
But I float on the coffin lid he made  
for me  
and sharks do not bite, out of awe  
or lack of hunger,  
and sea hawks do not tear me apart,  
his orphan child  
on her way  
to the starry archipelagoes  
where I rise and fall on waves of  
the coded universe,  
where a whale's skeleton seems to be

the hull of a great ship,  
and malady is health,  
and a coffin is life-buoy.

The human voice, as well as the voices of bears, wind, and waves, are at one with an animate universe, and when we are alive in and to the world we inhabit, we enter into a loving relationship with every aspect of being.

*Dances in Straw with a Two-Headed Calf* is no less than a communion. Not for the sheer beauty of its poetry alone is this book a masterpiece; it instructs us in the art of living well.

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*Sue Walker is a poet, fiction writer, and critic. She is chair of the English Department at the University of South Alabama where she teaches literature and poetry writing.*

## Mississippi Delta Women in Prism

Poems  
by Claire Feild

Court Street Press, 2001  
\$ 15.95 Paper

Feild's premier book of poetry offers a pastiche of memories of the South, some of them bygone and others which still linger today, some heartwarming and others absolutely chilling. Feild's poems examine the natural beauty of the Southern landscape as well as the unnatural ugliness that the pall of racism and strict sexist gender roles have cast over both its landscape and people.

In the poem "The Sacred Rule," Feild illustrates the dilemma of the proper Southern lady, who is brought up to be economically dependent on a husband, in a culture where "the slightest deviation from its sacred rule of/subordination would ignite a role war." And not only the culture eschews change but also the enculturated who support the status quo, like the lady in "Chemise" who "reinforced her straight-laced/thinking each day by

wearing chemise/dresses."

Social strictures imprison (and "im-prism") not only the women who would be called "proper ladies" but also the women who are black in a white-empowered world. Feild avoids the trap of didacticism in her poems by focusing from the point of view of the women and their actions within and despite stifling social rules. In "Cream of the Crop," a young girl throws aside the sack dress that marked her days and "began to follow the cuffed edge/of a desire that she had pressed down so long that it/shined before her eyes." She puts on nail polish, a "town dress," and boldly sits in class at the white elementary school until the police come, just as they also come in "Sittin' Back" when a woman dares to move to the front of the bus, where she isn't "allowed" to be.

Although the poems' syntactical structure tends to be more prosaic than poetic, this lends itself to a more comfortable narrative line with which to tell these stories. Even for those readers who may feel lost with contemporary poetry, this important work clearly speaks its mind.

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*Dr. Susan Swartout, professor of English at Southeast Missouri State University, is editor of Big Muddy: A Journal of the Mississippi River Valley. This review is reprinted from Big Muddy by permission.*

## Fall Love

by Anne Whitehouse

Xlibris Corporation  
[www.Xlibris.com](http://www.Xlibris.com)  
2001

Many readers may not recognize that Anne Whitehouse is a Southern writer. Well, Southern in that she was born and grew up in Birmingham. Most of her adult life has been spent in New York City, where she has pursued her career as a journalist, essayist and, primarily, a

poet. Author of *The Surveyor's Hand*, a collection of poems, Whitehouse has ventured into the fiction genre with *Fall Love*, her first novel.

The story is set in late 1980, takes place over a period of five months, and explores the lives of four young people, all in their twenties, who live in New York City. Althea Montgomery, Jeanne Mann, Paul Carmichael, and Bryce, his lover, share apartments and beds, friends and social circles, careers and calamities, disappointments and ambitions. Through a convoluted series of coincidences and happenstance, Whitehouse manages to weave an interlocking web among the disparate lives and natures of these four characters—all who aspire to things they cannot identify and search for things they seemingly do not understand.

Althea and Paul, she a “plastic artist” and he a dancer, find each other quite by chance in Riverside Park and on the streets of the neighborhood where they live. Jeanne and Bryce have careers they have fallen into, more by their choice to live in New York than by goal or definition: Jeanne in theater management, Bryce in law. Their lives become entwined when Althea impulsively invites her new acquaintance Paul to join her for a late summer holiday on Block Island, at a retreat she has rented to work on her paintings. She finds herself deeply interested in Paul, “although the evidence told her that he preferred his own sex.” She extends her invitation only to Paul and not to his companion, Bryce who, coincidentally, is out of town. Paul, hurt because of Bryce’s sudden return to his home in Meridian, Mississippi, accepts Althea’s offer. They are joined soon on the island by Althea’s lifelong friend, Jeanne, and thus begins the journey that puts these four characters on a collision course toward something, though no one seems aware of where, or why, they are going.

Often by coincidence, perhaps by fate, these characters are hurled together—by the beauty of a strange face discovered in a crowded theater

audience, by the interlocking of eyes and brush of a shoulder in a crowded subway car, by a lost letter and unanswered phone call, by the slip of a hoist on a city street—into a rushing tumult of emotions. Their passions, artistic and sexual, thrust them into tempestuous relationships that challenge their expectations of themselves and of others. Althea’s need for solitude compels her to retreat to Block Island for a respite from her teaching duties in a public school and for the settings in nature she hopes to capture in her art; her sexual desires propel her into the arms of Paul immediately upon his arrival. Paul’s search for his artistic identity and for a sense of fulfillment pushes him into choreographing his own dance and into the field of critics’ arrows; his anger at Bryce’s sudden leaving catapults him into bed with, first, Althea, and then with Althea and Jeanne together. Jeanne, seemingly the most traditional and controlled of the characters, allows her adulation of Althea to disguise her own identity and places her in a compromising role as Althea’s friend and her rival; she, in turn, seems to find her true self when she repels her inhibitions and opens herself to experiences outside Althea’s realm. Bryce, who had escaped the South and his family, goes home for the most sacred of Southern rituals—to attend the lingering death of his favorite uncle—and discovers again the reassuring, and painful, bonds of family.

In the novel, Whitehouse sets up a classic scenario of the travail of a fledgling artist who seeks a critique of his work in a new form by his peers. Paul, driven by his creative urge to be creator and choreographer of his own dance, asks his fellow dancers and their director to preview his solo dance, *Savage Landscape*. The dancers’ euphemisms of “interesting,” “unusual,” “different” demolish Paul, but Kurt Matthews, their director, reassures him:

“I wouldn’t say I really like it yet,” Kurt replied, . . . , “but I like what it could be. In fact, parts of it plain annoy me, but I recognize that my resistance may in fact be a sign of the dance’s

worth. . . . What I admire most is your willingness to risk gracelessness, and that you succeed is a kind of grace.”

Readers may have the same response to Whitehouse’s first venture into the novel form: parts of it, especially the heavy reliance on coincidence to propel and then to resolve the plot, may “plain annoy” them. However, there will be no doubt that her poetic handling of language and of sensuous detail is superb: in her descriptions, especially, of the intimacies of lovemaking, she is at the same time graphic and subtle, provocative and sensitive; in her portrayal of the unspoken emotions—about death and its aftermath, of fear, of pride, and of hurt—she conveys powerfully the cruel effects of all those coincidences of life. Anne Whitehouse’s *Fall Love* is to be admired for her willingness to take these risks.

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*Elaine Hughes is professor of English at the University of Montevallo.*

## From the Briarpatch File

On Context, Procedure, and American Identity  
By Albert Murray

Pantheon Books, 2001  
\$22 Hardback

Albert Murray was born in Nokomis, Alabama, in 1916, and while a sense of place is important in his writings, Murray has spent most of his life trying to transcend his geographical location. As Murray comments in an interview conducted by Charles H. Rowell in 1997, “I was already the type of person, from the third grade on, who thought of books and bulletin boards as windows on the world.” It was the great works of Western literary tradition that allowed Murray to rise above the regionalism and Jim Crow South. “I was beating that,” Murray comments. “I was better than that. I wasn’t their conceptions of me, I was my conception of me. And my conception of me came

from great books of the world. That is what I thought of human possibility, not what some dumb-assed white guy thought a colored guy should be doing and feeling.”

It is this tenacious assertion of the Western literary tradition that puts Murray out of step with many other contemporary intellectuals. At a time when the postmodern onslaught against universalism, Eurocentrism, and the centrality of the Western literary canon continues and the politics of difference and multiculturalism prevail, Murray is unashamedly culturally cosmopolitan and thoroughly American. “As for myself, I don’t like being called ‘black American,’ because it so often implies *less American*. And I absolutely despise being called ‘African-American.’ I am not African. I am an American. And I still can’t believe my ears when I hear educated people calling themselves a *minority-something...*”(emphasis in original).

Murray has no time for the cherishing of cultural difference or the kind of divisiveness created by identity politics. Rather than preaching the multiculturalist doctrine of difference, Murray reasserts the value of the classic liberal education with its emphasis on universal values and themes. “What I’m playing with is what Malraux meant when he talked about a ‘museum without walls.’ Now we live in terms of *all art*, do you see what I mean? *All art*. That’s what Malraux meant when he talked about a museum without walls, but not what people in colleges mean when they talk about multiculturalism these days. That kills me.”

Murray is interested in the best and brightest from anywhere and everywhere, and he found that writers like “Langston Hughes or anybody else from the so-called Harlem Renaissance” were not “in the same league as such world-class twentieth-century writers as James Joyce, Thomas Mann, Marcel Proust, Andre Malraux, Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner, T.S. Eliot, W.B. Yeats, and Erza Pound, among others.” He wanted “to produce

the literary equivalent of the world-class fine art music” of Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, Jelly Roll Morton, Count Basie, Lester Young, Dizzy Gillespie, and Charlie Parker whose music “had the universal appeal, impact, profundity, and endurance of fine art.”

*From the Briarpatch File* is a timely restatement of Murray’s thought and writing especially as debates of multiculturalism and the Western canon still swirl around a number of college campuses.

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*Grant Pheloung teaches English at Auburn University.*

## From the Mountain, From the Valley

by James Still

University Press of Kentucky, 2002  
\$20 Hardback

The late James Still’s final published book, *From the Mountain, From the Valley*, shines with his homespun humanity and eastern Kentucky roots.

Born in the redhill country of central Alabama, Still was a resident of Knott County, Kentucky, for more than seven decades. He was first attracted to the area during the Agrarian Movement, becoming active in college student groups that contributed money, goods, and moral support to striking miners. After his permanent move to the area in 1931, Still was offered a library job at the Hindman Settlement School. Despite the fact that his salary for the first three years averaged six cents a day, he remained at the job for many years, carrying books by foot and horseback to the natives of east Kentucky.

The author of many books, including the masterful novel, *River of Earth*, Still was named the first poet laureate of Kentucky and received two Guggenheim Fellowships and numerous awards and honors.

In his autobiographical essay from the book, “A Man Singing to Himself,”

Still speaks about growing up in rural Alabama and his eventual move to Kentucky. He traces his childhood working alongside his nine siblings among the cotton, sugarcane, and cornfields of Chambers County, Alabama.

Recalling his arrival in Hindman, a small village with a population of 200, Still recounts how he could cash a check at 4 a.m. from the early rising cashier and pick up mail at midnight from the insomniac postmaster. The wordsmith relates that some of his creative ideas sprang forth from actual articles in the local newspaper, *The Troublesome Creek Times*, or from a simple remark at a country store.

The collected verses of this volume are presented in chronological order, allowing the reader to trace the evolution of Still’s voice and style. Music, coalminers, folks striving to make ends meet, and the wonder of nature illuminate its pages.

In “Dulcimer” the reader can hear the melody flowing from the instrument. “Fiddlers Convention on Troublesome Creek” mesmerizes with stanzas such as “O fiddle the moon and the star-tails flying,/Fiddle the dead in their earth-long sleep,/Sing the day breaking, the sun-ball dying,/Fiddle me to laughter, fiddle me to weep.”

“Coal Town” conjures up images of rock, darkness, and dampness while the “Unemployed Coal Miner” has nothing to do with his hands but place them in his worn pockets. As one group of excavators sleeps in the darkness another strikes away at the coal and the slate in the haunting “Night in the Coal Camps.”

“On Troublesome Creek” is a shining gem within this collection. The author writes,

These people here were born for  
mottled hills,/The narrow trails, the  
creek-bed roads/Quilting dark ridges  
and pennyroyal valleys./Where  
Troublesome gathers forked waters/  
Into one strong body they have come  
down/To push the hills away, to  
shape sawn timbers/Into home-seats,

to heap firm stones into chimneys,  
And rear their young before splendid  
fires./And Troublesome floods with  
spring's dark waters,/Dries to sand  
in summer, and purple martins/Flock  
to poled gourds, molting stained  
feathers/Which fall like blackened  
snow on clapboard roofs/Of hill  
townsmen biding eternal time./And  
men here wait as mountains long  
have waited.

James Still graced the lives of many who knew him during his earthly life. His eye and ear for his rural surroundings make *From the Mountain From the Valley* a fitting legacy.

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*Elisabeth A. Doehring is a native Alabamian and a freelance writer living in Mobile. She serves as book editor/reviewer for The Troublesome Creek Times in Hindman, Kentucky, and is a member of the National Book Critics and Southern Book Critics Circle.*

## The Turning Hour

by Shelley Fraser Mickle

River City Press, 2001  
\$24.95 Hardback

Shelley Fraser Mickle's third novel, *The Turning Hour*, is a haunting story of an attempted teen suicide told from two points of view: Bergin Talbot and her mother, Leslie. Bergin, an excellent student and outstanding athlete, shocks her entire family when she overdoses on aspirin in an attempted suicide. Bergin's stepbrother, Dylan, fortunately arrives at the house in time to call the paramedics and save Bergin's life. This is only the beginning.

The story unfolds in chapters that alternate between Bergin's point of view and Leslie's point of view. In the first few chapters of the novel, we are introduced to Bergin in her own unique voice. Bergin tells about her suicide attempt. Then her mother comes in with her own story of pain. We soon learn that Leslie is the child of an alcoholic

mother and court judge father, whom she idolizes. Leslie is divorced from Bergin's father and is now married to a man named Jack. Jack and Leslie live on a farm with their twins, Maggie and Kirk. On the other side of the family, Bergin's father lives with Bergin's talkative stepmother and Dylan, her son.

Despite having such a large family, Bergin just can't seem to get comfortable anywhere. While there is a lot going on in this story, Bergin's reasoning for suicide is clearly identified as the focus. The more Bergin and Leslie tell of themselves, the more the reader can relate to them both. The reader understands Leslie's urgency, her need to know why, and sympathizes that she wanted to just force it out of Bergin. The reader also understands what little Bergin will share of herself and her reasons. The reader sympathizes with her losses and the angst that comes with high school and growing up.

Shelley Fraser Mickle said in an interview with Teenreads.com that a woman she met on the beach inspired this story. The woman told her that she had read all of Mickle's novels and felt like she'd known her all her life. The woman then proceeded to tell Mickle her experience with suicide. The woman's child had attempted suicide and failed. Throughout treatment and recovery, the woman said that even though this time was the darkest time her family had known, it turned out to be the most enriching experience of her life. When Mickle told a friend of her plan to write a novel on recovery from attempted teen suicide, the friend insisted that she write it.

When Mickle wrote this book, she had hopes of reaching out to teens who might be considering suicide. The nation's successful teen suicide rate has reached 5,000 a year, with teens composing 30 percent of all suicides annually. One in every five teenagers has considered suicide if he/she hasn't already attempted it. This book follows Bergin as she realizes that her attempt to see herself free from the world didn't help her at all. She only succeeded in

hurting herself and those around her. Bergin knows that in order to be happy she must come to understand that life is a privilege. The message of the book can be summed up in the first two sentences (though you won't realize this until you come to the end), "I'm still inclined to lie about this. Because the lowdown is, the truth didn't set anybody free."

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*Lillian Plott is a sophomore at the Alabama School of Fine Arts. She currently lives in Montevallo.*

## A Reminder of Stones

by Caine Campbell

Xlibris, 2002

Naturalized Texans are a little like converted Catholics. They take their religion seriously. Like President George W. Bush, Caine Campbell wasn't born in Texas, but he "got here as fast as he could." His new novel, *A Reminder of Stones*, is the quintessential Texas tale, a page-turner that includes in its sweep man's fascination with killing (even a "good" man's), the militia movement, Mexican migrant workers, startling family secrets, and allusions to classical literature, history, architecture, and the Bible, all with a subtle humor and a wealth of good feeling.

A Mississippi native, Campbell has always had a knack for being where the action is. While a graduate student at the University of Mississippi, he landed an assignment as a newsman for NBC News just as James Meredith, General Edwin Walker, and President John F. Kennedy were making Oxford a bloody battleground for the confrontation between the Old South and the rapidly emerging civil rights movement in America.

Decades later, Campbell became the center of a national news story when TV and wire service reporters converged on his office (he was by

then Dean of Liberal Arts at Auburn University), demanding he search his correspondence files for a letter written years before from another Oxford—this one in England. An ex-student had tipped off the press that a letter he had written to his old prof—Caine Campbell—contained mention of a draft notice issued to a former friend. Sure enough, in Campbell's meticulous files (he's a historian by profession) was the yellowing letter, complete with passing allusion to the draft notice received by "my friend, Bill Clinton."

In 1992 the Campbells moved to scenic Kerrville, Texas. It was at just this juncture that *A Reminder of Stones* was begun.

The hero of the book is Cable Bannerman, ostensibly scion of a respected and long-established family, and sole inheritor of a vast spread that sounds a lot like the legendary Y.O. ranch. He's also the sheriff of fictional Joshua County—and a man himself troubled by a fascination with killing and violence. Meanwhile, he has given himself over to a cultural education at the capable hands of the town's newspaper editor, and their discussions range far and wide.

In the midst of the education of Cable Bannerman, a real act of violence occurs—a murder that engages both the sheriff and the reader. But the solution to this murder is not the climax of the book. Instead, it serves to lead us deeper into the real mystery: Cable Bannerman's own "Reminder of Stones."

Bannerman is a whole lot like President George W. Bush, or you could say the President is a whole lot like Cable. Cable emerged as a character before President Bush became a wartime president. President Bush's frontier justice stance matches that of Sheriff Bannerman. Mr. Bush could have been quoting from Cable in a speech he made in January: "Each one of us is a story. That little story is part of a bigger story." Bannerman is a sheriff in George W. Bush's Texas. People who read the novel will get an understanding of Cable, but they

may be drawn to read it in order to get an understanding of President Bush.

One can imagine that *A Reminder of Stones* might well have found an honored place at the literary festival that First Lady Laura Bush established in Texas. Beyond that, the novel (completed several years before the George W. Bush presidency) provides an insight into how a Connecticut transplant like the President became perhaps most fully realized as a Texan. It's probably true that every man has a little of Cable Bannerman in him. But he may not discover that part of himself until he gets to Texas.

As fast as he can, of course.

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*Ray LaFontaine's work includes Tirant lo Blanc: The Complete Translation (Peter Lang, 1994) and Oswald Talked (Pelican Publishing, 1996).*

## The God File

by Frank Turner Hollon

MacAdam/Cage Publishing, 2002  
\$25 Cloth

A charge sometimes leveled against contemporary literary fiction is that it is too focused on the small details of small events and insufficiently concerned with the Big Picture/the Eternal Questions/what have you—that it is, in novelist James Morrow's memorable phrase, uninterested in "swatting at the cosmos."

In his memorable debut, *The Pains of April*, and now in his new novel, *The God File*, author Frank Turner Hollon, a Huntsville native who practices law in Baldwin County, shows us that the two approaches are not necessarily incompatible, and that God as well as the devil may be found in the details.

The narrator of *The God File*, Gabriel Black, is an ordinary man who through his own choice is thrust down an extraordinary and irrevocable path. When Gabriel's lover shoots and kills her husband, Gabriel takes the blame

for the murder; he is promptly convicted and sentenced to life in prison without parole. While in prison, he reads a book about a man who, when cured of cancer, sees his recovery as proof of the existence of God. Gabriel is unimpressed by the testimony of "a rich doctor, with a wonderful wife and children, cured of cancer, sitting around in your country house with your fat dog on the floor by your feet and writing stories about pretty visions." A far greater challenge would be to find evidence of God "in a nasty-ass place like this, with no real freedoms, surrounded everyday with fear, hopelessness, and people who live like rats." So Gabriel begins keeping "The God file," an accumulation of anecdotes and information through which Gabriel hopes "to collect the evidence...to look for God in the tiny details, the corners of my days in this place."

All of the above is laid out in a brief introductory section. The remainder of the novel consists of forty-seven equally brief chapters, the God files themselves, with titles such as "suicide," "smell," "laughter," "predestination," and "forgiveness." As might be expected, the files telling of events in the prison are grim accounts of violence and desperation in "a place where the difference between living and dying is the difference between black and black." However, the files dealing with Gabriel's life before his imprisonment are equally grim accounts of an abusive father, a dying mother, a runaway brother, and, of course, the disastrous affair with a woman who inspired him to sacrifice his life and then deserted him. There are moments of pleasure and beauty, but they are few, brief, and the objects of memory: a beautiful blue sky seen out a window, the song of a mockingbird, the smell of a baseball glove.

Despite the horrendous circumstances of Gabriel's life, he admirably refrains from casting blame on others and asserts more than once that his imprisonment is the result of an action he freely chose to perform. The one posi-

tive thing prison does for him is to turn him into an omnivorous reader; the one book he rereads constantly is Ayn Rand's *The Fountainhead*—an understandable choice, given Rand's famous championing of free will, but also an ironic one, since nothing could be farther removed from the arrogant triumphalism of Rand's cult classic than the successive catastrophes of Gabriel's life.

Nonetheless, in the end, Gabriel concludes that "the greatest evidence I have found of God's existence is not me, but is the search itself. I have to believe that God sent me on this search, and the search itself has nourished and sustained me."

Obviously, *The God File* is not intended as light entertainment, and some readers will find its subject matter harsh, even depressing. Although it is a profoundly spiritual novel, it does not offer any easy outs: the final chapter, a speculation (or is it a representation?) of the death experience titled "faith," offers a degree of hope, but no certainty.

However, readers will find much to admire in Hollon's striking use of narrative voice—Gabriel's language, by turns straightforward and uneven, is exactly what we would expect of a fundamentally inarticulate man striving to articulate thoughts as profound as anyone's—and in his courageous willingness to take on the biggest questions honestly and unflinchingly. The end result is what we might have hoped for if Raymond Carver had collaborated with Walker Percy—challenging, unsettling, ambitious, oddly beautiful, and well worth your attention.

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*F. Brett Cox's fiction, essays, and reviews have appeared in The North Carolina Literary Review, The New England Quarterly, The New York Review of Science Fiction, and elsewhere. Beginning in August 2002 he will be an assistant professor of English at Norwich University in Vermont.*

## Full Steam Ahead

by Faye Gibbons  
Illustrated by Sherry Meidell

Boyd's Mill Press, 2002  
\$15.95 Hardcover

Faye Gibbons in *Full Steam Ahead* gives readers a look at a time before speed was measured by jets and space-ships. That summer, in the July Georgia sun, Sammy and Grandpa race along in a buggy to catch sight of the wonderful new train on its first run through Turkey Creek to Tyler Cut.

Gibbons conveys a sense of neighborliness when Grandpa directs Old Rubin, his horse, to take them first by the homes of other mountain families to spread the news. Their detour is saved from the disaster of missing the event when they come upon the train at a water tower stop and are rewarded by the crew with a ride into town in the passenger car.

*Full Steam Ahead* is Gibbons' fifth picture book and the second with illustrator Sherry Meidell. The illustrations are in earth tones and with rustic figures, which not only convey a feeling of action appropriate to buggy and train, but also the social warmth of the small community.

Stylistically, Gibbons is true to her characters, beginning "Me and my family were hoeing cotton." Twice she uses the title expression: early, when the two set out for the neighbors, and at the conclusion, when Sammy determines to achieve his dream of being an engineer someday. The direct style is like speech, including realistic details (they cross a "truss bridge") and touches of alliteration ("the Blankenship girls gathering green beans in their garden").

Gibbons has captured a moment of the golden age of railroads. Happily, readers can nostalgically feel with Sammy that the train "smelled like a dream come true."

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*Joan Nist is Professor Emerita in Children's Literature at Auburn University.*

## Sometimes Madness Is Wisdom

Zelda and Scott Fitzgerald:  
A Marriage  
by Kendall Taylor

Ballantine Books, 2001  
\$20 Hardback

If I had to name the most influential literary couple of modern times, I would place Zelda Sayer Fitzgerald and her husband, Scott, at the top of the list. There are enough books by and about the famous couple to fill a library. Who wouldn't be enchanted by their magical allure? Zelda, the intelligent, beautiful, high-society miss from Montgomery, Alabama, and Scott, the handsome writer in a soldier's uniform, met in 1918 at a soiree in Montgomery. Fire met fire that evening, lighting a literary flame that flickers even now.

The latest biographer of Zelda Fitzgerald, Kendall Taylor, was fascinated by the enigmatic Zelda when she began studying her in college. Taylor began research that would culminate decades later in the stunningly frank *Sometimes Madness Is Wisdom*.

Taylor interviewed countless friends, critics, and surviving family members. Then serendipity. Newly released documents about Zelda Fitzgerald's mental illness came to light. These documents provided the basis of Taylor's premise, best expressed by Zelda herself, that sometimes madness is wisdom.

The book begins with Zelda's childhood as the pampered, indulged sixth child of Minnie and Judge Anthony Sayre. Her father was president of the Alabama State Senate and later associate of the Alabama Supreme Court. Born on July 24, 1900, Zelda was named by her intellectually gifted mother who'd read the romantic novel *Zelda's Fortune*.

Zelda grew up a golden girl embodying the youthful post-Victorian era. She was the model flapper, shunning patriotism, manners, and morals. When Zelda twirled by Scott that night flinging her fringe, Scott's passion

stirred. He had found his new literary subject: the exciting flapper girls.

The two formed an alliance that was unlike anything America had seen. The book is filled with many anecdotes about their hedonism and outrageous behavior.

At home, Scott wrote while Zelda became more and more the aesthete, filling her days writing in a diary, taking dancing and painting, and planning perfect parties. Scott began to cannibalize sections of Zelda's diaries to use in his own novels. Soon he was cannibalizing incidents from their lives to incorporate into his writings. One night after a bout of heavy drinking, Zelda cut her tailbone on a bottle at a friend's home and had to have several stitches. Scott disguised the incident in *The Beautiful and the Damned*.

The Fitzgeralds spent several years in Europe where they were friends with Ernest Hemingway. Being in the presence of other writers gave Zelda the courage to write a novel loosely based on her life. She hoped for Scott's approval. Zelda also hoped to win literary acclaim but the book, *Save Me the Waltz*, was a dismal failure. A humiliated Zelda began drinking heavily. She brooded over Scott's alcoholism, her own drinking problems, and heavy debts the couple had incurred. They sent their only child, Scottie, away to an expensive boarding school.

Over time, Zelda and Scott melded into a symbiotic relationship. She needed him for his reputation, and he fed off her reckless abandon. Zelda slowly began losing a grip on reality. She often became hysterical after bouts of heavy drinking. Doctors diagnosed her as suffering from schizophrenia. Her mental state deteriorated, yet she had periods of lucidity in which she focused on her writings, ballet, and family and could live outside an institution.

Though her talent was largely subsumed by Scott, according to Taylor, Zelda provided Scott with material, exuberance, and anecdotes. In the words of the biographer, Scott and Zelda were their own worst fantasies.

Ever in Scott's shadow, Zelda managed to pursue her passions in ballet and art. She had an important art exhibit, called "Sometimes Madness Is Wisdom," in the Ross Gallery in New York City in 1934. Some of her work is housed in the Montgomery Museum of Fine Art.

Zelda's story is no poor little rich girl story. It is the story of an extraordinary artist in a death struggle with mental illness at a time when the illness allowed no victors. Like a modern heroine in a Greek tragedy, she brings on much of her own demise. The book adds enormously to the body of knowledge on exactly how Zelda orchestrates this.

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*Marianne Moates is the author of Truman Capote's Southern Years (UA Press) and columnist for The Daily Home in Talledega.*

## Splintered Bones

by Carolyn Haines

Delacorte Press, 2002  
\$23.95 Hardback

*Splintered Bones*, the latest mystery from Carolyn Haines, is a delight. Like any good mystery writer, Haines provides enough convincing false leads for a satisfying surprise resolution. The real surprise for readers new to Haines is her postmodern take on the detective genre. Self-referential and ironic, Haines manages to slip issues of gender and class into her story without detracting from the plot's entertaining mix of sex and money. The book opens, for example, with an almost florid paragraph of Southern land worship. When the first-person narrator, Sarah Booth Delaney, speaks of "the fecundity that my own womb has been denied," many might close the book. Persistence is rewarded, however, on the next page when Sarah Booth, planting lemon basil, declares, "I would never go hungry again!" Cheerful parody redeems purple prose. Beginning with the *Gone with the Wind* allusion, Haines stakes a valid claim as both a

mystery writer and a Southern writer—defining a unique position for herself at the intersection of the two groups.

In *Splintered Bones*, the third in a series of "bones" books, dashing but sinister landowner Kemper Fuquar, who "looked like Zorro on a horse," turns up dead one morning in the stall of his wife's valuable stallion, first killed by a blow to the head and a horse-sized dose of insulin, and then thoroughly trampled by the horse. His wife, Lee, confesses to the murder, claiming he had beaten her one too many times. Detective Sarah Booth suspects that Lee is lying to protect someone and sets out to find the real murderer. Plenty of folks could have killed Fuquar besides his abused wife: their Gothic teenaged daughter, Lee's sexy horse trainer Bud Lynch, several adulterous socialites fearing blackmail, land-hungry developers with their eyes on the Fuquar estate, or even three men in black representing the Mississippi Mafia from Biloxi, where Fuquar gambled and lost. Only a practiced mystery reader will notice the clues to the real culprit sprinkled through the text. Most will have to go back to find them after reading the final scene.

There is no doubt that Haines deserves a place in the pantheon of southern writers, as well as on the shelves of mystery-lovers. Sarah Booth thinks again of Scarlett O'Hara one weary night as she decides her problem is something "to worry about tomorrow." One of several email suitors who provide comic relief reminds her of the bible salesman in Flannery O'Connor's "Good Country People." This seemingly gratuitous allusion to O'Connor is another of Haines's postmodern reminders that an author is creating this world for us to savor. By referring to O'Connor, Welty, and Faulkner, Haines may also be indirectly defending the more baroque southern details of her narrative. In either case, she's established that her lineage as southern writer, like the noble stallion's at the center of her plot, is impeccable.

Sarah Booth Delaney joins a throng of smart and tough women investigators,

both southern and not. Here below the Mason-Dixon line, Rita Mae Brown's popular Sneaky Pie mysteries come to mind, with their horses, cat and corgi. Anne George's pair of Birmingham sisters, like Sarah Booth, mingle with socialites as they solve crimes. Finally, it's a male P.I. who plays the most prominent role in the book. Sarah Booth reads herself to sleep with the mysteries of Texan Kinky Friedman, who makes a cameo appearance as well. Happily, Haines deserves a position among all these mystery writers.

Add to her fascinating mixture of characters and clues a touch of magic realism in the person of Jitty. "An old ghost with a streak of bossiness a mile wide," she's a postmodern Mammy giving Sarah Booth imperious advice on catching a husband. Jitty personifies the qualities of the book: she's humorous, wise, and entertaining. These qualities all make *Splintered Bones* a book worthy of anyone's summer reading list.

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*Karen Pirnie is a free-lance writer who also teaches English at Auburn University Montgomery.*

## Prepositional Heaven

by Thomas Rabbitt

River City Publishing, 2001  
\$20 Paper

Looking at the organization of Thomas Rabbitt's ninth collection of poems, *Prepositional Heaven*, I am struck by how appropriate a title *Exile* was for his first, published 27 years ago by the University of Pittsburgh Press. Throughout his remarkable career, Rabbitt has been a willing exile from the American poetry "business." He has been fiercely individual and independent—belonging to no school, afraid of no subject, and intimidated by no contemporary. His only allegiance has been to the poetry itself, and that is why his poems will long survive those of many poets who currently occupy a more conspicuous place in the public consciousness.

*Prepositional Heaven* is divided into three sections that bear the names of the last three places the poet has lived. The first of these, "Tuscaloosa," contains poems written about, and presumably during, Rabbitt's final years as a faculty member in the graduate creative writing program at the University of Alabama before his retirement in 1998. The second, "East Harwich," is composed of poems that evidently arise from his first two years of retirement in New England, and the third, "Tuam," presents poems apparently inspired by his current surroundings in County Galway, Ireland, where he lives on a farm. The book's organization is not surprising, considering Rabbitt's long interest in locale (his second book was titled *The Booth Interstate* and his third, *The Abandoned Country*). These poems about place reflect the sensibility of the exile because they are often about dissatisfaction with place. That is not to say that they are griping poems; rather, they present a vision of the world in its fallen state in a particular place at a particular time and often lament the impossibility of a better world. Perhaps "impossibility" is a strong word there, but these are not poems with a strongly affirmative vision.

Yet they are poems of beautiful vision, even if that vision begins in the recognition of the ugly, the failed, or the fallen. Throughout his career, Rabbitt has used the formal elements and music of poetry to give order to a chaotic, violent, and wicked world. *Prepositional Heaven* gives us his familiar themes as well as his masterful manipulation of form and sound. From its beginning, violent imagery abounds; consider these lines from the book's first poem, "In the Cemetery":

Someone has transfigured her. To  
day. Someone has  
Taken cobbles from a neighbor's  
grave to smash  
Rodina's fingers, crush her toes,  
bash the modest beauty  
From her downcast eyes, her lovely  
folded wings.

Disturbing images indeed, and yet the effect of the entire poem is to understand such senseless violence in a new way, to give order to what seems to be chaos.

Likewise, "Dead Skunk" makes beauty out of one of the most unlikely of poetic subjects:

What else is ever new under the  
moon?  
Nothing, of course. We know that  
the moon rises  
And the dead do not; that the road's  
next curve—  
Like truth from the east—always  
comes too soon,  
A perfume unsettling our frail  
surmises.

The language here is so carefully chosen, the irregular but balanced meter so certain, and the rhymes so natural and unobtrusive that we could almost accept the poem's grim message without question. Likewise, Rabbitt's "The Beasts of Coole Park" is such a beautifully executed sonnet (has any poet more successfully experimented with that old form in the last 25 years?) that we can tolerate the disturbing vision of the park's neglected deer.

If I weren't constrained by space, I could continue to endorse this book for pages. In short, what we have in *Prepositional Heaven* is a great book of poems—to my taste, perhaps the author's best—by one of the last quarter-century's finest American poets.

It is published by a relatively small and young regional press (beautifully designed and printed—many kudos to River City!), yet it is certainly among the very best books of poetry released nationwide in 2001.

Such is the case for the willing exile, the poet who stands apart from the business of contemporary poetry, the poet who, I am confident, will find his home in the anthologies in future generations.

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*Poet Dan Albergotti is concluding the MFA program at UNC-Greensboro.*

## To Yield a Dream

By Oxford Stroud

NewSouth Books, 2002

\$17 Paper

In his second novel, *To Yield a Dream*, Oxford Stroud has turned away from realism to conjure up what I would call a bright *other* world, informed by myth and archetype, far removed from contemporary American social and cultural trends. By taking us away from the actual, Stroud is able to evoke the possible, through a kind of speculative fiction affirming the interdependence of time, death, art, and love.

The novel opens with Jody and his fox terrier, Zip, on board an ancient ferry, The Umbilicus. Jody is accompanying his dead mother's coffin, adorned with sky blue angel's wings "swept back jet-like into the fuselage of the coffin." The Umbilicus is bound for Hurricane Island, somewhere off the coast of Alabama. The island itself is segmented into three parts. On the left is a huge clock built on the face of an old fort. At either end of the clock's diameter is a bronze equestrian statue of General Lee and General Grant, "in perpetual pursuit." On the right is a lighthouse leaning out over the Gulf of Mexico, inhabited by an aging patriarch, The Admiral. In the center is a gaudy, neon-lit Ark, where a TV star evangelist, Johnny Revelation, with his consort, Nola Rose, will perform a rock version of The First Commandment, "Thou Shalt Have No Other Gods Before Me." If by this time the reader has not suspended his disbelief, he will have to do so when he encounters Spencer, a ubiquitous, talking warrior ant endowed with eternal life. Spencer is the Blakean mentor for Jody, urging Jody to see through, not with, the eye.

A lot goes on in the novel. We are shown Jody's eccentric family. Jody's grandfather, the Admiral, drives an emerald Rolls Royce and longs for reunion with his dead wife. Jody's Uncle Minos has lived the life of a hermit in a salt-walled vault under the Why Not Shop, after losing a bar-room brawl over his captivating bride, Venoria. Another uncle and aunt, Claude and Gloria, live tepid, safe lives. Their daughter, Jo Anne, a talented painter, is a childhood companion of Jody's and ultimately the love of his life. Through her art she transforms natural things, a bull bream, a frog, into timeless entities. Yet being a young girl, she is also attracted to the carnal con artist Johnny Revelation.

Midway in the novel, we learn that Jody's mother, an opera singer and an aviatrix, has "sinned" with Jody's mysterious father, supposedly missing in Viet Nam. Jody feels tarnished by his mother's sin and oddly liberated at her funeral. He broods over the identity of his father. Is his father the island preacher? Is he an aging stranger who shows up at the funeral? He might even be Uncle Minos, or Johnny Revelation. I won't reveal the novel's outcome beyond saying that after an actual hurricane whips through the island, forcing Jody to act in his love for Jo Anne, the complica-

tions in Jody's life turn out to be trifling.

There are times when this novel is lacking in that essential element of good fiction, conflict, tension. In another writer's hands, the archetypal pull might have degenerated into romantic woolgathering, Fantasy Island stuff. What makes the novel go is Stroud's writing, succinctly shaped, expansively humorous, at times brimming over with ebullience. Where else would you find a frog by the name of Mr. Grumps imbibing kudzu juice out of a ketchup bottle before hopping in parabolas? Mr. Grumps prefers the parabola to the perfect circle, for "like old masters of the art, the frog knew the most rewarding contact between two points is not a straight line or a random splash of cow dung." Striking images are in almost every page. Here is Pelican's Perch: "The elite but rustic fish diner announced itself out in front of a large plywood replica of the ungainly bird: Behind Pelican's Perch was a billboard displaying a leggy bathing girl under the sun, holding to her lips a huge Coke streaming with cold sweat."

Coke bottles don't stream with cold sweat, not in this world, but in Stroud's appealing *other* world, tangential to this world, they do.

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*Charles Rose is a writer who lives in Auburn. This review first appeared in the Montgomery Advertiser.*

## Verbena

by Nanci Kincaid

Algonquin Press, 2002

\$24.95 Hardback

Verbena Eckerd is left precariously alone when her husband, Bobby, and his girlfriend, Lorraine, are killed in a car accident. Even though she has five children, many friends, and works as a teacher at the local elementary school, there is a sudden and vast emptiness in her life. For Bena, life has been "just something that had happened to her and she had done her best to deal with it."

Bena's attempts to "deal with it" are what pack this new novel from Nanci Kincaid, author of *Balls*, a novel, and *Pretending the Bed Is a Raft*, a short story collection. It is Bena's reticence to step into the uncertain flow of life that is the glue that holds together this look at small-town Alabama.

Bena's children are growing up and away from her, as she stands by, only able to watch and hope. Sissy, pregnant and almost married, moves to Florida with a ne'er-do-well who has dreams of working on a cruise ship. Joe falls in love with the younger sister of his father's girlfriend. Leslie ends up in Texas with a free-spirited musician. Eddie and Ellie struggle with adolescence, even as they try to protect their mother.

The heart of the novel, however, is Bena's relationship and marriage to Lucky McKale, local postman and observer

of human frailty. It will be he who shows Bena that forgiveness—"You got to forgive yourself," he reminds her—is what lets us live and that even death lets us move on.

And as she empties out and repaints her old house with the help of her children, her Earth-Mother-of-a-best-friend Mayfred, and Lucky's ebullient ex-wife Sue Cox, Bena moves from being careful to being caring. She becomes Ver-bena, not Bena, in the soft-hearted book about a lively woman who comes to realize that "sometimes it's better to have nothing than all the wrong stuff."

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*Steven Whitton is a Professor of English at Jacksonville State University. He is the founder of On the Brink, JSU's annual gathering of emerging Southern writers.*

## Rising Venus

by Kelly Cherry

Louisiana State University Press, 2002  
\$22.95 Cloth

Kelly Cherry has enormous talent as demonstrated by the sheer volume of work she has published. Among her published works are novels, short story collections, essays, and autobiography. *Rising Venus* is her sixth book of poetry. Her works have received high praise from major critics and reviewers. For the last three years she has spent a semester a year as Eminent Scholar in the Humanities at UAH. Just this spring she returned there for a symposium on contemporary Southern Literature. Although she has lived and taught in Wisconsin for a number of years, Cherry considers herself a Southern writer and currently lives in Halifax, Virginia.

Her forte is the endless variety and richness of her works, the different styles and genres she not only attempts but masters. *Rising Venus* is no exception. This volume of poetry is divided into four sections, tightly connected within each section. The book's predominant theme revolves around women and women's issues, though sometimes only peripherally.

In the first two sections, Kelly follows several well-known predecessors: Plath, Sexton, and Lowell, for these first two sections fall definitely into the confessional mode. Just as with Plath, Sexton, and Lowell, the reader is presented with a somewhat difficult problem in judging the poetry's value, for confessional poetry depends as much upon the experience conveyed as it does upon the skill with which it is conveyed. For some, reading confessional poetry can cause a certain squeamishness and even embarrassment at the sometimes raw facts presented even though they are couched in the form of poetry and highly crafted. Reading confessional poetry is an acceptable form of voyeurism. We become privy to the virtually unabridged presentation of the poets' lives: divorces, abandonment, thoughts of suicide, nervous breakdowns, even

family relationships that may border on the incestuous. Nothing is held back, and the language at times becomes sexually explicit. Many times the poems are saved by their brilliance, the cleverness and humor surrounding even depths of depression and despair. Cleverness makes a safe border for poems of this nature. Immediately one is struck by the linguistic brilliance of the first poem, "Adult Ed.101, Basic Home Repair for Single Women." Language is a tool and a weapon for those who have an "ax" to grind. At times the poem is bawdy in its humor, but one is struck by the underlying sadness of the situation. The closing lines of the first poem read:

Ladies, you are about to find out  
just how much really rough  
weather  
your house can take.

Cherry deftly guides us to an understanding of what it is like for women trying to survive alone. Throughout Section I we come upon little gems of wordplay where "Stationary sprawls" and "Love letters lie."

Section II consists of one long poem divided into eleven parts with headings such as "Part Two: Waking Alone at Night in Virginia, She Thinks of Him Driving Northeast from Wisconsin with His Wife and Children." And we follow the progression of a love affair that seems doomed.

Section III is my personal favorite. The central metaphor for each poem revolves around an art form. For instance, some poems describe or present a painting: still life, portrait, landscape; others may describe a sculpture, as in the title poem. We, the viewers and the readers, enter the work through the medium of Cherry's skill with language. "The Horse at Dusk" is particularly beautiful, so much so that I shall take the liberty of quoting the entire poem, which, though brief, presents a scene to us as clearly as any oil or watercolor.

### "The Horse at Dusk"

He was showing himself off,  
switching his tail,  
Thrusting his lovely head over the fence  
and a bit put out when I had no sugar  
to give him.  
Finally, he bent one foreleg against the other  
as in a bow.  
Sorrel and rapeseed  
sparked like the faintest of flames  
in a dusk like smoke  
and red poppies had ignited singly  
here and there,  
as if the fire were spreading.  
Blue hills stood out not far off,  
and in the valley

*Continued on page 32*

# Young Book Lovers

## Making a Difference in Sylacauga

*Members of the Teen Advisory Council (TAC) at B. B. Comer Memorial Library in Sylacauga dispel the myth that teenagers aren't reading, thinking, and giving back to their communities. This group of library-loving teens meets twice a month at Comer Library to review books, discuss issues, and participate in programs that help develop life skills; they are also active in the civic life of the Sylacauga community.*

The TAC, formed in 1989 with LSCA seed money, was the first of its kind in Alabama. The initial young adult book collection, also purchased with grant money, consisted of more than 2000 titles written specifically for teens. The popularity of the group grew after the TAC members hosted workshops on book talking and book reviewing and brought in well-known authors such as Kathryn Tucker Windham and Norma Fox Mazer.

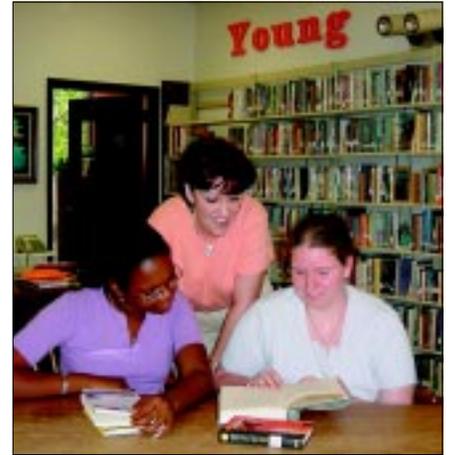
In 1994 the TAC was named one of only ten recipients in the country of the Margaret Alexander Edwards Trust Recognition grants for *Outstanding Customer Service for Youth in the Library*. The group was once again recognized nationally in 1995 with the award of one of two *Book Wholesalers Awards for Collection Development*.

Last year, the TAC was one of twelve groups chosen to participate in a nationwide project called YA Galley. Seventeen book publishers agreed to supply free books for these teen groups to review.

The purpose of the YA Galley project is twofold: The teen group receives multiple copies of titles to read, discuss, and evaluate; the publishers receive the feedback to help them determine the interests of today's young readers.

Comer Library's TAC members find added benefits in the YA Galley project. They enjoy the experience of reading and evaluating the quality of the stories, and they participate in group discussions that help them learn to share their ideas and consider the opinions of others.

The publishers send a copy of each



*Tracey Thomas (center) with TAC members*

title for each member of the teen group. At the end of the project, Comer Library keeps copies for its collection and the remaining copies are packaged into gift bags and presented to the area's school librarians to add to their young adult collections. The books have plates that designate the books as gifts from the TAC, and the teens take pride in giving books that they have earned; the entire community benefits from this project.

Other interesting TAC projects include:

- *Yearly trips to the Shakespeare Festival*—Each year the members choose a play, which they read prior to the trip. A group discussion follows the reading, which allows the students to have a better understanding of the





*Library staff and TAC members consider new titles*

play before seeing it. This trip is the only source of cultural arts enrichment many of the students receive during the year.

- *Life Skills Development Programs* – Each month the library provides a program to help teens develop life skills in areas such as: 1) being responsible; 2) being honest; 3) managing money; 4) learning to invest and; 5) managing anger. The non-fiction collection is utilized by displaying books that match the theme of the current program. Materials

for many of the life-skills development programs are provided by the Brooks & Brooks Foundation ([youthleadertraining.com](http://youthleadertraining.com)), which seeks, through libraries and schools, to motivate and inspire students to make a difference in their community.

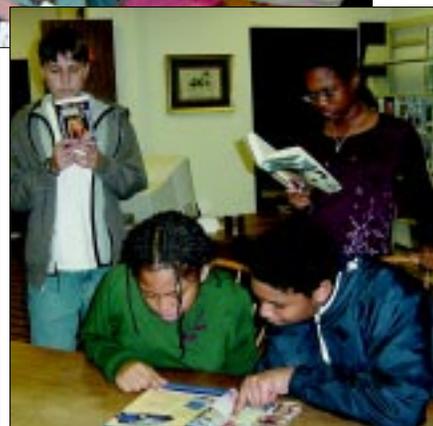
- *Volunteer Services* – TAC members provide volunteer services in the community. One of the most popular services is reading to senior citizens at area nursing homes and retirement centers. Intergenerational programs like this spark thoughtful and informative conversations between the participants, often providing a glimpse of history that many of the students have never seen.
- *Summer Reading Assistance* – Undoubtedly one of the busiest times of the year at Comer Library comes during the Summer Reading Program. The TAC plays a vital role in this program by helping to supervise younger children, as well as by providing skits, puppet shows, and storytelling for the young library patrons.

Today's TAC group is comprised of students from five area junior and senior high schools. Members socialize and enjoy refreshments before the start of the program, which allows them to discuss school issues and get to know each other better. The informal interaction at TAC meetings promotes understanding by helping alleviate school rivalries; it also promotes the socialization of home-schooled teens by introducing them to public school students in their age group.

One additional perk of being in TAC is that members get first choice of new YA titles, which are displayed in the meeting room during their program. The teens often arrive early so that they can have first choice of the new books. The YA collection reflects the needs and interests of the young adults who use the Comer Library because the majority of titles are purchased from request. TAC members often help with selection by reading YA journals such as VOYA and marking titles they find interesting. This not only makes the YA librarian's job easier, it also helps to build a collection that teens will use, which truly is the ultimate goal of Comer Library's service to this age group.

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*Tracey Thomas is assistant director in charge of Youth Services at the B. B. Comer Library in Sylacauga.*



*Members of the award-winning Teen Advisory Council at B. B. Comer Library in Sylacauga take part in book selection, host book talks, and bring noted writers in to give readings, among many other activities.*

the small lights of houses  
came on.  
Trees shook their green manes.

The fourth and final section is a long occasional poem written to a young woman upon her graduation from Vanderbilt. The poem is filled with fresh imagery and is somewhat nostalgic and philosophical. It is lovely.

Should you buy this book? Definitely. You will enjoy it.

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*Sue Scalf is a semiretired adjunct teacher of English and creative writing. Her latest collection of poetry is South by Candlelight. She lives in Prattville, Alabama.*

## Sky of Stone

by Homer Hickam

Delacorte, 2001  
\$24.95 Cloth

In his memoir *Sky of Stone*, Homer Hickam takes us on a vicarious journey through a life we would not otherwise know, and yet there are many familiar touchstones. His story reads like a novel. A mystery unfolds, and even by turning the pages and paying close attention, we do not know the truth until Hickam tells us. There is not the usual predictability, nor even the “I remember” aspect of ordinary memoir here. Instead, every detail is told in the interesting yet matter-of-fact manner of a good storyteller. The scenes sparkle with clear-cut characters. Hickam whittled away the unnecessary to show us each person in high relief, and yet he maintains the perspective of the 18-year-old eyes that saw that part of his life.

As we enter Hickam’s life in this third installment of his Coalwood series, it is 1961. He is struggling with college and fantasizing about summer break at his mother’s new Myrtle Beach home, reading Heinlein, and meeting girls. The dream is short-lived when his mother, Elsie, tells him on the phone, “No. You are going home to Coalwood....It’s the Tuck Dillon accident,” she said. “They’re blaming your father.”

Once in Coalwood, it is obvious that his father doesn’t want him there nor, in fact, do most of the locals. This is no longer home. He is a college boy now an outsider. With no other options open to him, he alienates his father further by taking a job in the mines, and compounds that sin by joining the union and taking a room with board at the Club House.

The mine is hard work, yet the boy is growing into a man, making friends, falling in love, and contemplating his place in the world. Down in the mine, he studies the roof above him and tells his friend Bobby, “I’ve been looking up at the sky ever since Sputnik got launched four years ago.

Now my sky is five feet high and made of stone....A sky of stone with stars of mica.” In the next moment he turns to his crew leader, Johnny, and repeats the question about the dead miner that he’s asked of everyone since he arrived. “Why are they blaming Dad for what happened to Tuck?” He gets no real answer.

With his mother in Myrtle Beach, his father under suspicion of wrongdoing at the mine, state and federal investigators on the way, and Homer “Sonny” Hickam persona non grata to pretty much everyone, this story is a multifaceted page-turning read.

Whether you like memoir, a good mystery, or just a good read, this book is all three. When the answer to the mystery is handed to me in the parlor of the Club House, there is an “aha” moment. I remember then all the small clues strewn along the way. Were I a real sleuth, they pointed to the truth.

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*Perle Champion, Birmingham resident, is a frequent reviewer for First Draft.*

# Alabama Authors from Livingston Press at UWA

## Fiction

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ISBN 0-942979-41-9, paper, \$9.95

**Ann Vaughan Richards**, Miss Woman  
ISBN 0-942979-77-X, paper, \$12.95

**B.K. Smith**, Side Shows  
ISBN 0-942979-16-8, paper, \$10.95

**Suzanne Hudson**, Opposable Thumbs  
ISBN 0-942979-81-8, paper, \$12.95

**James E. Colquitt, ed.**, Alabama Bound  
ISBN 0-942979-26-5, paper, \$13.95

**Joe Taylor & Tina N. Jones, ed.**, Belles' Letters  
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**Fred Bonnie**, Detecting Metal  
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**Ralph Hammond**, Personal Encounters  
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**Ralph Hammond**, Vincent Van Gogh  
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**Ralph Hammond, ed.**, Alabama Poets  
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## Non-fiction

**(Ruby Pickens Tartt) Alan Brown, ed.**, Dim Roads and Dark Nights  
ISBN 0-942979-11-7, paper \$12.95

**(Ruby Pickens Tartt) Alan Brown & David Taylor, ed.**, Gabr'l Blow Sof  
ISBN 0-942979-38-9, paper \$10.50

**(Samuel H. Sprott) Louis R. Smith, Jr. & Andrew Quist, ed.**, Cush: A Civil War Memoir  
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# Literary News

## Publications



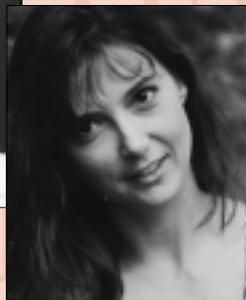
*The Right to Remain Silent: An Anthology of Class Writings from Julia Tutwiler Prison for Women* grew out of a 2001 creative writing program sponsored by Aid to Inmate Mothers, a nonprofit organization based in Montgomery that keeps women in prison connected to their children and offers support through job training and education. The project was

co-sponsored by the AWF and the Auburn University Center for the Arts & Humanities and funded by a grant from the Alabama State Council on the Arts. Writings by members of the class are punctuated by Valerie Downes's stunning photographs of the women, captioned with their names, identification numbers, and sentences. The volume is available for \$15 at Capitol Book & News in Montgomery (334-265-1473) or from Aid to Inmate Mothers (800-679-0246).

**PMS poemstorymemoir** proudly announces the publication of its spring 2002 issue. The journal, according to editor **Linda Frost**, "presents the poetry, memoir, and short fiction of women across the country, writing that strives to detail our collective—and not so collective—experiences." Each issue also features a memoir by a woman who has been involved in some experience of historic significance. The spring number includes



Lynn Burris Butler



Wendy Bruce

an essay by **Nancy Johnson-Oberwanowicz**, who was showing her family around her office in World Trade Center Tower Two on the morning of September 11. It also includes work by Alabama State Council on the Arts Fellowship Award winners **Lynne Burris Butler** and **Wendy Bruce**. Subscriptions are available from the University of Alabama-Birmingham Department of English, HB 217, 900 South 13<sup>th</sup> Street, Birmingham, AL 35294.

**The Publishers Association of the South** (<http://www.pubsouth.org/>) is offering a collection of editorial and manuscript submission guidelines from its publishing house members. This handy reference is available for sale to prospective authors, librarians, and other interested parties at \$20 per copy. To obtain a copy of this publication, contact the PAS office: (850) 914-0766 or fax (850) 769-4348.

## Awards and Notices



Marlin Barton

**Marlin Barton** received the award for a Distinguished First Volume of Short Stories Published in the United States in 2001 for his first collection of short stories, *The Dry Well*, published by Frederic C. Beil. Given by the Dictionary of Literary Biography Yearbook and selected by **George Garrett**, the award praises Barton's prose as "clear as a pane of glass."

Alabamian **Diane McWhorter** received the Pulitzer Prize in April for *Carry Me Home: The Climactic Battle of the Civil Rights Movement*. The book, published by Simon & Schuster in 2001, explored the events that led Birmingham to be called Bombingham and her own connection to the events and their legacy.



Diane McWhorter

Two Montgomery area writers won five of the eight poetry categories in the recent National League of American Pen Women 2002 National Biennial Writing Contest. **Mary Halliburton**, president of the Alabama State Association of NLAPW, attended the Biennial Conference in San Francisco,



Mary Halliburton

where she won four First Places in Poetry and the Over-All Award for Best Poet at the Conference. **Helen Blackshear**, immediate past poet laureate of Alabama, also won a First Place and a Third Place.

Historian **Wayne Flynt** was awarded the Clarence Cason Writing Award this March by the University of Alabama. The award recognizes a writer who writes about or is identified with Alabama. Past recipients include **Gay Talese**, **E. O. Wilson**, and **Howell Raines**.

## Conference Notices and Community News

The 9<sup>th</sup> Annual Harriette Austin Writers Conference will be held July 19-20 at the University of Georgia in Athens, GA. Speakers include editors from Simon & Schuster, Penguin Putnam, Hill Street Press, and literary agencies Graybill & English, BookEnds, LLC, Cricket Pechstein, and others. **Rosemary Daniell**, **Joan Broerman**, **Janice Daugharty**, **Charlotte Miller**, and **Robert Vaughan** are among the featured speakers. Manuscript evaluations are available. For information check the conference website at [www.coe.uga.edu/hawc](http://www.coe.uga.edu/hawc).

From **Concept to Character to Contract**, a one-day seminar sponsored by the Southeast Chapter of Mystery Writers of America (SEMWA), will be held July 20, 2002, in the Council Chambers of City Hall (301 D'Olive Street), Bay Minette, AL. Participants include **Sonny Brewer** (editor) who owns Over The Transom Bookstore in Fairhope and has recently signed on as an acquiring editor for McMillan/Cage Publishers. ([www.overtthetransom.com](http://www.overtthetransom.com)); **Carolyn Haines** (Bantam/Delacorte) is the author of three Mississippi Delta mystery series featuring sleuth Sarah Booth Delaney; **Martin Hegwood** (St. Martins/Minotaur), senior attorney for the Mississippi Secretary of State's office. Martin has written three P.I. Jack Delmas mysteries, all set on the Gulf Coast; **Gwen Hunter** (Mira) has published eight action adventure and women-in-jeopardy novels, several set in her home state of Louisiana; **Dean James** (Silver Dagger and Kensington) has two on-going series, one with a retired schoolteacher sleuth in the Mississippi Delta and another with a gay vampire P.I. set in England; **Les**



Carolyn Haines

**Standiford** (Putnam) is the creator of the John Deal mystery series set in Florida; and **Brewster Milton Robertson** (Harbor House) who has sold his first novel, *Rainy Days and Sundays*, and is a reviewer for *Publishers Weekly*. Cost is \$20 for the day. Lunch is on your own. Registration begins at 8 a.m. Contact: Charlotte Cabannis, Bay Minette Public Library, 251-580-1648 or e-mail [charlotte1336507@yahoo.com](mailto:charlotte1336507@yahoo.com).

The **Alabama Writers Conclave** will hold its annual conference on August 1-3 at the University of Montevallo. For information about the program and other activities of the Conclave, contact president John Frandsen at [jfrandsen2@charter.net](mailto:jfrandsen2@charter.net) or publicity/membership chair Dianna Murphree at [medixiewriter@aol.com](mailto:medixiewriter@aol.com).

**Kurt Brown**, author of three books of poetry, a recent chapbook *Fables From the Ark*, and editor of several anthologies of essays about poetry and writing will read at the University of North Alabama on September 13, 2002 at 11:00 a.m. in the Guillot Student Center. The reading is free and open to the public.

Troy State University Montgomery and the Southern Poverty Law Center co-sponsored a free reading by **Nikki Giovanni** for its first **Rosa Parks Woman of Courage Lecture Series**. A poet, essayist, and lecturer, Giovanni is the recipient of many honors and awards and currently teaches at VPI.



Rick Bragg, center, with the Weekend speakers from USA: Professors Tom West, Sue Walker, Jean McIver, Bob Coleman

As part of the city's 300<sup>th</sup> birthday celebration, the Literary Committee of the Mobile Tricentennial Celebration designated April 5-6 as Literary Weekend. Cosponsored by Spring Hill College and the University of South Alabama, the activities opened with a memoir writing workshop led by Dr. John Hafner of Spring Hill College. Participants enjoyed lunch with fiction writers **Robert Bahr**, **Carolyn Haines**, **Melinda Haynes**, **Patricia Meyers**, **James White** and poets **Carol Chase**, **Maurice Gandy**, **Diane Garden**, **Jeff Goodman**, and **Sue Walker**. **Roy Hoffman** was the luncheon speaker. Two afternoon sessions with the fiction writers and

poets, respectively, focused on the role of memory in creative work. Saturday events included a reading of student work, critical papers on **Rick Bragg** and historical literary figures from the Gulf Coast area. A reading by Bragg concluded the Literary Weekend, which was supported in part by the Alabama Humanities Foundation.

The UAH Humanities Center, located on the Campus of The University of Alabama in Huntsville, recently hosted “Many Voices, Many Forms: A Symposium on Contemporary Southern Literature.” The event was co-sponsored by the Alabama Humanities Foundation and the Huntsville Literary Association and was also supported by donations from area residents. The two-day event (April 5-6) featured two Pulitzer Prize winners—poet **Henry Taylor** of Washington University, who read from a selection of his poems and led a poetry workshop, and author **Diane McWhorter**, a native of Birmingham, Alabama, who received the 2002 Pulitzer Prize for nonfiction for her book *Carry Me Home: Birmingham, Alabama, The Climactic Battle of the Civil Rights Revolution*. Also participating were scholars and writers from around the South, including **Scott Romine** (University of North Carolina-Greensboro) and **Anne Goodwyn Jones** (University of Florida). **Kelly Cherry**, who has been the Visiting Eminent Scholar in the Humanities at UAH for three semesters over the past several years, **James Watkins** (Berry College in Rome, Georgia), **Mab Segrest** (currently visiting at Duke University), and **Natasha Trethewey** (Emory University) were also on the program.



*Henry Taylor*

The Alabama Library Association has announced its **Alabama Author Award** winners for 2002. **Tony Earley** received the juvenile/young adult award for *Jim the Boy*, published by Little, Brown. The nonfiction award went to **Barbara Robinette Moss** for *Change Me into Zeus's Daughter*, published by Scribner. **Helen Norris** received the award for fiction for *One Day in the Life of a Born Again Loser*, published by the University of Alabama Press. All three 2002 award winners were published in 2000.

North Carolina native Tony Earley was named one of America's “best young novelists” by *Granta* magazine in 1996 and one of the “twenty best young fiction writers in America” by the *New Yorker* magazine in 1999. Movie rights for *Jim the Boy* have been secured by Hallmark Hall of Fame Productions. Barbara Robinette Moss received a BFA from Ringling School of Art & Design in Sarasota, FL, and an



*Barbara Robinette Moss, Helen Norris, and Susan Markham*

MFA from Drake University, Des Moines, IA. Pulitzer Prize-winning screenwriter **Marsha Norman** is presently writing a screenplay of *Zeus's Daughter* that will be produced by **Goldie Hawn**. Helen

Norris, a native of

Montgomery, is the author of four novels, four collections of short stories, and two books of poetry. She has received four O. Henry Awards, a Pushcart Prize, two Andrew Lytle awards, four Christian Book Association awards, the Penwomen's Biennial Award, and was a finalist for the Penn/Faulkner Award and the Los Angeles Times Fiction Award. In 2000, Norris won the Harper Lee Award for Distinguished Alabama Writer.

The Alabama Library Association Author Awards have been made since 1957. Through the awards, the ALLA seeks to “encourage and recognize Alabama authors and promote interest in local author's books. Awards are based on literary merit and to be considered an author must be a native Alabamian or have lived in the state for at least five years.



*Rick Bragg (left), and Homer Hickam sign books at Alabama Bound.*

The **Birmingham Public Library** celebrated the fourth installment of Alabama Bound Book Fair on Saturday, April 27th. More than 50 authors and publishers convened at the downtown library to speak about their latest publications, sign copies of their books and speak individually with the public. More than 3000 people come through the library to meet and listen to the writers, who included Rick Bragg, Bill Cobb, Elizabeth Dewberry, Vanessa Griggs, Paul Hemphill, Bob Inman, and many others.

# The Back Page

## *Teaching Should Have No Boundaries*

by Kyes Stevens

When I returned from New York to my native Alabama, I didn't intend to teach creative writing at the Federal Correctional Institution at Talledega. Nor did I plan to teach at the Tutwiler State Facility for Women. In fact, I hadn't planned to teach at all. But then life happened—and now I teach poetry writing at both. What I found is simply the most rewarding educational environment. The students come to class to learn—and are quite willing to follow you on whatever journey you can offer through words and mind and heart.

My approach to teaching these classes focuses on opening up new ways to see and think about the world—and on helping each student learn to honor and recognize in themselves a creative voice and vision. What has come from lessons about avoiding leeches (according to *Strunk and White*: rather, very, little, pretty), using word-of-the-day prompts, and writing as if you were a meteor is impressive. Through hard work, and lots of revision, and having to constantly listen to me say “*I can't see it*,” these students have made wonderful progress. I am proud of them.

The following poem was written by Michelle Bankston at Tutwiler. The first draft of the poem she brought in was much longer and the piercing details lost in the effort of getting the poem down. I asked her to find the truth of the poem—to find the strangest, most direct, and visual lines—what

she has produced after many revisions is a solid and surprising poem.

Clouds  
like a beggar no place to go  
coal colored  
strange striking masses  
sadness falls wet wax from a  
candle

Take over the heavens  
alabaster skies  
your creator the puppeteer

In April of this year, I gave my advanced students at Talledega the *1855 Preface to Walt Whitman's Leaves of Grass*. Just a reminder:

This is what you shall do: Love the earth and sun and the animals, despise riches, give alms to every one that asks, stand up for the stupid crazy, devote your income and labor to others, hate tyrants, argue not concerning God, have patience and indulgence toward the people, take off your hat to nothing known or unknown or to any man or number of men, go freely with powerful uneducated persons and with the young and with the mothers of families, read these leaves in the open air every season of every year of your life, re-examine all you have been told at school or church or in any book, dismiss whatever insults your own soul, and your very flesh shall be a great poem and have the richest fluency not only in its words but in the silent lines of its lips and face and between the lashes of your eyes and in every motion and joint of your body .

The looks on the students' faces were astonishing. Within the pages they read and the discussion we had, entire perceptions of writing and thinking changed. One of my students got so excited his face got red, he talked faster and faster, and he began rising up out of his desk: “I had no idea poetry could be this!” Saying to his classmates, “Do you see what he's saying a poet can do?” There was sheer joy in his recognition of something truly amazing and new. I know not to expect

that reaction always, but whatever awareness the students find, what joy or sorrow they see, they carry with them wherever their lives lead them. Reading and writing and talking opens them up to new experiences, even new understandings that just might help them stay out of prison again.

I have learned to re-evaluate my understandings and thoughts about the prison system. In my classes are groups of individuals thankful for opportunities to break the monotony of prison life, individuals thankful for the chance to learn something new, thankful to have a space where learning and growing are safe. What I have found are students who hang on to every word and who are more polite than most folks on the “outside.” I have found people trying hard to change. The classroom is a sanctuary of sorts within the walls—where art and reading and exploratory creative expression are encouraged and nurtured.

I finished my MFA in 2000 and this is my first creative writing teaching job. And as my students learn, so do I. When planning my classes I keep constant thought on a Goethe quote: “Treat a man as he is and he will remain as he is. Treat a man as he can and should be and he will become as he can and should be.” So I try to raise the bar. But in raising the bar, I've had to learn to offer a few more steps for the students who need to take a running jump. Writing is a process—and I try to teach them that process as best I can. At this point, I cannot imagine teaching in any other setting. Everyone, incarcerated or not, should have the opportunity to learn and better themselves. And aren't we as a society helping ourselves when we teach and help each other?

My work at FCI-Talledega was made possible by a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Federal Corrections Department.

Teaching at Tutwiler was made possible by grants from the Alabama State Council on the Arts to Aid to Inmate Mothers and Auburn University's Center for the Arts and Humanities.

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