

# NORTH CAROLINA LITERARY REVIEW

**ONLINE**

number 21

**2012**

**NORTH CAROLINA  
LITERATURE INTO FILM**



# LITERATURE INTO FILM

## **IN THE SPECIAL FEATURE SECTION**

Poetry by James Applewhite ■ Essays by Paul Green, James Dodson, and Eleanora E. Tate ■ And more . . .

## COVER ART

FRONT COVER PHOTOGRAPHY

by Dana Ezzell Gay and  
Mary Shannon Johnstone

Published annually by East Carolina University and by  
the North Carolina Literary and Historical Association

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Individuals or institutions may also receive *NCLR* through membership in the North Carolina Literary and Historical Association. Find membership information on the **website**.

**Individual copies** of the annual print issue are available from retail outlets (listed in the back of our issues and on our website) or from *NCLR*. Back issues of our print editions are also available for purchase, while supplies last. See the *NCLR* website for prices and tables of contents of back issues.

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#### Submissions

*NCLR* invites proposals for articles or essays about North Carolina literature, history, and culture. Much of each issue is thematically focused, but a portion of each issue is open for developing interesting proposals – particularly interviews and literary analyses (without academic jargon). *NCLR* also publishes high-quality poetry, fiction, drama, and creative nonfiction by North Carolina writers or set in North Carolina. We define a North Carolina writer as anyone who currently lives in North Carolina, has lived in North Carolina, or has used North Carolina as subject matter.

See our website for submission guidelines for the various sections of each issue. Submissions to each issue's special feature section are due August 31 of the preceding year, though proposals may be considered through early fall.

**Issue #22 (2013)** will feature North Carolina: A State of Change, A Changing State

Book reviews are usually solicited, though suggestions will be considered as long as the book is by a North Carolina writer, is set in North Carolina, or deals with North Carolina subjects. *NCLR* prefers review essays that consider the new work in the context of the writer's canon, other North Carolina literature, or the genre at large. Publishers and writers are invited to submit North Carolina-related books for review consideration. See the index of books that have been reviewed in *NCLR* on our website. *NCLR* does not review self-/subsidy-published or vanity press books.

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## Litflix: Adapting North Carolina Literature into Film

Margaret D. Bauer, Editor

Welcome to the first issue of *NCLR Online*. As you see, this electronic issue maintains the fresh and unique design created by our Art Director, Dana Ezzell Gay, and unveiled with the 2009 issue. *NCLR Online* is an open access supplement where we will now publish the book reviews and literary news that used to appear in our annual print issue, as well as some content related to the year's special feature topic. Providing book reviews to as broad an audience as possible helps to fulfill *NCLR's* mission to serve as ambassador for North Carolina writers. Now writers can link our reviews and award stories to their websites and Facebook pages. And drawing attention to the annual special feature topic in advance of publication will give readers time to subscribe before the summer mailing of the print issue.

To introduce our 2012 focus on North Carolina Literature into Film, we reprint here an essay by pre-eminent North Carolina playwright Paul Green on the subject of moviemaking. Since another of *NCLR's* missions is to bring attention to writers whose work has been recently neglected or even forgotten, reprinting essays like Green's and making them widely accessible will, I hope, reintroduce the writer to the public beyond North Carolina. Indeed, when I sent Laurence Avery's essay on Green's screenwriting experience (forthcoming in the print issue) to our film experts on the editorial board, their feedback included requests for more information about Green. New to North Carolina, they did not know of his important role in drama and so wanted to learn more about the literary relevance of his screenwriting.

In *NCLR's* other mission of introducing new writers, Editorial Assistant Amanda Stevens reviews a debut story collection that reflects how film finds its way into literature as much as literature into film: Tamra Wilson's *"Dining with Robert Redford" and Other*

*Stories* (the title story of which was first published in *NCLR*). Wilson's stories explore Americans' fascination with movie stars and other celebrities.

This section also includes essays by two of the writers who will join us here in Greenville in September for the ninth Eastern North Carolina Literary Homecoming, the theme of which is "Litflix: Adapting North Carolina Literature into Film": James Dodson and Eleanor E. Tate have written about seeing their books turned into movies. More such content relevant to the writers coming for the literary homecoming (on September 21–22) will appear in the print issue forthcoming this summer.

Between now and September, several community events will take place throughout Eastern North Carolina, where participants will have the opportunity to talk about various film adaptations of North Carolina literature. The ENCLH website and *NCLR's* Facebook page will post more information about these events and the literary homecoming program in the coming months. Check back frequently.

The 2012 literary homecoming will begin, as usual, with the Friday evening presentation of the Roberts Award for Literary Inspiration, and the recipient this year will be, we are pleased to announce here, Eastern North Carolina poet James Applewhite. Read also in the special feature section of this supplemental issue two poems by our honoree that are relevant to the theme – or perhaps a reversal of the theme – film finding its way into North Carolina literature, one poem alluding to actress Joan Crawford and the other to a movie musical, *South Pacific*. We thank James Applewhite and LSU Press for permission to reprint these poems, and you can look forward to more film-inspired poetry by this eastern North Carolina poet to come in the print issue – two previously unpublished poems. We invite you then to



## North Carolina LITERATURE INTO FILM

join us in Greenville next fall to honor the poet and hear NCLR's Poetry Editor Jeffrey Franklin and Duke University alumna Sally Rosen Kindred (once a student in Professor Applewhite's classes, now a published poet) speak that evening about Applewhite's amazing body of work (his twelfth volume forthcoming from LSU Press in 2013).

In addition to James Applewhite's poetry in this section, we include a poem by one of the finalists of the first James Applewhite Poetry Prize competition: C.G. Thompson's poem "Border Crossings," with its reference to *The Green Hornet*, seemed appropriate to the special feature topic (more of the Applewhite competition finalists can be read in the other sections of this issue and also in the print issue).

After reading the special feature section of this electronic issue, check out the Next Issue page of our website to see what we've got lined up for our print issue. Of course, we couldn't cover all the film adaptations we have learned about over the past several months, so if your favorite is missing, remember that we have a Flashbacks section in every issue. It is not too late to explore a film adaptation you've enjoyed (or perhaps not enjoyed but want to write about) or to interview a writer you know whose work was adapted and then submit your article or interview for our consideration. ■

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COURTESY OF  
BRITISH FILM INSTITUTE

The

BY PAUL GREEN

INTRODUCED BY MARGARET D. BAUER

# Theatre and the Screen

Reprinted from PAUL GREEN, *Drama and the Weather: Some Notes and Papers on Life and the Theatre* (New York: French, 1958), with permission from the Paul Green Foundation.<sup>1</sup>

To say the least, Paul Green, North Carolina's preeminent playwright, was not enamored with the film industry after working as a screenwriter. Watching his own work adapted into film may also have been a factor in prompting him to write "A Playwright's Notes on Drama and the Screen." This essay was originally published in *The New York Times* on February 4, 1934, less than two weeks after the Charlotte, North Carolina, premiere of *Carolina*, a movie very loosely based on Green's Broadway play *The House of Connelly*.<sup>2</sup> Perhaps disappointment in (if not dismay about) this film adaptation of his own work inspired him to express his concern about the failure of the film industry to live up to Green's perception of its potential to bring dramatic *art* to the masses.

NCLR Editor MARGARET D. BAUER is currently working on a critical edition of Paul Green's *The House of Connelly*.

ABOVE Janet Gaynor in *Carolina* (Fox Film Corporation, 1934), a movie loosely based upon Paul Green's 1931 play *The House of Connelly*




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**“CAROLINA, THE ALL-TALKIE . . . IS THE HOUSE OF CONNELLY  
FALLEN UPON EVIL DAYS.”—PHILIP K. SCHEUER, “JANET GAYNOR  
INVADES SOUTH: CAROLINA TYPICAL SCREEN VERSION OF PLAY,”  
LOS ANGELES TIMES 9 FEB. 1934: 12.**

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On February 7, 1934, the *Raleigh News and Observer* ran an excerpt of Green's essay under the title “Dimes vs. Art.”<sup>3</sup> This home state paper begins with section III of the full text that appears here, thus leaving out Green's recollection of watching D.W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) when he was a young man. Perhaps the paper's editors did not want to remind readers that this movie, with its white supremacy agenda, was based on a novel by a North Carolinian, Thomas Dixon. But Paul Green was not reticent about mentioning the notorious film. Talking with such interviewers as James R. Spence, Green discussed *The Birth of a Nation* even more extensively than he does in this essay. He explains to Spence that although much of the impact of Griffith's film is derived from its music, “[t]he effect of *The Birth of a Nation* was doubly strong in that it was a darned good dramatic story. It was well done. It had pathos, heartache, fervor, antagonism, even hate in it. The power of the drama was such that the spillover effect was not spiritually healthy.” Green's testament to the “power” of this particular film may be disturbing but attests all the more to the power he attributes to the film medium in general. He recalled to Spence that he had “never seen art used with more fervent result than that picture.” Griffith “had a great picture, unfortunately,” Green said, explaining candidly the “unfortunately”: “After you had gone through the experience of seeing this thing and appreciating it, there was this hangover of antagonism. There's no question about it that . . . when you came out from it and [saw] a black man, you didn't feel more like embracing him[; rather,] you felt more like pushing him away.”<sup>4</sup> Such a statement coming from Paul Green, a man who protested capital punishment in North Carolina because of the disparate ratio of black and white convicts on death row, supports Green's assessment of the power of Griffith's film.



<sup>1</sup> To learn more about the Paul Green Foundation, see Laurence G. Avery's essay on Paul Green in *NCLR 18* (2009). *NCLR* thanks the Paul Green Foundation for providing funding for the movie photographs featured here, as well as for providing the Paul Green photographs.

<sup>2</sup> Paul Green, “A Playwright's Notes on Drama and the Screen,” *New York Times* 4 Feb. 1934: sec. 10, 1–2.

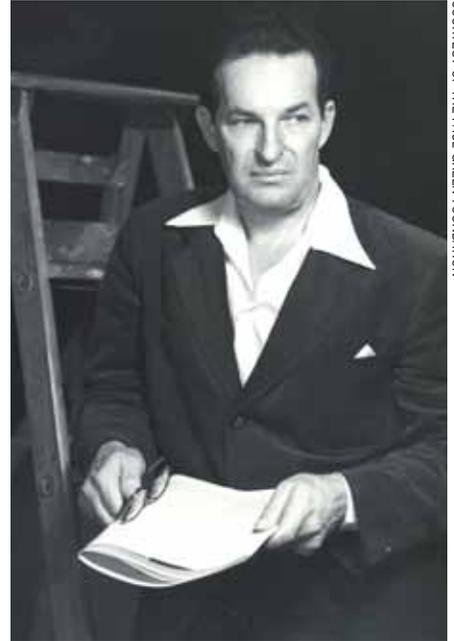
<sup>3</sup> “Dimes vs. Art,” *News & Observer* [Raleigh] 7 Feb. 1934, morning ed.: 4.

<sup>4</sup> Green's remarks to James R. Spence, recorded in the 1970s, are quoted from Spence's *Watering the Sahara: Recollections of Paul Green from 1894 to 1937*, ed. Margaret D. Bauer (Raleigh: North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources, 2008) 158.

In the essay reprinted here, Green continues his point about the potential of film to bring drama to a broader audience with a more positive example, turning from the popularity of *Birth of a Nation* to the “loud appreciation” of audiences for Charlie Chaplin, an innovator in what Green envisioned as “the new imaginative cinema.”

2012 is the seventy-fifth anniversary of the opening of Green’s symphonic outdoor drama *The Lost Colony*, which (except for the blackout years of World War II) has been performed in Manteo, North Carolina, every summer since 1937. The creator of the symphonic outdoor drama, Green knew what appealed to audiences. He respected his audience – more, it seems, than filmmakers did (or do). Green believed that rather than challenging their audiences with more substantive content, some (perhaps most) filmmakers cater to the lowest intellectual common denominator, as long as that person has the cost of a ticket.

*NCLR* readers are invited to learn more about “Paul Green and the Movies” in Laurence G. Avery’s essay, forthcoming in the print issue, *NCLR 21* (2012), in anticipation of which, we reprint here, with the permission of the Paul Green Foundation, the playwright’s own provocative essay, which he retitled “The Theatre and the Screen” when he collected it in his book *Drama and the Weather*.<sup>5</sup>



COURTESY OF THE PAUL GREEN FOUNDATION

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**LATER AT NIGHT THE FARMERS, THEIR WIVES AND CHILDREN, ALL ON THE ROADS THAT LED HOME LIKE LENGTHENING SPOKES FROM THE BRIGHT CITY TO THE RIM OF DARKNESS, WERE TALKING OF THIS WONDER.**

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I

One day when I was a little boy I stood with my father in a sideshow at the state fair and saw a miracle happen on a screen. A tiny puppet man in a top hat was shown diving from a high platform into a swimming pool and then springing backward out of the water and up onto his perch again. The tent that day was crowded with farmers and their wives and children who had come to see the sword swallower and the wild man from Borneo. But when for the last act this jerky little figure came walking along the side of the tent as it were, made his manikin bow to us the audience, and then went twirling down from his high perch into the water, and zoop! back again up the way he’d come, we thought no more of smoking knives or bloody meat that day. Later at night the farmers, their wives

and children, all on the roads that led home like lengthening spokes from the bright city to the rim of darkness, were talking of this wonder.

“But the thing moved like a real man, Mommee.”

“So it did move. It was a man.”

“How did they make it move like that?”

“You tell him, George.”

“How did they, Poppee?”

“Edison and such fellows can do anything these days.”

“But he dived somersaults backwards and up in the air, I bet twenty feet.”

“Them fellows are smart, I tell you.”

“But Poppee – a man can’t really do that, can he, Poppee?”

“Go to sleep, son, I tell you.”

<sup>5</sup> Green also later included the essay in his *The Hawthorn Tree: Some Papers and Letters on Life and the Theatre* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1943).

## II

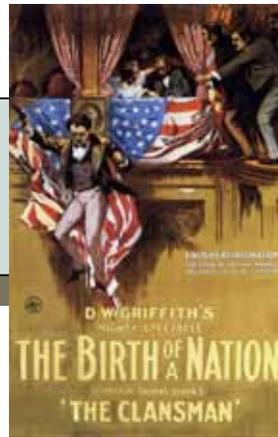
In 1915 *The Birth of a Nation* came to our capital city. The newspapers and wayside signs worked up a lot of interest in our section, and I rode off to see it. After a trip of several hours over thirty-five miles of miry road in a T-model Ford, I arrived at the crowded theatre door and finally made my way inside and up into the balcony. Every seat in the house was taken. The lights went down, the orchestra began to play, and things started to happen. It would be hard to describe the effect of the picture on that audience. There on the screen in front of our eyes not more than twenty yards away, we saw brave armies fighting as only brave ones can. We heard the roar of cannon, the neighing of horses, saw the bleeding and the dying, the fluttering flags

**THE THUNDER AND BEAT OF THE ORCHESTRA WHIPPED OUR SOULS ALONG IN THE STORY.**

and banners. And all the while the thunder and beat of the orchestra whipped our souls along in the story. Now like a breath the tumult is gone, the rumble and cannonading die out, and a beautiful woodland vision entrances us. There stands the handsome Little Colonel and his exquisite Southern sweetheart, dove in hand and all, saying a fond farewell, and the music of the violin proclaims the piteousness of their love. Then with a flick the scene has changed again, and we see the dark and sliding figure of the villain prowling around a vine-clad cottage, and the evil of his nature is intensified for us in the croomy notes of the bassoons.

So the story went on unfolding, in dumb show, captions and musical sound, telling the hopes, the loves, and the dangers that beset these our heroic characters. The audience sat one moment in breathless anxiety, another moment it was applauding the short triumph of virtue and honor. And when at last the robed and wind-blown figure of the Klansman on his horse stood in a medium close-up on a hill, and the bugle in the orchestra announced with its high note that a stern and powerful force

of righteousness was risen to defend the innocent ones from all villains of whatsoever creed or color, a frenzy ran among the spectators like fire among wintry broomstraw. There were yells and shouts, clenching of fists, and loud unashamed oaths. One woman directly in front of me sprang up as in a holy-roller hysteria and screamed, "Kill 'em, Kill 'em!" and then like a lady in a play or protracted meeting fell with a fainting thud to the floor. The ushers hurried up and carried her out, but even as they went, she opened her eyes and looked longingly and avidly back towards the screen. (Not until years later did I realize that without the bugle note the lady would not have fainted. It was then I understood the place of music in the theatre.)



I saw *The Birth of a Nation* many times, and its effect on the audience was always much the same. True, these audiences were Southern, and this would account for some of the emotional outbursts on racial matters, but from general reports this film was a great success in

all parts of the world. (I should like to mention here that, of all the modern stage plays I have witnessed or heard about, none of them seem to have affected the audience to the degree that this melodramatic and romantic story did.)

**OF ALL THE MODERN STAGE PLAYS I HAVE WITNESSED OR HEARD ABOUT, NONE OF THEM SEEM TO HAVE AFFECTED THE AUDIENCE TO THE DEGREE THAT THIS MELODRAMATIC AND ROMANTIC STORY DID.**



ABOVE LEFT **Paul Green**

ABOVE RIGHT **D.W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) is based on North Carolina writer Thomas Dixon's novel *The Clansman* (1905).**

The next event in the movies for me was Charlie Chaplin. One day in 1919 his *Shoulder Arms* was shown in a French cantonment for us American soldiers. Here again the audience was moved to vent its loud appreciation. Chuckles and gales of laughter swept through the hall at the antics of the little man, and for a while the memory of air raids, whining 75s, snipers, stink and filth of trenches was forgotten. He was the divine magician playing with the bauble of our souls for an hour. And some weeks later, when I saw the likeness of Charlot hauled through the streets of Paris and followed by a great crowd of hurraing boys and girls, I joined in the procession which led to a moving-picture entrance. And from that day to this I have followed wherever he leads – except in politics. A few years ago I sat with a friend who, like me, was seeing *The Gold Rush* for the tenth time. After the show we spoke in guilty defense of Shakespeare and the drama and felt sad that neither of us would wish to see one of those plays ten times. But the afterthought that we had read some of Shakespeare's plays more than ten times and would continue to read them comforted us where thoughts of the stage could not.

**HERE INDEED WAS THE CREATION OF THE MACHINE AGE WHICH WAS THE EQUAL OF THE WORD AS SPOKEN BY MEN OF OLD. HERE WAS A MEDIUM INFINITE AND UNIVERSAL IN ITS POWER, ABLE TO DEPICT ANYTHING – WHETHER IN HEAVEN, OR EARTH, OR IN HELL . . .**

### III

Some time ago I had the chance to do some movie writing in Hollywood. With all the glaring evidence of cheap pictures that fill the world before me, and with plenty of warnings against Babylon and all its waste and iniquities, I landed at one of the major studios. This at last was the glittering world of Pirandellian make-believe, where everything seems what it is not and yet is what it seems. Here were

RIGHT **Bette Davis with Hardie Albright in *The Cabin in the Cotton* (Warner Bros., 1932), the first screenplay written by Paul Green, Davis's first role as a "vixen"**

ABOVE RIGHT **Bette Davis and co-star Richard Barthelmess in *The Cabin in the Cotton***

hundreds of acres of buildings where dreams were manufactured, where thousands of people went in and out early and late creating millions of feet of film on which were imprinted little shadows which, placed against a steady light, acted, talked, and danced and spun their thousand-and-one tales of ambition, love, hope, or despair.

The first thing to do was to see inside and get acquainted with the goings-on. And so I did and tried to understand what I saw. I read all the books on the movies I could get – both European and American. I poked about in the cutting rooms, the wardrobes, the projection rooms and construction departments. I read the engineers' handbooks on light and sound devices. I made myself familiar with all the camera terms from "angle-shot" to "wipe-off." And the more I learned the more enthusiastic I became. Here indeed was the creation of the machine age which was the equal of the Word as spoken by men of old. Here was a medium infinite and universal in its power, able to depict anything – whether in heaven, or earth, or in hell; whether of man's relation to man or man's deepest submerged self. For the first time in history a completely democratic art form was available, capable of answering any vital demand made upon it by the imagination of any human being. For the first time in the history of the world we had a dramatic medium in the movies which could be understood by black and white, yellow or red, the only requirement being that the audience must be able to see or hear – better if it could do both. For pantomime is and can be understood by all men of whatever race, creed, or calling, and music likewise. A Japanese will laugh at Charlie Chaplin even as a New Yorker will.



COURTESY OF GEORGE EASTMAN HOUSE MOTION PICTURE DEPARTMENT COLLECTION

For several weeks I labored on a script, trying to measure up in some degree to the camera which was to express the story I had to tell. No one hurried me, nobody said do this or that. Apparently I was left free to do as I chose. What was this nonsense I had heard about the cramping power of Hollywood and its slave-driving methods with writers? I began to doubt tales of woe which brethren of my kind had been wont to tell. At last my script was in some sort of final shape, and conferences with producer, director, leading actor, and men of the technical staff began. The scenario was read, discussed, and tentatively accepted. I was pleased to find that the boss men said only a little revision was needed here and there and the thing would be ready for shooting. The revisions suggested seemed sensible enough, and I gladly tried to make them. So the script was finally delivered into the producer's hands, and I began another writing job while it was being shot. Now and then, I would hear a report from the lot that "everything is going



COURTESY OF THE BRITISH FILM INSTITUTE

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**“YOU SEE, YOUR SCRIPT LEANED TOO MUCH TOWARD ONE OF THESE CURSED ARTISTIC PRODUCTIONS, AND THAT’S A THING NO STUDIO WILL ALLOW. THERE’S NOT A CENT OF MONEY IN THEM.”**

---

fine,” and I was beginning to feel some pride in the fact that this picture was to be a little better maybe than the general Hollywood product. A few times I went on the set and watched the making and came away with nothing but admiration for the studio and its employees. How hard and seriously everybody seemed to be working – from early morning till late at night they labored. And as time went on I learned that, contrary to general report, hard work was the rule in Hollywood. Nervous breakdowns there are not all liquor, love, and libidos.

When the picture was finally completed, I went downtown to see it. It turned out to be a straightforward, level, and unimpressive thing. Whatever touch of inspiration I thought I had in writing it was gone. On referring to my script, I found a bit here, a bit there, this end of a scene, this key line of a scene changed or left out. Somebody had been there while I was gone. I discussed the matter some days later with another writer – a man who formerly

had been a pretty well known but struggling novelist and now was an ace scenario writer with a purple Cadillac and a seaplane to his credit. “Yes,” he said, “they gave your script to me to look over. I hope you didn’t mind. We often have to do that.”

“Do what?” I asked.

“Well, smooth things up. You see, your script leaned too much toward one of these cursed artistic productions, and that’s a thing no studio will allow. There’s not a cent of money in them.”

“How do you know there’s not?”

“Listen, this is a business out here, not an art. You’d better go back to Greenwich Village or South Carolina.”

“North Carolina,” I corrected with some heat.

“Well, wherever it is.”

“But Chaplin –,” I began.

“Yes, Chaplin!” he snapped.

“And Disney.”

“Yes, Disney,” he murmured.



COURTESY OF THE PAUL GREEN FOUNDATION AND BETSY GREEN MOYER

## IV

My friend was right, as I well found out. Making pictures in Hollywood is a business, an industry, and with its present aims and methods has to be. This simple and first fact is the source of all the trouble that befalls anyone interested in the art of the cinema, whether he be actor, writer, musician, architect, dancer, sculptor, painter, or stage designer. Since the old nickelodeon days when this novel form of mass entertainment tapped a mine of riches for any hustling Jack, Harry, or Sam, money-making has been its prime aim. And this being true, it was logical that, as the different studios developed, they should follow the methods of big business and in the competitive market force a speeding up and leveling out of production that would prohibit any sort of experimentation or excursions into new creations. The only experimentation they can or will afford to be interested in is that of novelty. Let any new trick or gadget be invented which might be used to intrigue the populace through the till, and the executive will grab it in an instant. But let an Eisenstein or Clair try to interest them in cinematic art and they politely but firmly refuse to hear. “We’d like to do fine things,” they will always tell you, “but such pictures never pay. We’ll show you the books.”

The studios have a product to sell to the masses of the world, and in order to sell to

everybody they think they must strike a common denominator of general illiteracy and bad taste. Their pictures are standardized by what they consider to be the intelligence quotient of the majority of people in the small villages and crossroad places. For there are many times more fourteen-year-old minds in the world than thirty-year-old minds – and a dime is a dime no matter whose it is, and the best picture from the Hollywood point of view is the picture that attracts the most dimes. This is obvious and well known to everybody, but I mention it in order to somewhat explain, for instance, that pernicious institution known as censorship. That powerful organization is in actuality an economics-inspired liaison medium between the studios and the public. Outwardly – and hypocritically – it has as its intent the welfare of the country’s morals. But what the organization really does is to keep the studios informed as to the varying whims of the fourteen-year-old mind and what is likely to go best in Ohio and not to go in North Carolina or vice versa.

**THE STUDIOS HAVE A PRODUCT TO SELL TO THE MASSES OF THE WORLD, AND IN ORDER TO SELL TO EVERYBODY THEY THINK THEY MUST STRIKE A COMMON DENOMINATOR OF GENERAL ILLITERACY AND BAD TASTE.**

By censoring each script carefully before shooting and reporting its findings to its employer (the producer), the censorship board saves the studios hundreds of thousands of dollars a year in wasted footage. No wonder the producers are willing to provide the salaries of that body, for after all it is one of the best paying parts of their business. And so it is that the writer who strives to create a script which in some way shall express the drama of his characters, or the problems of life as he feels them, is again and again defeated in his purpose by the censor. And once the censor says nay to a line or a scene, the writer is helpless. The producer simply has to point to the ruling of that office, if he cares to, and say, “Here’s the public board on morality and customs. It says no” – and no it is. Sometimes a producer will overrule the censor, as



metropolis, a generation or so ago. In fact it is the old theatre in a new form. The movies through the universality of their medium have been able to provide more entertainment to more people at less cost than the old professional theatre could, and the Erlangers and Shuberts have pretty much disappeared. And just as the art or imaginative theatre grew out of a revolt against the professional theatre, so will, I hope and think, the art of imaginative cinema grow out of the professional

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**AND WHEN THIS NEW ART HAS BROKEN ITSELF LOOSE FROM THE  
INDUSTRY AND PROFESSIONALISM OF HOLLYWOOD AND STARTED ON  
ITS OWN PATH, WE SHALL SEE MOVING PICTURE DRAMAS WORTHY  
OF THE NAME.**

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in the case of a recent sensational convict picture, but these differences of judgment are rare.

Such difficulties as these, to repeat, make it impossible for one interested in the moving pictures as an art to sink himself in Hollywood without some total loss in time, energy, and life's enthusiasm. He can replenish his purse perhaps, but it is likely to prove a costly gain otherwise. There is hardly any place on the globe so full of unhappy would-be artists – writers, musicians, actors, and poets. They are surfeited with hush money, but many of them cannot hush the gnawing that wakes them up at night when they think of the book they had planned to write, the play they yet will write, or the symphony that struggles somewhere within them. They are wearied to distraction trying to provide cheap stuff at the behest of their cynical-minded and ignorant employers, the producers – men who seem to have a special genius for exploiting the gullibility, the appetites and weaknesses of the public. And why should they not be wearied, yes, wearied and undone? For what joy, what encouragement and inspiration can there be in continuing to assist at the corruption and pollution of a people's soul?

V

But even so, Hollywood is essentially no worse than the old Broadway theatre, or for that matter the professional entertainment theatre in any great

movies. The hundreds of dissatisfied creative minds, whose sole job day after day is the making of money for bankers, millionaires, and stockholders, will some day – and very soon at that – break into open revolt. There is no price large enough to keep a rebellious spirit indefinitely enslaved. Already a few independent producers, writers, and artists are trying a few forlorn experiments in creating pure forms of cinematic art, both here and abroad. And just as the imaginative theatre has had its Appia, its Stanislavsky, and its Craig, so will the new imaginative cinema have its apostles and philosophers who, following the lead of Charlie Chaplin and Disney, will give to the art a statement of new form and vital method. And when this new art has broken itself loose from the industry and professionalism of Hollywood and started on its own path, we shall see moving picture dramas worthy of the name. Writers, actors, directors, and musicians will then take joy and pride in their work and will strive to the best of their minds and souls to deal with the camera as its essential nature provides. And what they create will be of their own making, and the writers will be free to write scenarios as full of imagination and poetry as their gifts will allow. And these scenarios will have the dignity of publication, just as the stage plays are now published, and the author will have every privilege in the art motion picture that his brother playwright has in the art theatre.

## VI

In the imaginative motion picture art, as I like to call it, which is soon to be a power in the world, this truth will be recognized; namely, that the art of screen is not the art of the theatre. And conversely the theatre – (that is, the imaginative theatre, for no other is really left, now that the movies have taken over the professional theatre) – this theatre must realize that its art is not that of the motion picture. Each has a nature of its own technique. But in each the poet as creator and storyteller shall be supreme. In the motion picture he has a means of universal and infinite power – the camera. In the theatre he likewise has a means of universal and infinite richness – the intimate presence. In the former he has an invention which eradicates all the material difficulties of depiction which beset the stage, but which projects forth only shadows of two dimensions and begins with a certain aloofness therefor. In the latter he has the embodied being which projects only itself and in three dimensions and begins with a complete and vital closeness therefor. And as the essential nature of the camera is expressed in pantomime and accompanying sound, so the essential nature of the intimate presence is expressed in words and accompanying pantomime.

Now those who lament the death of the theatre before the onslaught of the movies do not grasp the vital differences of the two mediums and likewise forget the godlike power which resides in the word spoken by the intimate presence. It is immortal and cannot die, and a theatre founded on it will never perish. The theatre is not dead. Only the worst of it is dead or moved elsewhere. Let that worst go with its methods of industry and mass marketing. The best, more purified and certain of itself shall stand, for the very purpose of time and the nature of man are that before history is finished the best shall somehow come forth to light.

But this theatre of the imaginative word and intimate presence must refit itself more in terms of the machine age if it is to be free and powerful as it should be. It must take a lesson from the flexibility and universality of the camera medium and make more flexible and universal its own medium. It must throw away the bothersome clogs of too many material props which impede the flow and lift of the dramatist's story. Slight suggestions and symbols should be sufficient. Let the poet follow his story wherever it leads – into bogs, boudoirs, or skyscrapers. Let the word speak. With the great advance in discoveries concerning light, almost any change of scenery and scene effect can be worked instantaneously; and when the curtain goes up on the stage the processes of fade-ins, fade-outs, and dissolves which the movies have discovered can be used so that the dramatist's imagination and the audience's attention remain one.

And under such conditions poetry will return again to the stage, and the freedom that Shakespeare knew in his Elizabethan theatre will be ours to enchantment. And whereas the new motion picture art form will be the imaginative sight and sound unlimited, so the new theatre will be the home of the imaginative word and vitalized being unbound. And once more, as in the days of Shakespeare, we shall be able to parade before our vision all the manifestations of nature and the subtleties of the mind which are usable in the movie medium. And once more music in the theatre will return to us, above which the high poet's words are calling. ■



**THE NEW MOTION PICTURE ART FORM WILL BE THE IMAGINATIVE SIGHT AND SOUND UNLIMITED, SO THE NEW THEATRE WILL BE THE HOME OF THE IMAGINATIVE WORD AND VITALIZED BEING UNBOUND.**

*Border Crossings*

BY C.G. THOMPSON

**FINALIST IN THE 2011 JAMES APPLEWHITE  
POETRY PRIZE COMPETITION**

Instinct is what matters. Try not to overthink.  
Let your feet take the lead, rocking forward  
and back, forward and back, quarter-turning  
to “Wild, Wild West,” hip-hop song inspired  
by the movie version of a steam-punk show  
of years ago, song sampling from songs before,  
circle of influences like this two-wall line dance.  
Cha-cha-cha to the left, cha-cha-cha to the right,

face the opposite direction, cross over, cross over,  
start again, rock forward, readjust yourself  
in space. It’s best when you’re there, not there –  
too much presence self-conscious – so my mind  
drifts home, where my still-rolling VCR tapes  
episodes of *The Green Hornet*, 1960s series  
born as comic book, now remade for the big screen,  
one-eighty turn, one-eighty turn, but maintaining

a cult following, its fame largely due to Bruce Lee.  
Relegated to the background then, as an Asian,  
he captured each scene he was in, fast-kicking  
in a chauffeur’s suit, giving millions their first view  
of martial arts. He studied Wing Chun, boxing, fencing,  
defined his style as no style, economy of motion,  
streetwise sense (a gunshot rings out from the song),  
influences he made his own. Become the fight, the dance.



*Pillow Talk* (cyanotype, 17x17) by Ben Isburg

**C.G. THOMPSON** won the NCSU Poetry Contest in 2008. In 2011, she studied in the Gilbert-Chappell Distinguished Poet Program. Her poetry has appeared in such venues as *Tar River Poetry*, *Sandcutters*, and the *News & Observer*. Another of her Applewhite competition poems will be published in *NCLR* 2012. She also writes short fiction.

Denver resident **BEN ISBURG** received a BFA from Creighton University in 2001 and then studied art at ECU from 2002 to 2005. His work has been exhibited at Castell Photography Gallery in Asheville, NC, and at Lone Leaf Gallery in Washington, NC.

NCLR Art Director **DANA EZZELL GAY** designed the layouts of the Green essay and this poem. See more information about her in the inside of the front cover.

## *Last Night We Saw South Pacific*

BY JAMES APPLEWHITE

I wake to see a cardinal in our white  
crape myrtle. My eye aches. Bees celebrate  
morning come with their dynamo-hum  
around a froth of bloom.

Though presently it's paradise for the bees,  
noon will reach ninety-nine degrees.  
*Le vierge, le vivace et le bel aujourd' hui*  
will stupefy hope in ennui.

I watched *Raging Planet* on TV.  
Earth's orbit around the sun appears  
to alter every hundred thousand years.  
Each thirty million years,

mass extinctions attend Earth's  
traverse of the galactic plane.  
The asteroid rain that cratered the moon  
returns, brings species' deaths.

In the Hudson Bay region of Quebec,  
the Laurentide ice sheet  
only a geological eye-blink  
ago lay two miles thick.

Disasters preceded us, like violent parents.  
Pangaea's fragmenting land mass  
drowned origins like lost Atlantis:  
an enigma for consciousness.

These continents will re-collide  
in their rock-bending tectonic dance,  
as once before Tyrannosaurus died.  
So change continues by chance,

as if meaningless – granite to sand,  
sand to sandstone, sandstone to sand.  
In five billion years, the sun will expand,  
to Venus and Mars, then end

planet Earth. The hydrangea blooms  
its dry blue, burns a brown lavender.  
Earth whirls in space and August comes –  
this slanted light my calendar.

As I water the pink phlox, I wonder  
what use there is for a world of matter –  
why the universe exploding into being invents  
night and star-incandescence?

We are the part of it that feels it,  
thinks it, seeing this time in its slant  
on bloom with our physical brains that  
change it as they sense it.

We *become*. We hum a story as tune,  
in sonata form that runes this sphinx-  
riddle sequence as notes that the pharynx  
fluctuates, to *mean*.

So "This Nearly Was Mine" assuages,  
braced against old loss and war.  
Emile de Becque sounds rich with knowledge  
of children and love, before.

REPRINTED FROM JAMES APPLEWHITE, *A DIARY OF ALTERED LIGHT*, © 2006,  
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*A Measure* (transfer, acrylic and oil on paper, 18<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub>x15)  
by Paul Hartley, courtesy of Lee Hansley Gallery

**JAMES APPLEWHITE** is a four-time recipient of the Roanoke-Chowan Award for Poetry given by the North Carolina Literary and Historical Association. His other honors include a National Endowment for the Arts Award, the Jean Stein Award in Poetry from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, the Associated Writing Programs

Contemporary Poetry Prize, and the North Carolina Award in Literature. In 1995, he was elected to membership in the Fellowship of Southern Writers. In 2007, the North Carolina Writers Conference honored his achievements, and in 2008, he was inducted into the North Carolina Literary Hall of Fame.



*We Have Paris Box* (mixed media, 11½x8½x6¼) by Paul Hartley, courtesy of Lee Hansley Gallery

## *Joan Crawford and Others*

BY JAMES APPLEWHITE

An actress surviving black and white nitrate  
persists as hairline and cheeks in stills –  
more real, perfected, than when passionate  
breath animated her nostrils.

So memory understands backwardly –  
arrests a flicker of moving frames.  
A lover's irises widen to see  
a child join shapes and names.

Earlier, your eyes burned intensely  
blue in porch dark over the velvet coat  
when I struck a match for the candle. Sky  
of all summer above the boat

aureoled you, the woman I would marry –  
already implicitly flanked by sons  
and a daughter. So love retrospectively  
establishes the triptych of icons.

But days as they change and change us  
Move over in sun and rain, eroding  
clean profile, firm chin – the seasonal process  
a film before editing.

A snapshot of you in a wedding dress  
in dust on the piano doesn't alter.  
Like a figure seen from a train, this stillness  
moves our lives along faster.

We scheme for an evening's love-conclusion  
like a last-inning hit or brilliant basket,  
but carelessly written scenes drag on  
without the defining moment.

Pyramids, Crusades, the Roman Empire's  
sieges, holy wars and victory fires  
abash us in their Technicolored portrayal.  
Lancelot never finds the grail

but gets a girl. Ingrid's eyelids, rising,  
outweigh elephants, airplane-wings –  
though the fascist director demands  
legions of extras, foreign lands.

REPRINTED FROM JAMES APPLEWHITE, *SELECTED POEMS*, © 2005,  
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**PAUL HARTLEY** (1943–2009) was a professor in the School of Art and Design at ECU for thirty-seven years. Lee Hansley, who represented Hartley, honored his memory in 2010 by mounting an exhibition of works by over a hundred of Hartley's former students. Hartley's works are in the permanent collections of the North Carolina Museum of Art

in Raleigh, the Weatherspoon Art Museum at UNC-Greensboro, the Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art in Winston-Salem, and the Greenville Museum of Art, among others. See more of Hartley's work in *NCLR* 2010, 2011 and forthcoming in 2012, and on the Lee Hansley Gallery website.

## CELEBRITY WATCHERS

*a review by Amanda Stevens*

**Tamra Wilson. "Dining with Robert Redford" & Other Stories. Bristol, VA: Little Creek Books, 2011.**

**AMANDA STEVENS** is an NCLR Editorial Assistant. She is enrolled in ECU, working on her master's degree in English with a concentration in literature.

**TAMRA WILSON's** work has appeared in numerous literary magazines, including NCLR, in which she published the title story of this collection in 2002 and another of her stories in 2001 (both under the name Tammy Wilson).

Tamra Wilson describes the stories in her collection, *"Dining with Robert Redford" & Other Stories*, as "slices of small-town life in the South, with a few celebrities thrown in" ([www.tamrawilson.com](http://www.tamrawilson.com)). Wilson herself grew up in the small farming community of Shelbyville, IL, but has called North Carolina home for more than thirty years. In her stories, told from a consistently female perspective, she explores issues familiar to readers of Southern literature. A feature that sets Wilson's collection apart is that while fulfilling a certain necessity for true-to-life appeal, she also – and often – juxtaposes the quintessential small-town American South against the "glitz" of celebrity status.

Wilson says in an interview in the *Hickory Daily Record* that she believes "celebrity culture has replaced royalty in most modern societies. That's why it permeates our consciousness."\* From the sighting of Robert Redford at a western North Carolina restaurant in the book's title story to the mention of other stars like Kevin Costner, Brad Pitt, Pamela Anderson, and Alex Trebek in "Remembering Miss Wonderful" and "Dick & Rhoda," celebrities pop in and out of these stories with regularity. In these and other stories in the collection, Wilson examines the influences of celebrity culture in American society, particularly through the characters' keen awareness of social status and its ties to economic class.

In "The Glamour Stretcher," for example, the young narrator's mother frets about cooking for

out-of-town relatives visiting from California. These are wealthy relatives, whom the narrator's mother believes are accustomed to expensive and exotic meals and entertainment and are used to being in the company of celebrities and Hollywood "hot-shots." As the narrator notes, "To [Mom], a visit from them was like opening the doors to the Maharaja and his maharini – exotic but intimidating" (27). It is no surprise to the narrator when the anticipation of their arrival sends her mother into overdrive, "cleaning, de-junking the closets and stewing over prospective meals" (28). On their part, Aunt Ramona and Uncle Doug go out of their way to give the impression that they are wealthier and more glamorous than they actually are. When the narrator's grandmother died years prior, these relatives dropped everything to fly to the rescue. Her mother was touched, but her father claimed that their trip "had more to do with Uncle Doug having his pilot's license and showing off" (26) than providing emotional support. At the funeral, Aunt Ramona moved down the receiving line looking "glamorous and blonde in her West Coast clothes . . . like a movie star on Oscar night . . . draw[ing] quite a few stares in her form-fitting sheath with platter collar and pillbox hat, pointed nails and beaded stilettos" (26–27). According to the narrator's father, Ramona was supposed to be a big star before "Uncle Doug snatched [her] away from a Hollywood bigwig" (27). She even shared an apartment with Marilyn Monroe, according to Uncle Doug,

\* Richard Gould, "Professional Writer Pens First Book," rev. of *"Dining with Robert Redford" & Other Stories*, *Hickory Daily Record* 19 Sept. 2011: web.



PHOTOGRAPH BY CATHERINE YAMASAKI

though no one seems to believe this but the narrator, since Doug is “known to stretch a story now and then” (29).

Still, awareness of the probable posing does not prevent the narrator’s mother from going out of her own way to try to impress their visitors. She assumes Uncle Doug and Aunt Ramona look down on the rest of the family and works vigorously not only to prove them wrong but also to avoid disasters that “would become part of the family lore to be told and re-told long after the cook had stirred her last pot” (25). At the same time, Aunt Ramona and Uncle Doug continue their fiction because they have built up a reputation for themselves and cannot bear to lose face. They may or may not look down upon the narrator’s family, but they definitely exaggerate their own lifestyle and means in order to keep up appearances. It

is equally clear that the narrator’s mother is intimidated by their assumed wealth and socialite status. A consequence of these adults’ concern about social position is revealed when the young narrator, awestruck by her glamorous relatives (Aunt Ramona in particular), dresses her Barbie doll in clothes that are the “epitome of glamour” (26) and pretends the doll is friends with Marilyn Monroe.

Other characters in Wilson’s collection share similar aspirations and anxieties. Many of them working-class, they are proud of what they do – at home, at work, at church, in the community – and thankful for the money they make, which helps them afford to take care of themselves and their families and, if they are lucky, splurge on a few luxuries here and there. Yet, they are ever aware of their own economic and social class and the disparity between their lifestyles and that of the celebrity ideal against which so much seems to be measured in American society. Sometimes these characters, like the mother in “The Glamour Stretcher,” develop negative opinions of those in more privileged economic circumstances, while others, like Aunt Ramona, emulate celebrities and take every opportunity to flaunt their wealth and connections. Still others, like the young narrator, entertained by and curious about celebrity lifestyle, are satisfied just to admire celebrities and maybe, if they are lucky enough, to actually see one in person – or to know someone who knows *Someone*.

Jane, a cashier at Foodliners in “The Grocery Queen,” for example, criticizes Carol Ann Richards,

the wife of a local millionaire, for miserly habits like catching every sale and cheating in store raffles in order to win prizes that she can afford to buy. Jane does not understand “why good luck is wasted” on people like Carol Ann, who “has enough money for three people, and at forty-two . . . still looks cute in her cropped pants and peachy grin” (41). Whenever Carol Ann comes into the store, Jane and her co-workers compete to determine which of them will get stuck checking her out at the register, where they will have to scan her numerous coupons. The hassle for Jane rests not so much on doing the extra work but rather on being made to do it for someone who has little need to scrimp and save – as Jane does in order to make ends meet. Though Jane recognizes that it is not charitable to judge others negatively for their economic advantages, she resents Carol Ann for masquerading as a middle-class housewife in her shopping habits while simultaneously flaunting her fortune. Like Aunt Ramona, Carol Ann “does everything in a big way, including her makeup and her hair done up like some talk show hostess” (42).

Carol Ann never misses an opportunity to brag about her many trips, yet still complains that she has not seen enough and that the only exotic place she has visited is Las Vegas. She wants to go to Italy and to South America, where Madonna starred in *Evita*, and Carol Ann speaks of London and France as though she has actually been there. She visits travel bureaus and plans trips to Australia and Buenos Aires, but her husband will not allow her to



do all the things she wants to do, so in the end, Carol Ann leaves her rich husband for a man who will indulge her sense of adventure. She runs off with Rob, the Foodliners owner, and weeks later, Jane receives a postcard from Carol Ann saying, “‘Buenos Diaz de Buenos Aires,’ as if Evita was talking . . . as she hovered in an oval bubble above elaborate marble tombs that resembled little playhouses with fancy porches” (53). Not only has Rob been helping her cheat in store drawings so that she can win trips around the world and lifetime supplies of her favorite products, but he, from what Jane and the other Foodliners workers can gather, drained his bank account in order to take Carol Ann traveling.

In this plot, Wilson explores two sides of celebrity dysfunction. Carol Ann does everything in a “big way” in order to curry favor with men and foster envy in women. Rob, with intentions as shallow as Carol Ann’s, is willing to abandon his business,

his friends, his family, the very foundations of his life, in order to win the affections of this shallow woman. His interest in Carol Ann seems less about loving her than about boosting his own social status by gaining a top-of-the-line trophy wife – and the town celebrity.

In the collection’s title story, Alma and Cliff, a couple celebrating their fortieth wedding anniversary, spy Robert Redford in a local restaurant. For Cliff, recognizing a movie star several tables over is nothing to get worked up over, but Alma cannot concentrate on “ordering dinner with Robert Redford sitting across the room” (56). Like the seven-year-old narrator in “The Glamour Stretcher,” Alma is infatuated with celebrity – particularly this celebrity. She has seen nearly every Robert Redford movie. But, on this night Cliff wants nothing more than to have a good meal and enjoy spending time with his wife, especially when they are sitting in the very restaurant she had been pestering him for weeks about trying. Alma

is actually having the time of her life, though not so much because of the restaurant as because of this brush with celebrity. She tells her husband, “I’m thrilled you brought me here, especially tonight, because I’ll never forget it as long as I live. . . . You couldn’t have given me a better gift than being right here, right now” (57). So it is no surprise to Cliff when Alma insists on getting a picture with the actor and asking for an autograph before they leave the restaurant. She finally works up the nerve to go over to the star’s table, hastily blurting out to him, “I’ve seen all your movies and you’ve always been my favorite.

Do you have any idea what this means to me to see you live in person?” (59). Even Cliff is a bit excited by this point, and the incident certainly turns out to be a memorable way for the couple to spend their anniversary together.

But Cliff’s and Alma’s evening ultimately does not go well for either of them. Cliff wanted to have a quiet meal with his wife. Alma wanted to eat at this particular restaurant. Had neither of them seen Robert Redford, they might have walked away with pleasant memories from that night. Instead, Alma embarrasses both herself and Cliff with her star-crazed excitement, not only showing little concern for the boundaries of her favorite celebrity, but assuming that, because he is a celebrity, he expects to be approached by adoring fans. Cliff, in contrast, assumes that someone like Robert Redford has better things to do with his time than listen to the exclamations of a strange couple, especially when

sharing a meal with a female companion. Thus, the anniversary evening turns contentious, and in the end, Alma's fascination with celebrity causes her a great deal of embarrassment. She is so ashamed afterward that she cannot even bear to look at the photographs she had taken or tell her friends about her once in a lifetime chance encounter with fame. Cliff finds the whole incident humorous (at Alma's expense), and thus ends up contributing to her disappointment and anger and the negative memory she will always have of this fortieth wedding anniversary.

In stories like these throughout the collection, Wilson explores the ways in which Hollywood and its famous figures have become a part of mainstream culture. Her tales compel readers to think about the emphasis on celebrity in American society and reflect on the ways in which aspirations for beauty, wealth, and fame can be, in some cases, harmless fun and, in other cases, destructively driven by unhealthy obsession. Wilson thus shows how heightened awareness of celebrities, particularly regarding their popularity and wealth, influences the lifestyles and opinions of everyday people.

*"Dining with Robert Redford" & Other Stories* will elicit a smile and nod of understanding from readers. The strength of Wilson's style lies in her ability to create a sense of authenticity and to stay true to the trademark spirit of a small-town lifestyle, balancing both the merits and drawbacks of a provincial life. Tamra Wilson has created believable characters and placed them in familiar situations, and her tone is conversational and inviting – never patronizing. Her stories – laced with common colloquialisms – capture not only the essence of life in the Old North State, but also universal elements of American culture. ■

#### KEYNOTE SPEAKER

Charles Frazier

#### FEATURED ARTISTS

Elisabeth Benfey  
James Dodson  
Lois Duncan  
Dante James  
Randall Kenan  
Eleanora E. Tate  
Timothy Tyson  
Daniel Wallace

#### HONORING

James Applewhite

#### with TRIBUTES by

Jeffrey Franklin  
Sally Rosen Kindred

#### and MUSIC by

Luke Whisnant

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and the *North Carolina Literary Review*

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# MY FILM BIZ BLUES

by James Dodson

It was the kind of phone call many authors dream of receiving, especially on a slow summer afternoon in Maine. “Mr. Dodson, this is Patsy Pumpnickel from Creative Genius Associates in Beverly Hills; King Rex Films is terribly interested in acquiring the film rights to your latest book,” a voice announced with a whisper of condescension.

To say the least, I was pleased. But also a little worried.

These are mere *nom de guerres* I’m giving one of Hollywood’s most powerful film agents and her celebrated firm, the large film company that wished to acquire the film rights to *Faithful Travelers*, a true story of a cross-country fly-fishing and camping trip I made over the span of a turbulent summer with my precocious seven-year-old daughter, Maggie, and our elderly golden retriever, Amos. The memoir, which briefly found its way onto several different bestseller lists and was named by *Reader’s Digest* as one of the top nonfiction books of 2000, was a true labor of love for me, the account of a pivotal summer in my family’s life, and the idea of seeing it made into a film filled me with both happiness and apprehension.

The apprehension derived from the fact that the film rights of the book that preceded it, *Final Rounds* – also an intimate and best-selling memoir – had been acquired by Hallmark Films and was, as they say in the biz, “in development.” This book

told the equally fact-based story of taking my dying father back to England and Scotland to play several celebrated golf courses where he’d learned to play golf during the Second World War. My nickname for my father – relevant to this tale, as you shall see – was “Opti the Mystic,” owing to his unquenchable optimism, his uncanny ability to see the upside of any situation.

As it happens, Patsy Pumpnickel had served as the film agent involved in the sale of the rights to *Final Rounds* to Hallmark Films, though this was my first time actually speaking with the super agent herself. The president of Hallmark was an equally celebrated man named David Picker, a Hollywood legend who had helped create United Artists and produced some of the most honored films of the past forty years, including *Midnight Cowboy*, most of the early James Bond movies, and *Tom Jones*. The fact that David Picker loved *Final Rounds* and was determined to bring it to the screen was enough to make me lightheaded.

Now Patsy explained that the aforementioned King Rex Films was offering seventy-five thousand for the film rights to *Faithful Travelers* and would agree to meet any reasonable terms that I, as author, would care to stipulate.

“Great,” I said. “To begin with, since both these books involve my life and my family members, is there any kind of conflict?”

“Oh, absolutely not,” Patsy assured me. “No worries at all, dear. These are two entirely separate film projects based on separate literary properties.”

“Very good. Here’s what I would also appreciate very much,” I said, eager to show I was no pushover in the negotiating game.

I explained that I hoped to be able to review the script before any shooting began and, if possible, to visit the set with my movie-mad daughter to watch the film get made.

“That won’t be any problem at all,” Patsy assured me, sounding a touch late for lunch with Steven Spielberg. She added, “You’ll receive the contracts in a few weeks. You’ll need to review them, have your lawyer review them if necessary – though, frankly, that’s why you have me – then sign at the designated places, and return them to us here at CGA. Is that clear, sweetie?”

I assured her that was clear and swallowed the urge to call her *Tootsie* (another David Picker movie).

With that I hung up the phone and went outside to mow the lawn, thinking how cool it was that my first two books would soon be movies.

Silly me.

**I’d heard plenty of horror stories about the process, how Hollywood treated authors, running roughshod over their artistic works, blithely changing the stories and keeping the authors at arm’s length.**

You see, having several friends who’d sold their book rights to large film companies, I’d heard plenty of horror stories about the process, how Hollywood treated authors, running roughshod over their artistic works, blithely changing the stories and keeping the authors at arm’s length. I knew, for example, from my budding friendship with David Picker that many producers and directors even refused to have authors show up on the set. So, in a way, I was prepared for the worst.

Indeed, months passed and no contract arrived from King Rex and Creative Genius Associates. By then it was late autumn and I was raking up the last leaves, more or less having forgotten about my second time being wooed by Hollywood.

Suddenly Patsy phoned out of the blue, sounding a tad anxious. “Here’s the situation, dear. You’ll receive the contracts for *Faithful Travelers* first thing tomorrow. It’s very important that you sign the contracts immediately and FedEx them straight back to me. Is that understood?”

RIGHT James Dodson with his daughter, Maggie, during the trip to Wyoming (1996) that inspired Dodson’s *Faithful Travelers: A Father, A Daughter, A Fly-Fishing Journey of the Heart* (New York: Bantam, 1998)

COURTESY OF JAMES AND WENDY DODSON



“How about my terms?” I reminded her. “Maggie would love to see this movie being made, as would Amos the dog, come to think of it. It’s about their lives, after all.”

Patsy wasn’t amused. “Of course. Absolutely. Just do please sign those contracts and get them back to me ASAP.” Then she was gone.

Sure enough, a huge contract showed up the next day, and I signed in a dozen places and, with only a slight shiver of reluctance, FedExed the whole thing back to Hollywood before I could ask a lawyer buddy to look over it. As Patsy herself kept saying, she was getting a nice cut of the deal to be looking after my interests. So what could go wrong?

Not two weeks later, a pleasant-sounding woman identifying herself as a chief publicist for CBS Entertainment Division in New York phoned to ask me to send a comprehensive bio of myself to her as soon as possible.

“Why is that?” I wondered.

“Because your film is about to debut in early January as our Movie of the Week on CBS. We’re very excited about it.” She mentioned several big-name actors playing the leads.

I asked if perhaps she had me confused with someone else. She replied, “I don’t think so. Didn’t you write *Faithful Travelers*?”

“Yes ma’am,” I said. “Are you telling me they’ve already made the movie?”

“Oh yes. It was finished late last summer,” she explained.

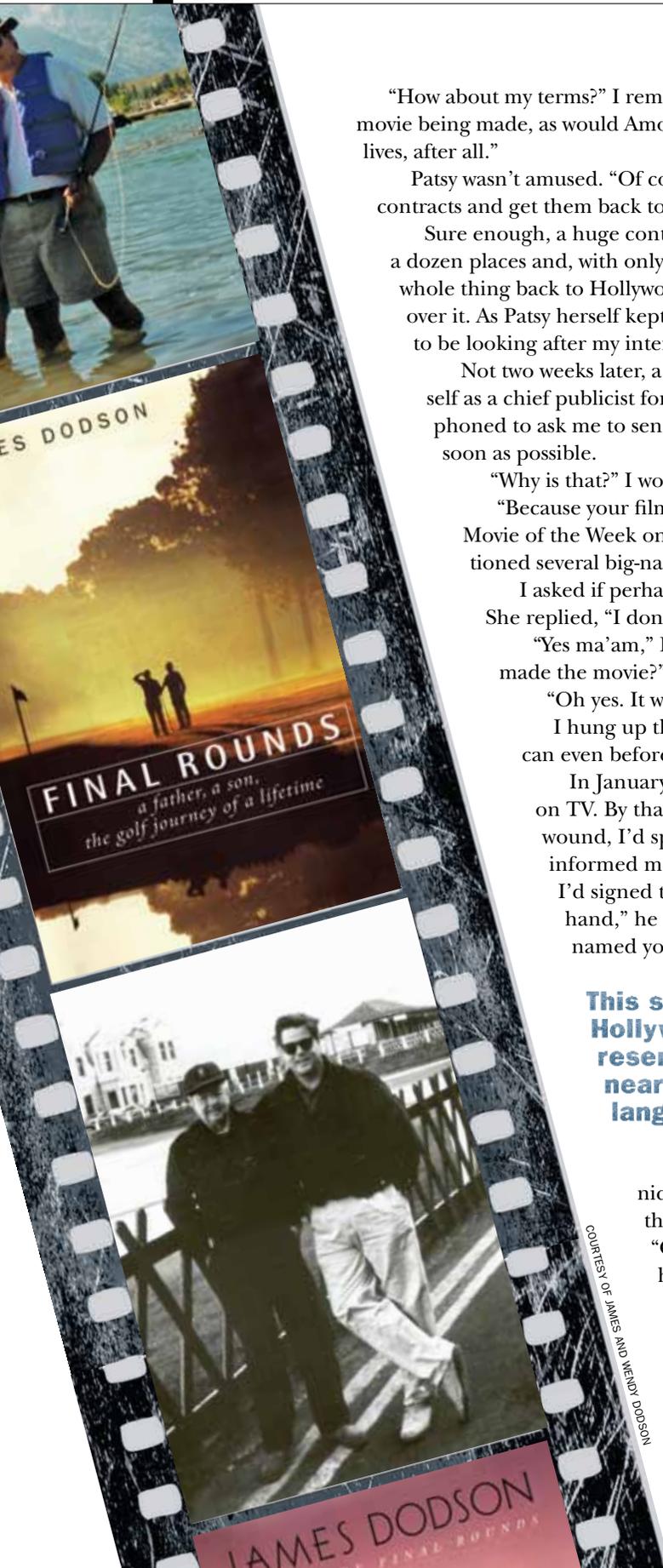
I hung up the phone, realizing the film had been in the can even before I’d signed the contract.

In January, I watched the film, called *Dodson’s Journey*, on TV. By that point, just to rub a little more salt into the wound, I’d spoken with a top entertainment lawyer who informed me I had no legal recourse because, after all, I’d signed the contract. “Had you known this beforehand,” he said with a rueful laugh, “you could have named your price.”

**This seemed like a perfectly lovely Hollywood narrative – except it bore no resemblance to the facts or the book that nearly half a million readers in six different languages had bought and seemed to love.**

For the record, the film turned out to be a nice little adaptation of the book, though most of the story got left out and the screenwriter lifted “Opti the Mystic” from *Final Rounds* and made him central to this story. Moreover, Amos the dog wasn’t the least bit pleased to have made only a cameo appearance.

A few days after the film debuted, the director phoned me from California just to



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LEFT James Dodson with his father, Braxton, during their trip together that inspired Dodson’s *Final Rounds: A Father, a Son, the Golf Journey of a Lifetime* (New York: Bantam, 1996)

say how much he'd enjoyed the book and the opportunity to make it into a movie. It was a nice surprise. I thanked him but explained the only thing I regretted was that I hadn't been able to see the script before shooting began and that my daughter, a real movie buff, hadn't been able to watch the film being shot.

"Sorry about that. I have a daughter myself," he said, sounding genuinely apologetic. "We would have loved to have you two on the set."

The problems didn't end there, however. They extended into David Picker's efforts to make *Final Rounds* into a feature film when, a year or so later, we learned that King Rex Films claimed they "owned" the rights to the "Opti the Mystic" character, owing to the fact that they'd put him into their movie first. Technically speaking, they were claiming a character that David Picker and Hallmark first had the rights to, and King Rex Films merely lifted him from the earlier book and expanded his role in their script. Had I had the opportunity to review their script beforehand, of course, I would have spotted this instantly and alerted David Picker, who by now had retired from Hallmark and formed a partnership with me to make *Final Rounds* as a major feature film. With his guidance, I wrote my version of the screenplay, and at that moment a major studio was interested enough to have David and me play a round of golf with Dennis Quaid and James Garner for the film's possible leads. Jim Garner, I'd been told, was especially keen to play Opti the Mystic.

While David worked behind the scenes to sort out the "Opti issue," as we came to call the problem with King Rex Films, the film moved ahead until we learned at the eleventh hour that a new creative head had replaced the old one at the studio, and he wanted to alter the story to have the father and son be enemies, more or less, who embark upon a final journey and ultimately reconcile.

This seemed like a perfectly lovely Hollywood narrative – except it bore no resemblance to the facts or the book that nearly half a million readers in six different languages had bought and seemed to love. In fact, my dad and I remained best friends throughout our lives. The tale I wrote is about the power of that kind of sustaining familiar love.



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### **Amos the dog wasn't the least bit pleased to have made only a cameo appearance.**

David was the first to say we couldn't agree to this fundamental change, so we withdrew from the project – having, in this case, retained the creative rights.

Within a very short time, another big studio came calling, this one a major cable outfit that claimed it planned to take on HBO and wanted to make *Final Rounds* as the debut film for the year 2006.

The offer sounded almost too good to be true and only meant we had to revise the script to make it a ninety-minute cable-length film. No problem. David even worked out the "Opti issue" without too much difficulty. Everything looked rosy, in fact, until one summer afternoon while I was covering the 2005 US Open at Pinehurst, David phoned me to say it had happened again. The cable network we'd signed with had just been acquired by NBC, and the studio boss who so loved the book had been booted "upstairs" to a new post where he had no say in the *Final Rounds* project. The new creative person, a woman I never met, who it seemed knew zilch about golf, thought it would substantially improve the film to have the father and son be lifelong adversaries who embark upon a final journey shortly before the father dies, to bury the nine-iron, so to speak.

"We've seen this movie before," a clearly disappointed David remarked to me, so we politely withdrew a second time.

After two unfruitful trips up the aisle with major studios, we formed a small independent film company and have quietly worked the past few years to raise the capital to make the movie the way it needs to be made – hand-crafted and faithful to the book, shot on location in North Carolina and Scotland where the story takes place.

Because interest in this project has never waned – would-be producers still track me down at least four or five times a year – there’s plenty of reason to hope that someday, in some form or another, *Final Rounds* will finally make it to the screen. The question for us remains timing and chemistry. At his eightieth birthday party in Manhattan, a fete that included video tributes from Woody Allen and Norman Lear, guests like William Goldman and Harry Bellefonte, and several major studio heads whom David Picker had launched in the business, my beloved and extremely youthful partner wryly remarked, “I’m now officially old enough to play Opti the Mystic. But I have no doubt we’ll eventually get this project done the way it needs to be done – with love and passion – hopefully before *Jim* is old enough to play his own father!” That got a big laugh.

The thing is, I believe him. As David pointed out to me on several occasions, it took him more than a decade to bring *Midnight Cowboy* to the big screen from a small book “nobody had ever read.” And other blockbusters he’s made, from *Last Tango in Paris* to *The Crucible*, had taken both patience and perseverance on Picker’s part before they became films.

And so, for better or worse, I’m not really one of those authors who grumbles too intensely about the long and sometimes deflating road one must travel in order to see one’s book leap from page to screen. As I’ve learned from this complicated fifteen-year odyssey, the two media are related but by no means the same. Patience and a sense of humor are not just useful, but mandatory to retaining your sanity.

### As I’ve learned from this complicated fifteen-year odyssey, the two media are related but by no means the same.

At the end of the day, I am a writer who writes books, and David – who is finally, with my encouragement, working on a delightful memoir of his phenomenal career in American film – is a movie man extraordinaire who will remain my artistic partner to the end. If Providence smiles on us and a film adaptation of *Final Rounds* gets made, we’ll raise our pints and thank the gods and Opti the Mystic himself for finally making it happen.

If not, at least I’ve made a great friend in David and his indefatigable wife, Sandy – who, as we speak, is finagling to get our latest version of the screenplay into the hands of either Justin Timberlake or her heartthrob George Clooney. “They’re both mad for golf,” she insists, “and would be perfect for the father and son.”

And so it goes. Who knows where this latest effort may yet lead.

My old man always said the pleasure is in the journey, undoubtedly wisdom too. ■

For two decades **JAMES DODSON** was a contributing editor and regular columnist for *Golf Magazine* and Golf and Travel Correspondent for *Departures* magazine of American Express. He was also the award-winning Senior Writer for *Yankee Magazine* during the 1980s and early '90s, prior to which he was Senior Writer for the *Atlanta Journal and Constitution Sunday Magazine*, the oldest Sunday magazine in the nation. He is currently Writer-in-Residence for *The Pilot* newspaper and Editor of *PineStraw Magazine*, both based in Southern Pines, NC. Beginning in summer 2011, he is also the editor of *O. Henry Magazine* in Greensboro, where he grew up and began his journalism career at the *News & Record* (and where his family goes back several generations). He is also the author of several books, and over the course of a thirty-year-golf-writing career, his work has garnered more than a dozen awards from the Golf Writers of America and other industry organizations, including the Donald Ross Award for his lifetime contributions to the game and golf literature. Dodson recently served as Distinguished Charles Rubin Writer-in-Residence at Hollins University in Virginia. See the 2007 issue of *NCLR* for another James Dodson essay, “Driving Miss Molly Home,” featuring another of his beloved dogs.



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“consultant” to the script, “suggest changes where necessary,” and “consult on language and dialect.” In turn, I’d receive my advance. It didn’t make me a millionaire by any means, but by 1980s “starving artist” measures, I’d have more money from the sale than I had before signing the contract. I was pragmatic about life back in those days.

What I didn’t figure on was that there’d be a multitude of differences between the book and the film’s script. The book’s Missouri setting switched to California in the script. Margie’s sister Alberta and the family’s beloved neighbor Mrs. Moten in the book didn’t make it into the script, nor did any of the other Missouri characters. The book in general would be stripped to thirty-eight minutes’ worth of thematic essentials.

When I grumbled out my grievances to my agent, she matter of factly reminded me, “But Eleanora, they’re making a *movie* from your book, so be quiet. It’s going to star Richard Roundtree and Rosalind Cash. Haven’t you heard of them?”

What? *The* heartthrob Richard Roundtree of *Shaft* movie fame? *The* beautiful, multi-talented stage and screen star Rosalind Cash? After hearing that, I didn’t grumble so much, at least not loudly. I deeply respected both Roundtree and Cash. I tried not to be too disgruntled when I read in the script that the occupation of my book’s father as a cross-country furniture truck driver evolved into the script’s declaration that he was a saxophone player in a band. “It’s a movie, it’s a movie,” I kept telling myself. And maybe by seeing the movie, young readers would be drawn back to the book.

I didn’t much change my ambivalent tune about the script until the next year, when I saw an excerpt from the film. Ms. Bryant, a remarkable producer, had arranged for me to speak at a media conference in New Orleans. Preceding my presentation, the film was shown. The film’s title and credits rolled across the screen, and then along came, “based on the novel by Eleanora E. Tate.” That made me swoon – I love to see my name in print. Now it was on a larger screen. When I heard Richard Roundtree, Rosalind Cash, Tiffany Hill (Ethel), Elinor Donahue (the social worker), and Fran Robinson (Margie) say my words on screen in the scenes that had been rendered exactly as I had written them, I began to like the film.

The scene that particularly touched my heart was Margie, Ethel, and Daddy sitting on the porch popping green beans for Momma to cook. The words the actors



PHOTOGRAPH BY ZACK E. HAMLETT, III, COURTESY OF ELEANORA E. TATE



PHOTOGRAPH BY ZACK E. HAMLETT, III, COURTESY OF ELEANORA E. TATE

JUST AN OVERNIGHT GUEST: FROM BOOK TO FILM BY ELEANORA E. TATE. JUST AN OVERNIGHT GUEST: FROM BOOK TO FILM

TOP Eleanora E. Tate and Phoenix Films Executive Producer Barbara Bryant at the Des Moines Public Library’s premiere showing of *Just an Overnight Guest*, 1983

BOTTOM Eleanora E. Tate and actor Richard Roundtree at the Des Moines International Airport, 1983; also pictured, Des Moines Public Library Director Elaine Estes



uttered were taken directly from my book. I relaxed. *Just an Overnight Guest* the book and *Just an Overnight Guest* the film could stand on their own, separate but equal – though, of course, my book was still better.

The film premiered in 1983 in New York and Los Angeles, and on September 30 in Des Moines, Iowa, where I once lived. Ms. Bryant and her entourage arrived with Richard Roundtree. I sat with him in the back of a limousine (borrowed from a funeral home!) while my husband Zack sat in the front, taking pictures. We arrived to join some eight hundred people, including my mother, sister, sister-in-law, daughter, and oldest nephew, Don Tate II (now a successful illustrator of children’s books), crowded into the Des Moines Public Library to see the hometown girl’s film. For four days, I was swept up in school visits (including one to my old high school), radio and television interviews, dinners, and a fun night of roustabouting with Roundtree and Zack at our favorite nightclub.

*Just an Overnight Guest* was shown on PBS in its award-winning WonderWorks Series, on Nickelodeon Children’s Television, and in other venues. The film was included on the “Selected Films for Young Adults” 1985 list of the Young Adult Services Committee of the American Library Association. It also was named “Best” in the Family Issues category at the Birmingham International Film Festival and the National Educational Film Festival; and it was a finalist in the human relations category of the American Film Festival.

Looking back to those years, I realize how blessed I was that my book was selected to become a film. Not many children’s films had been produced from books written by African American authors – not in 1983 and not now in 2011. Of such films that were produced, most were television films, like mine, rather than feature films. Some of the other television films based on books by African American

PHOTOGRAPH BY ZACK E. HAMLETT, III, COURTESY OF ELEANORA E. TATE



children’s book authors that I recall are *The House of Dies Drear* (by Virginia Hamilton), *White Socks Only* (by Evelyn Coleman), *The Learning Tree* (by Gordon Parks), and *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* (by Mildred D. Taylor). *Push*, written by Sapphire, and adapted into the film *Precious* was made into a feature film. I’ve heard that Christopher Paul Curtis’s *The Watsons Go to Birmingham – 1963* was optioned by Whoopi Goldberg, but I have seen no film yet.<sup>2</sup> Perhaps the time will come when more movies will be based on work by African American writers. Certainly there’s a wide choice of such books available to draw from: one could start a list of possibilities just by visiting the American Library Association website listing of recipients of the Coretta Scott King Book Award and the website of The Brown Bookshelf.

*Just an Overnight Guest*, the movie, is still available from the Phoenix Learning Group, Inc. My story began as a book, then became a 16mm film, evolved into a video, and is now on DVD. Packaged with a teacher’s guide and the paperback book version (from Just Us Books), it is a useful amalgam of print and cinematic art. So Margie’s journey is not over yet, as new media reach new audiences. ■

<sup>2</sup> Whoopi Goldberg did buy the film rights to *The Watsons go to Birmingham – 1963*, and the novel has been adapted for CBS, Columbia Tri-Star by Kevin Willmott, who also adapted and directed a successful stage version of the novel, performed in New York and Kansas City, but, to date, the movie has not appeared.

**ELEANORA E. TATE** lives in Durham, NC, and is a writer of several North Carolina-set books including *Thank You, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.!* (Watts, 1990), *A Blessing in Disguise* (Delacorte Press, 1995), and the short story collection *Don’t Split the Pole: Tales of Down-Home Folk Wisdom* (Delacorte Press, 1997). She was named a Circle of Elders Award recipient at the 29<sup>th</sup> Annual National Black Storytelling Festival and Conference for her “years of involvement and commitment to the African Oral Tradition” and for her “honored presence in the storytelling community.” Her short story “What Goes Around Comes Around” is included in *What Writers Do* (Lorimer Press, 2011), an anthology of stories, poems, and essays written by writers in the Lenoir-Rhyne University Writers Series.

## Flashbacks: Twenty Years of Echoes

Margaret D. Bauer, Editor

For the 1997 issue, interim editor Thomas Douglass invited several North Carolina writers to respond to works in the North Carolina Museum of Art. In 2010, *NCLR* Art Editor Diane Rodman arranged with the City Art Gallery here in Greenville to invite their artists to respond to poetry by James Applewhite. Read more about the resulting exhibit with the Applewhite poems appearing in this section.

This collaboration with City Art Gallery is just one more in a long list of services Diane Rodman contributes as Art Editor, and I am certain the writers and artists whose work appears in our pages join me in feeling grateful for her generous contribution of time and talent. Finding art that complements the writing we publish has been a labor of love for Diane for four years now. She is such an astute reader that even as she reads the content in order to determine what images should complement it, she also helps me to edit the issue.

This issue begins *NCLR*'s second decade, so it should be no surprise that the Flashbacks section is growing. More and more of the writers whose books are selected for review are return appearances to *NCLR*'s pages: Marjorie Hudson wrote for the first and tenth anniversary issues. Clyde Edgerton and Ron Rash have been interviewed, and their work has been discussed by literary critics. The 2011 Roberts Award winner announced in this section, Bland Simpson, has contributed to several issues – as has Jerry Leath Mills, who wrote the appreciation of Simpson for the award ceremony and *NCLR*.

Minnie Bruce Pratt was discussed in the 2000 issue's articles on the Feminary Collective, and another of her poetry collections was extensively reviewed (by regular *NCLR* book reviewer Christina Bucher) in 2006. Art Taylor reviewed John Hart's three previous books in 2009 and returns to the subject in this issue (and

he plans an interview with Hart for the 2013 issue's special feature section). Susan Laughter Meyers and Valerie Nieman, finalists in *NCLR*'s first James Applewhite Poetry Prize competition, have published poetry in earlier issues, too – and more of their poetry will appear in the forthcoming print issue.

Announcing the award for the best new book by a children's or young adult writer, given by North Carolina's chapter of the American Association of University Women, reminds me each year of our 2006 issue's special feature section on children's and young adult literature, which I recommend to those of you with young readers around you to find out who – from somewhere right around the corner – your children might be reading. And finally, the other award story we have included in this section, the Hardee Rives Dramatic Arts Award, received by a *Lost Colony* "veteran," reminds us that 2012 brings the seventy-fifth anniversary of the 1937 premiere of Paul Green's first symphonic outdoor drama, also discussed in *NCLR*'s 2009 drama issue.

Tracing all of this Flashbacks section's content to earlier appearances of the writers and subjects in our pages was made simple by the index section of our website, which *NCLR*'s staff likely uses more than anyone else, but which I am sure would be handy to our readers as well. The various indices, created and maintained by *NCLR*'s interns and editorial assistants, will tell you who has been interviewed, who is the subject of literary essays, whose books have been reviewed, what back issues you can find a writer's poetry or fiction in, and a list of the writers included in the serialized "Dictionary of North Carolina Writers." And if you notice from perusing these indices the absence of a favorite writer, from North Carolina's literary past or present, we welcome you to alert us or, even better, to offer to fill in the gap. ■



PHOTOGRAPH BY DAWN MAINWRIGHT



PHOTOGRAPH BY ALAN WESTMORELAND;  
COURTESY OF THE NORTH CAROLINA STATE ARCHIVES



PHOTOGRAPH BY DAWN MAINWRIGHT



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ABOVE RIGHT **NCLR's** premiere issue (1992), cover art by Stanton Blakeslee; and twentieth issue (2011), cover art by Joan Mansfield

FAR LEFT **Bland and Ann Cary Simpson, Eastern North Carolina Literary Homecoming, Greenville, 23 Sept. 2011**

LEFT CENTER **Ron Rash receiving North Carolina Award for Literature from Governor Beverly Perdue, Raleigh, 10 Nov. 2011**

LEFT **Marti Jones and Don Dixon giving a musical tribute to Roberts Award winner Bland Simpson, Eastern North Carolina Literary Homecoming, Greenville, 23 Sept. 2011**

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*Grown Yellow with October* (acrylic on canvas, 40x30) by Bob Rankin

## *Pamlico River*

BY JAMES APPLEWHITE

I breathed that odor of land-draining water,  
 Leachings from ditches and saw-bladed marshes,  
 From springs, field-trickles, now channeled by creeks  
 Into a five-mile flood turned bronze in the sun:  
 Cypresses ever in the distances, living  
 And dead, fish hawks nesting their skeletons.  
 I breathed that odor of ending and beginning,  
 Land's drift marrying with salt and the tides.  
 I lay on a spit of sand in the sun,  
 Savoring the taste of my body and water.  
 My cousin Ethel cooked steaks on a fire,  
 Ethel's beau and I sipped beer. That spirit  
 From childhood, whose cloud-imagination  
 Trailed the rain in necklaces, felt winelike  
 Arteries and veins, intoxicating stems,  
 Like grandfather's scuppernong: grapes in leaves  
 Grown yellow with October too sweet to resist.

REPRINTED FROM JAMES APPLEWHITE, *SELECTED POEMS*, © 2005,  
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City Art Gallery in Greenville, NC, and *NCLR* collaborated on an exhibit of original artwork inspired by the poetry of **JAMES APPLEWHITE**, who read at the exhibit opening on 13 Jan. 2011. These three poems had been sent out in the fall to artists represented by the gallery. They are reprinted here from *Applewhite's Selected Poems* (2005), with the permission of Duke University Press. *NCLR* is grateful to the City Art Gallery owners, Peg Hardee and Torrey Stroud, for sponsoring the premiere invitational exhibit, as well as a second one in January 2012. A new Applewhite poem was included among the poems sent to artists in fall 2011, and that poem will appear in the 2012 print issue, forthcoming in the summer. The Applewhite 2011 and 2012 invitational exhibits can be viewed on the City Art Gallery's website.

**BOB RANKIN** lives and works in Raleigh. He received his BS in Art Education from ECU and studied art and art history with the American Institute of Foreign Study. Retired after thirty years teaching art in Wake County Public Schools, he now paints full time. His work has been featured in *International Artist Magazine*, and he is a co-founder of North Carolina's outdoor art festival Artsposure. His work has earned Best in Show seven times at the NCSU Fine Arts Competition, and he is a five-time winner of *Spectator Magazine's* Best in the Triangle. In 1993, he received the Raleigh Medal of Arts Award. His work is in corporate and private collections around the world and exhibited at such galleries as Art Source in Raleigh, and New Elements Gallery in Wilmington. See more of his work on his website and in the print issue of *NCLR* 2012.



*January Farmhouse* (acrylic and mixed media on canvas, 24x30) by Tony Breuer

## *January Farmhouse*

BY JAMES APPLEWHITE

Snow on ground and  
 Brown weeds above: patches  
 Like fragments of dinner plate  
 Where sun brushes clay.  
 The washboard wall is in shadow,  
 Holds skim milk light  
 The way a bedsheet hung out to dry  
 And catch cold's cleanliness  
 Gathers sheen from the sky.  
 The white boards appear  
 Translucent, like a woman's skin  
 When she is old and left alone  
 The January afternoon;  
 Seem translucent with enclosing  
 Light I see through an upstairs window  
 Collected in a dresser mirror;  
 Or see from glimpsing  
 Through front and back windows,  
 All the way through those rooms,  
 Through this still afternoon  
 In her life and back into sky,  
 Where sun slants clearly  
 Without clay, or broom sedge,  
 Or skin to make rosy, there  
 Where wind's too thin to be seen.

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Greenville resident **TONY BREUER** was born in Venezuela. As the son of a US Foreign Service officer, he moved often to different countries. His research and study in the field of molecular neurobiology and neurology began at Princeton and continued at Oxford and Harvard Medical School, where he received his MD. At the University of Southern Indiana, he received a BFA. Upon moving to Greenville, NC, to

teach at ECU's Brody School of Medicine, he pursued his interest in art at ECU's School of Art and Design, where he earned an MFA. His work has been featured in *Nashville Arts Magazine* and exhibited in group and solo shows. He is represented by City Art Gallery in Greenville and The Arts Company in Nashville, TN. See more about the artist and his work on his website.



*May Sky and Land Be One* (oil and paper on canvas, 40x30) by Richard Garrison

### *Greene County Pastoral*

**BY JAMES APPLEWHITE**

I hope that Mary Alice Philips who lived  
by the river will pick new  
jonquils for the casket.

Maybe L.G. Newcomb whose four-room house  
stood in a bend of the creek road  
will come with a fist of forsythia.

I wish the girls and boys I knew, from creekside and  
mule lot, from rosy broom sedge knolls,  
could start past edges of pine woods.

I think their singing and sighing might rustle  
with the needles and hush like the dove  
wings alighting on light wires

On hills far away in the country. Their preachers  
might come looking pale and fresh-shaven  
from the white inside the wooden churches.

May their sermons on sin and punishment subside,  
 let them calm those waters. Let Jesus walk  
 out of their words and pass among

L.G.'s crowd where they're turning the reel in the Contentnea.  
 Let his face be from faces in the boats on  
 the Neuse, the Pamlico, the Cape Fear.

Those who drowned, let them arise.  
 The white face of one from underwater  
 will still these troubles. While they

Scoop up nets full of shad and cats and their  
 campfire flickers more orange as the sun  
 goes down, may the mules

In the fenced lots hang their heads sorrowfully  
 and turn their hindquarters to the wind,  
 one hoof scraping a corn cob.

May wind through dog fennel of the deserted  
 pasture sway the soft weeds just at the tips  
 so they touch the fence's wire.

May the sky and the land be one in evening,  
 the pale light a lake for the straw  
 and the twigs and the weeds

And fish in the reel and the horses and mules  
 and Mary Alice Philips and L.G.,  
 and Christ like a drowned man arisen.

Let the deserted house with scrolled cornices  
 in the grove of broken oaks with a few  
 jonquils spotting that shadow

Be circled like an elegy by swallows.  
 Let them know that she always loved them.  
 Let this light and these fields

Hold her spirit as naturally as a straw  
 basket carries the loose flowers.  
 Let the light in that cloud fade to stone.

May she lie at peace with the forsythia, spirea, willow  
 brought her by bare-footed farm girls  
 in my frail thoughts' pastoral.

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Raleigh resident **RICHARD GARRISON** holds a BFA in Studio Art with a concentration in painting from UNC-Chapel Hill. In 1994, he received an Emerging Artists Grant from the City of Raleigh Arts Commission, and he began to paint full-time in 1995. His art has received numerous awards and is exhibited widely in North

Carolina, Georgia, and Virginia. His work also appears in private and corporate collections worldwide, as well as in *NCLR* 2008 and 2010. He is represented by such galleries as City Art Gallery in Greenville, the Mahler in Raleigh, and Tyndall Galleries in Chapel Hill. See more of his work on his website.

## RACE IN THE AMERICAN SOUTH

a review by Jeff Abernathy

Clyde Edgerton. *The Night Train*.  
New York: Little, Brown and  
Company, 2011.

**JEFF ABERNATHY** is the author of *To Hell and Back: Race and Betrayal in the Southern Novel* (University of Georgia Press, 2003). A Virginia native with a PhD from the University of Florida, he is currently serving as President of Alma College in Michigan.

**CLYDE EDGERTON** was interviewed for *NCLR's* 2003 flight issue, which also includes an article on his novels *The Floatplane Notebooks* (Algonquin, 1988) and *In Memory of Junior* (Algonquin, 1992). He is the recipient of the Sir Walter Raleigh Award for *Where Trouble Sleeps* (Algonquin, 1997; reviewed in *NCLR* 1998) and the Ragan Old North State Award for *Solo: My Adventures in the Air* (Algonquin, 2005; reviewed in *NCLR* 2006).

Clyde Edgerton's latest novel, *The Night Train*, needs a companion CD. Any book so steeped in the racial and cultural bouillabaisse that was popular music at mid-century ought to have music. James Brown's rewriting of the blues standard "Night Train" – made famous on his monumental 1963 album *Live at the Apollo* – would have done nicely, as Brown's music infuses much of the novel and inspires each of its main characters. Thelonious Monk's "Blue Monk" would be another inspired choice.

Amidst the slow development of racial balance in the South, Edgerton's tenth novel returns to his familiar North Carolina by examining community life in Starke, circa 1963. This short novel traces the relationship of Dwayne Hallston, a seventeen-year-old white male, and his black friend Larry Lime Nolan, who both work at a furniture store owned by Dwayne's father. Both are also aspiring musicians: Dwayne comes to admire James Brown (*Live at the Apollo* has just been released), while Larry Lime grows ever more fascinated with Monk's complex jazz.

Dwayne's friendship with Larry Lime provides Dwayne with a glimpse into a different world that he will come to see as a hidden soundtrack to the life he wants to live. Intrigued by James Brown's latest album, Dwayne and his band, the Amazing Rumlbers, learn *Live at the Apollo* note for note so that they can perform the album as a whole. When finally Dwayne wins a spot on a local television show and plays "Night Train," for a stunned white studio audience (and an inspired black

television audience at home: "White boy gettin' down. He gettin' down" [203]), he models a new racial consciousness.

Other similar transformations take place as well, as when Flash Acres, a foreman in the furniture store, watches as his mother's life slowly ends. After his mother's stroke, Flash is forced to hire Larry Lime's mother, Canary, to take care of her. When Flash's mother finally dies, Flash spontaneously embraces Canary, demonstrating perhaps that both of them have started to overcome the prejudice that characterized their earlier lives.

The story repeats a central pattern in the Southern novel, in which a white protagonist experiences moral growth by crossing racial lines. Like Huck Finn and other white protagonists in the Southern novel, Dwayne grows through his relationships that cross the color line. Larry Lime becomes a kind of muse for Dwayne, and Dwayne's mimicry of James Brown becomes implicit affirmation of an expanded selfhood.

Edgerton is less interested in the psychological or political questions of race than in the human need for connection through music. We never see into these characters' psyches in order to understand their motivations, just as we see remarkably little of the tension of race relations in the South in 1963. But Edgerton's rich portrayal of musical transcendence in the novel offers a new approach to a central American story of race in which the South, the *region*, is the stage upon which race in America, the *nation*, is enacted. ■

ABOVE RIGHT Clyde Edgerton at the Turnage Theatre in Washington, NC, 16 March 2008; sponsored by the Friends of Brown Library. At this event, *NCLR* recorded Edgerton reading from his novel *Lunch at the Picadilly* for the CD that accompanied *NCLR's* 2008 humor issue. Edgerton also read from his novel *The Bible Salesman* (2008; reviewed in *NCLR* 2009).

# FLASH'S MAMA

by Clyde Edgerton

During Clyde Edgerton's appearance on UNC-TV's *North Carolina Bookwatch* to talk about his latest novel, *The Night Train*, the author told D.G. Martin, "I had so much of Flash and his mama" that his editor ("a great editor," he says) asked, "Can we cut back some?" Intrigued, *NCLR*'s editor (a regular *North Carolina Bookwatch* viewer) emailed the writer to ask if *NCLR* might publish an excerpt from the cutting room floor. The following is what Edgerton sent, noting that in early drafts, the novel was told "in multiple first-person voices."

To hear more about the various inspirations for and the writing of Edgerton's latest novel, watch the *North Carolina Bookwatch* episode (which premiered 18 November 2011).

**I'm Fannie Acres, Flash's Mama to you. Flash has always been a good boy. His daddy gave him that guitar before**

*"I wanted to explore the humanity of this guy . . . examine the racist in my book. . . . I wanted to try out taking this guy whom many would see as a villain and see what would happen . . . if his mother got sick."*

—Clyde Edgerton to D.G. Martin

he died, and Flash has always cherished it. Benton Halston gave him that job at the shop when he was sixteen, and now he's the foreman out there. They got a good reputation. Haul in furniture from all over and refinish it. Do a lot with antiques, even sell some. Flash has always been good to me. Without his daddy, he didn't have a lot that the other boys his age had. Bill Burgess even went off to law school in Chapel Hill and got a law degree and is back working for Jared Fitzgerald, who has gone plum crazy purchasing things. Like the dern TV station

and some radio stations. What somebody would want with one of them beats me, and now he's got WLBT with that dogfood-eating fool on there every Saturday night. But they do have good music, and they say that program is getting picked up all over. Flash is one of the last men on earth that squats on his heels when he talks to somebody in the yard. I'll look out there and one or two of his buddies will be in the swing or in the chair beside the swing, and he'll be squatting with a toothpick in his mouth just exactly like his daddy used to do. Flash remembers his daddy well is something I'm proud I can say.

So Flash is going to audition for that TV show where Bobby Lee Thackton eats the dogfood. They got good country music on there, and he plays a hymn every show. Course some people don't know a hymn from a bluebird.

Odd things going on. Junior, Sister's boy, was in here the other evening for supper with his fiancée, Joyce, and

PHOTOGRAPH BY MARGARET BAUER



they'd been to a funeral of Joyce's aunt's, and she was a odd bird that had it in her will that she was to be cremated. (I don't know when Flash is going to settle on a girlfriend, but I hope he hooks into something with more sense than that Joyce.) "They use some mighty fine wood in those boxes," Joyce says, talking about the boxes they put the ashes in, you know. "Mahogany, it looked like," she says. Joyce is the same size as Junior and dresses up like a man sometimes.

"I never understood that cremating," I says. "I just wouldn't want to take a chance about being raised from the dead."

"It's real dark. Like mahogany," says Joyce. "And the hole they dig ain't big as nothing." She was talking about the hole they bury the ashes in. See, sometimes they bury them and sometimes they give them to somebody to set on a mantle beside a picture.

"No, it's lighter than mahogany," says Junior. He rubbed his forehead. He's got this habit of rubbing the sweat off his forehead with the palm of his hand. He sweats a lot.

"It's about four feet deep," says Joyce. Then she laughed kind of loud and hard. "In a square hole about that big." And she shows with her hands.

"How big is the box?" I asked her.

"A big thick cereal box," says Joyce. "About that. Almost square, but long this way. Have you ever seen a hole they bury somebody's ashes in?" she asks me.

"No."

"Have you?" she asks Flash.

"No ma'am. I can't see as how it'd be different than any other hole."

Flash is real good with his manners. I taught him.

"About four feet deep," she says. "I wouldn't think anything would dig it up, since ashes don't smell."

"I just wonder about the second coming," I says, "and how anybody could be sure that, you know, they could become a body and all. It just seems like it's lots easier and more normal to get raised from the dead if you were buried like you're supposed to be."

"What about when somebody's been underground so long they're nothing but dust?" says Junior.

"Well, that would be dust" I says. "I think dust is lots closer to a human body than ashes. Dust is natural – a natural ingredient, more or less."

They didn't say anything after that. ■

## *My Brother, Last Radiation Treatments*

BY SUSAN LAUGHTER MEYERS

### FINALIST IN THE 2011 JAMES APPLEWHITE POETRY PRIZE COMPETITION

#### *Summer solstice*

All the little runners in my brain,  
wearing their best sneakers, have readied themselves.  
It's time, *On your mark*. Today is longer,  
another way to measure.

A wasp investigating the window frame  
takes light for granted. In the lowest limb of a pine  
a red-tailed hawk moves nothing but head  
and eye, every blink an aperture closing.

Yesterday my brother sent photos  
he took years ago – one of me, the youngest,  
drinking from the fountain at Fontana Dam.  
I squint and reach, barely tall enough.  
How well I remember the dress, the soft ribbon  
of water cooling my lips.

All the little runners  
want a story about the boy, his first camera –  
boy of few words – how he, fifteen  
and snapping close-ups, learned the art.  
How that summer he took to the woods  
where he made a white bracelet of snake rattles.  
Other summers he took to the beach. Lifeguarding.  
That tan and peroxidized boy, that tall shutterbug.

The coneflowers out back, their petals  
at odd angles, look picture pretty and casual enough  
to be on vacation.

Mostly sunny and warm.  
The little runners, panting – all of them –  
are in sight of the last turn. Home stretch,  
though a dark blur just shot past them,  
a small thing preyed upon, or closing in on prey.



from the *Série Noire* series (2010), by Stephen Aubuchon

While living in Raleigh, NC, **STEPHEN AUBUCHON** embarked on a personal project photographing Nazi concentration camps in Poland, which led him to abandon his commercial art career to focus on fine art. His work has been shown at the North Carolina Museum of Art, NCSU, the Durham Art Guild, and many other locations in the US, Canada, and Europe. He is represented by Adam Cave Fine Art in Raleigh. See more of his work on his website and in *NCLR 2012*.

## DARK AND LIGHT – AND WONDERMENT

a review by  
*Susan Laughter Meyers*

Ron Rash, *Waking*. Spartanburg,  
SC: Hub City Press, 2011.

SUSAN LAUGHTER MEYERS's poetry collection *Keep and Give Away* (University of South Carolina Press, 2006) won the South Carolina Poetry Book Prize, the SIBA Book Award for Poetry, and the Brockman-Campbell Book Award. She is past president of the poetry societies of North Carolina and South Carolina. Her poetry has appeared in *NCLR* 2002, 2007, and 2008 and is forthcoming in 2012.

Ron Rash's *Waking*, his fourth book of poems, continues the powerfully evocative course that he set his compass to in his previous three poetry collections: verse that calls up the lives and resolve of hard-working, God-fearing people in the mountains and foothills of the Carolinas. Mostly farmers, mostly poor or close to it, mostly dealing with hardships and bad choices – or bad luck – sometimes leading to catastrophe. Among the characters in his poems are historical figures, often from the Civil War, as well as his own kin.

Rash began this poetic journey with *Eureka Mill* (Bench, 1998) that tells of the life of farmers who moved from Buncombe County, NC, to work in the mill at Chester, SC – and what it was like to trade one lifestyle of struggle for another. In his second poetry book, *Among the Believers* (Iris, 2000), he brings to light a largely past culture from the North Carolina mountains – snake-handling church services, hunting rituals, last rites. *Raising the Dead* (Iris, 2002) considers places and persons no longer visible in this world – including the pastures, creeks, and homesteads flooded by the dam completed in 1973 to form South Carolina's Lake Jocassee. *Waking*, about rural life in the familiar setting of the North Carolina mountains, is a welcome addition to this bounty of poems. With a unity rarely found so constant in a poet's body of work, Rash has produced a river of poetry, with the move from one book to the next a steady flow in the current. Dip into any of his poetry collections, read a poem or two from several of them, and you'll find that the poems all fit together seamlessly.

Part of the seamlessness of Rash's poetry comes from a spare style – spare but rich in metaphor – that does not tolerate

an extraneous word. A typical Ron Rash poem is based on a seven-syllable line, a characteristic element that leans toward spareness and that has remained constant in his poetry through the years. Poem after poem in *Waking* follows this lineation, often used in Welsh poetry. Much sound play is another characteristic. Common knowledge to anyone who has taken Rash's poetry classes or workshops (as I have) is that he highly values sound in poetry. He is well versed in Welsh forms, poems exhibiting *cynghanedd*, with careful attention to the arrangement of sounds, making particularly effective use of alliteration and rhyme. Combine his skill of achieving highly lyrical sounds with his ability to tell a good story, and the result is the distinctive, tightly knit, well-crafted narrative poem so recognizable in his body of poetry thus far. He is best recognized these days for his novels, but a boon it is for the poetry world that he has not forsaken his talents as a poet.

Thematically, *Waking* covers territories similar to those of Rash's previous books: death, tragedy, the past, rural life, the natural world, and love. A symmetrically structured book divided into five sections of eleven or twelve poems each, it begins and ends with childhood, growth, and wonderment – which is to say, it begins and ends with the notion of "waking." The child in the poems wakes to the world through all five of his senses. Much in the first section, for example, has to do with seeing – and, frequently, not seeing. In "First Memory," the section's opening poem, "Something unseen stirs in the reeds." In "Sleepwalking," the speaker is oblivious to the world until he steps outside to see "stars thrown / skyward like fistfuls of jacks."

And in “Myopia,” the speaker finds his dead great-grandmother’s eyeglasses, which allow him to see the world more clearly. Seeing has become a waking. Death, though, has a presence even in the early poems of the book.

The second section begins and ends with light, the first poem being about a flame handed down from generation to generation, even when the family migrated across the Atlantic and then from one state to another – and the refusal by the heir of the flame to leave when the valley is to be flooded by a dam: “. . . until / that fire left with him, the truck’s / windows left up less wind still / the pail of sparks his lap held.” With similar passion in the section’s last poem, “Woman Among

Lightning: Catawba County Fair, 1962,” a farmwife riding a Ferris wheel “dredging buckets of darkness / out of the sky” is willing to risk the dangers of a storm to feel that freedom up in the air “far from earth as a fistful / of hard-earned quarters can take her.” The poems in this section move from observations – about such subjects as pocketknives, car tags, and tobacco barns – to narratives about women in circumstances of hardship and yearning.

Poems of death and hard times are most prevalent in the third and fourth sections. Included is an elegy for musician Merle Watson (distant kin of the poet), who died in a tractor accident in 1985. Deaths by childbirth, drowning, hunting accident, and war are some of the tragedies that Rash tells of when his

narrative talents as a fiction writer serve him especially well. In the book’s longest poem, “Three A.M. and the Stars Were Out,” spoken in the voice of an old veterinarian, Rash is able to take both a narrative and meditative slant, revealing not just the story of the veterinarian but of the hard times of poor farmers as well, men who, in an attempt to save the fee, often wait too late to call the vet.

Welsh culture begins the book’s fourth section with the poem “Genealogy,” which ends with amazing sound play on the poet’s Welsh surname *Rash*: “. . . a name carried far / only in the wind’s harsh sibilance, / its branch-lashing rattle and rush.” That poem is followed by “Rhiannon,” whose story comes

## RON RASH, CHILDHOOD FRIEND, RUNNER, AND . . . RECIPIENT OF THE 2011 NORTH CAROLINA AWARD FOR LITERATURE

by *Cindy Putnam-Evans*

CINDY PUTNAM-EVANS, Associate Dean for Research in ECU’s Thomas Harriot College of Arts and Sciences, was asked to introduce her life-long friend Ron Rash before his keynote speech at the 8<sup>th</sup> Eastern North Carolina Literary Homecoming in Greenville, 24 Sept. 2011. Hearing of Rash’s most recent honor, *NCLR* asked Putnam-Evans to share her remarks for a different kind of introduction to the 2011 North Carolina Award recipient. See also the North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources press release.

For those of you who know me, you might be wondering why I have been given the honor of introducing our special guest, Ron Rash, the Parris Distinguished Professor of Appalachian Cultural Studies at Western Carolina. Certainly, as a biologist, I have a deep love of and respect for the natural world, and human interaction with the environment is the theme for this year’s homecoming and a theme that permeates Ron’s writing. But that’s not why. And I’m certainly not up here because I know much about literary technique. The reason I’m here is because I have known Ron Rash my entire life. At least, I can’t remember a time when I didn’t know Ron and his family. We grew up together in our hometown, Boiling Springs, NC; we spent time together; and over the years, we have followed each other’s careers with great interest and, dare I say, pride.

I thought I would take this opportunity, if you will indulge me, to reminisce briefly about our younger days and tell you a couple of things I remember best about Ron. You may not know this, but Ron was an exceptional athlete in his younger days. He ran track in high school and college and was mostly a middle-distance runner. I have some very fond memories of going to track meets to watch Ron run. At this time, running was a main focus of his life, perhaps, one might say an obsession. Another thing you might not know about Ron is that he didn’t get his driver’s license until he was nineteen. You see, he didn’t need to drive because he ran everywhere he went. It was a rare day in Boiling Springs that you didn’t see Ron somewhere around town – running. And he ran a lot – sometimes fifty, eighty, or more miles a week – as part of his training. I remember that sometimes he even ran to school, which was about five miles from his house.

Looking back, I think this obsession with running illustrated two things about Ron that I’ve known for a long time: he is dedicated to and passionate about those things that are important to him. And this same dedication and passion that he had for running we now see

from a Welsh myth, and by “Dylan Thomas,” which takes place after the Welsh poet’s death. One of the most moving poems is “Good Friday, 2006: Shelton Laurel,” about a Civil War massacre that Rash has written about before.\* The setting is in Madison County at the grave of David Shelton, who, at thirteen, was the youngest of thirteen men and boys taken prisoner for revenge – and then shot – by a regiment of Confederate soldiers.

Death may come often and in brutal ways in *Waking*, but it does not overshadow the grit and gumption that best define the people of the Southern Appalachians depicted in Rash’s poems. Nor does death overshadow the beautiful but dangerous and indomitable natural world that is their

setting. The book itself is beautiful, with its stark cover art of the car in snow, and the poems themselves offer both light and dark. The world of creeks and sunlight is also the world of shadows and steep inclines, of rattlesnakes and crawfish.

Throughout *Waking*, this world is viewed with the awe of childhood. Within poem after poem are all sorts of “wakings,” those to the self and those to the world and its inhabitants: reading tobacco leaves and clouds and the word *satinback*, wearing a grandfather’s shirt, sleeping under the quilt made and creek-washed

by a grandmother, feeling separate as a child – probably for the first time – from parents lying together by a lake.

Like the woman on the Ferris wheel at the county fair, the speaker in a deer stand dreams “of falling away from earth, toward heaven.” He experiences a moment of paradox, when the familiar becomes strange. That such revelatory moments would occur in the book is inevitable from the outset, starting with its first poem: “It’s all beyond your reach though it appears / as near and known as your outstretched hand.” ■

\* The Shelton Laurel Massacre influenced at least three other poems by Rash: “Allen’s Command,” in *Among the Believers*, and “The Dowry” and “Shelton Laurel,” in *Raising the Dead*, as well as his novel *The World Made Straight* (Holt, 2006), and an essay, “Shelton Laurel,” which appeared in the Flashbacks section of *NCLR* 2008.

magnified many times over in the practice of his craft, his writing. Even when we were teenagers, before most of us thought much about what we wanted to do with our lives, Ron was thinking ahead and talked about his desire to write. You just had a sense that this was something he had to do. In some sense, I think that Ron is still running – when not literally, at least figuratively. He has an amazing work ethic. I’ve heard him remark many times that he writes as much as five or six hours a day. And certainly, his devotion to and passion for his writing is reflected in the wonderful body of work he has produced – poetry, short stories, and his novels, including the highly acclaimed *Serena*, which has been the topic of much discussion during this Literary Homecoming.

Ron has received many awards and honors for his works – the list is ever growing. It includes two O. Henry awards, one for “Speckled Trout” and the other for “Into the Gorge,” and numerous awards for *Serena*, which was a SIBA Book of the Year and finalist for the PEN/Faulkner Award. Last year Ron was awarded the world’s most prestigious prize for a short story collection, the Frank O’Connor award, for *Burning Bright*.\* This year Ron was inducted into the Fellowship of Southern Writers and takes his place alongside such luminaries as Eudora Welty and Walker Percy. With that I give you our special guest – and my dear friend – Ron Rash. ■



PHOTOGRAPH BY DAVID POTOITL, NC ARTS COUNCIL

\* See *NCLR* 2010 for an article on Ron Rash’s *Serena*. In 2011, *NCLR* also published an article on environmental themes in Rash’s oeuvre, and in 2004, an interview with Rash. “Speckled Trout,” which appeared originally in the *Kenyon Review*, is collected in Rash’s *Chemistry and Other Stories* (Picador, 2007). “Into the Gorge,” which appeared originally in the *Southern Review*, is collected in the Frank O’Connor award-winning collection *Burning Bright: Stories* (HarperCollins, 2010).

ABOVE Ron Rash with fellow Boiling Springs native Cindy Putnam-Evans at the Eastern North Carolina Literary Homecoming, 24 Sept. 2011

## CONTEMPORARY CARPETBAGGERS CALLING CAROLINA “HOME”

*a review by Erica  
Plouffe Lazure*

**Marjorie Hudson. *Accidental Birds of the Carolinas*. Winston-Salem, NC: Press 53, 2011.**

**Valerie Nieman. *Blood Clay*. Winston-Salem, NC: Press 53, 2011.**

*“You got to keep in mind he is a northerner. They does things different than us.”—William Faulkner, *The Hamlet**

**ERICA PLOUFFE LAZURE** has an MA from ECU and an MFA from Bennington College. She currently teaches at Phillips Exeter Academy in Exeter, NH. Her writing has appeared in such venues as *McSweeney’s Quarterly Concern* #29, *NCLR* 2007, the *Greensboro Review*, and the *Mississippi Quarterly*. Her short story manuscript, “Cadence’ and Other Stories,” was a 2008 finalist for the Bakeless Literary Prize.

For any Southerner who’s ever wondered what it’s like to be a Yankee transplant, read *Accidental Birds of the Carolinas*, a short story collection by Marjorie Hudson, and *Blood Clay*, a novel by Valerie Nieman, both published in 2011 by Press 53. While Hudson and Nieman have been taken in as Tar Heels – certainly by the state’s rich literary community – both hail from points north, making good use of their outsiders’ perspectives to create compelling stories of escape, displacement, or integration, while capturing with great sensitivity and authenticity the Carolina landscape and its people.

As the title in **Marjorie Hudson’s** collection suggests, birds – whether caged accidentally or incidentally – populate each of her eight stories, marrying the transitory nature of the avian world to the lost souls who have found a haven in rural stretches of the Carolina landscape. Among the characters are Elizabeth, the willful and self-described “crazy Yankee lady” (11) and “the stranger in the house at the end of the road” (1), whose frozen pipes in her ramshackle farmhouse force an encounter with a local plumber and a self-taught ecologist; Rand, a retired Army colonel with a heart condition who prepares for his death while his energetic wife attempts to find friends among the other transplants in their gated retirement community; Jolene, a Nebraskan Mennonite who wins a scholarship to UNC–Chapel Hill; and Dip, the boy who joins a traveling carnival after his widowed father abandons him. Even Elizabeth’s widowed neighbor and Carolina native, Sarton Lee, “spread in his seat like a wrinkled toad” (2), holds stories and secrets of both the land and its people, and finds

his anchors through the cultivation of his farm and through his golden retriever, Wiener.

Like “accidental birds,” as Hudson defines them in a note at the start of the collection, these characters are “found outside their normal range, breeding area, or migration path, arrived through storm, wind, or unusual weather” (n.p.). Her characters are as diverse in their lostness as the stories’ birds – caged cockatiels and barred owls hooting, “*Who cooks for you?*” (9). They share the page with sparrows and whip-poorwills that – in homage to Walt Whitman – offer a “strange throbbing from the shrubbery at dusk” (2). Beyond the birds and other images drawn from the natural world, escape and isolation – both physical and geographic – permeate nearly all of Hudson’s stories. Many of her characters project a contented kind of aloneness – whether by choice or life circumstance – that comes not from a desire for solitude but rather as a side effect of rejection, illness, escape, or ruination. Eventually, however, these characters ache for real human connection and interaction. For example, Dip, the young carnival worker, realizes that he “doesn’t want a family. But today, for the first time, he wonders if there’s something else you can have, not a father yelling at you, but not this high life shit with Royal either” (42).

Hudson does not allow her characters to languish in their self-imposed cocoons but rather forces each of them to find their version of Dip’s “something else.” Whether it’s Elizabeth taking refuge from a wildfire raging through her kitchen, or Holly’s newfound sexual desire for her poetry teacher, or Sarton digging a hole beyond his rows of fence posts

and laying himself in it, wondering “if what holds us down is as strong as what wants to take us up” (35), each character emerges from his or her psychic or physical hibernation.

Even Nina, a rough-edged woman from Detroit, who flees her abusive soldier husband, finds solace – and home – at a Carolina crossing. There, a three-legged dog named Roger greets her on the porch. The next day, she discovers a strawberry pie from her neighbor, which she eats in its entirety and with her fingers. “I guess I was on a starvation diet, trying to disappear,” Nina says, as she prepares to pay a visit of thanks to her neighbor. “But suddenly I was hungry” (59).

Whereas Hudson’s passel of stories offers a range of characters and situations to explore themes of displacement and engagement in the Southern landscape, **Valerie Nieman’s *Blood Clay*** allows for a slower, more focused unfolding of her protagonist’s escape from the North and subsequent effort to find a home in the small town of Shawton, NC. Tracey Gaines is a newly transplanted special needs teacher from both Pennsylvania and Ohio, who, after her divorce, moves to North Carolina to teach at an alternative school. Volleying the narration between Tracey’s perspective and that of her counterpoint, colleague, and eventual love interest, Dave Fordham, the story unfolds through the lens of two lonely and damaged souls who struggle with their self-imposed barriers toward companionship, community, and love.

Dave is a native of Shawton, a former athlete and farm boy, who took his first teaching job out of graduate school in Baltimore and returned home three years later to care for his ailing mother. His narrative offers an insider’s perspective of Shawton and its history and people, coupled with a keen awareness of the harsh realities of the world beyond. Like so many Southern male characters before him – from William Faulkner’s Quentin Compson to Barry Hannah’s Dr. Ray – Dave struggles with his own failure to be a certain kind of man. Dave, former farm boy, football player, and track star, finds himself middle-aged, with his hair thinned, his leg in a brace, and deeply ashamed of his limp. He can no longer hold his own in a fistfight or drive a stick shift. He struggles continually with his Southern pedigree – “he didn’t want her to think he was a snob for his Pettigrew roots” – yet challenges Tracey on her Northerner’s assumptions about race and heritage: “We’re all bound together,” he tells her. “It’s like the names, the black Chalmerses and the white Chalmerses. . . . That goes a long way back, and there’s a lot of pain, but this is still our home. Our land. We all come out of the same red dirt. Blood and clay.” (74).

These themes intensify when Tracey witnesses a pack of dogs attack and kill a neighbor child, Lakesha Sipe, a student at the alternative school. The novel’s action pivots on Tracey’s report of the attack after failing to rescue the girl from the dogs, following which she feels the full brunt of her outsider status from both



COURTESY OF VALERIE NIEMAN

the white and black community. Not only does the dogs’ owner, Artis Pennell, suggest to the local paper that Tracey ran over the girl with her car and is blaming the dogs to cover it up, but also the girl’s mother, Orenna Sipe, blames Tracey for Lakesha’s death because Tracey did not get out of the car to save the child.

Tracey, who had tried to leave her car to help Lakesha but couldn’t because the dogs began to attack her, too, fully admits to cowardice. However, Tracey has a blind spot about why Orenna is so hostile toward her – even before Lakesha’s death – which Tracey never quite realizes or understands. Weeks earlier, Tracey had seen Lakesha at the bus stop “holding a thin sweater close to her bones, and that very night had pulled the coat off the rack at Wal-Mart” (2). Tracey believes that her present of the coat is an indicator of her good will toward Lakesha and her mother and is puzzled by Orenna’s animosity –

**MARJORIE HUDSON** has published essays on John Lawson in *NCLR* 1992 and 2002, and her story “The High Life” (collected in the volume reviewed here) was a finalist in the 2009 Doris Betts Fiction Prize competition. In 2007, Press 53 reprinted her first book, *Searching for Virginia Dare* (Coastal Carolina Press, 2002; reviewed in *NCLR* 2003).

ABOVE **Marjorie Hudson (right) and Valerie Nieman** after their reading at the Joyful Jewel, a gallery in Pittsboro, NC, 16 July 2011

"*Truculent*" (3), Tracey calls it – when she helps to jump-start Orenna's car in the grocery store parking lot. "Was she angry about the coat?" Tracey wonders. "Was that something to be angry about, such a simple thing, to see a child standing cold and give her something bright and warm?" (4). According to Orenna, yes: "Must be she thought I couldn't provide for my girl. She got her some coat and give it to her" (172).

Embedded in Orenna's testimony during Artis Pennell's trial to determine whether his dogs had killed Lakesha is also a charge against Tracey, not for her failure to save Lakesha, but rather for her naïve inability to understand that her act of kindness in giving the child the coat was perceived, in fact, as an indictment of the mother. In large part, Orenna's attitude toward Tracey distracts attention from Tracey's efforts on behalf of Lakesha, focusing attention instead on the Northerner's outsider status; even Orenna's friends and family opt to side with Artis Pennell because "Leastways, he's one of *us*" (111). Meanwhile, Tracey suffers from nightmares, unable to forget "the shy smile when [Lakesha] tried on the new coat and ran her fingers over the bright blue zippers" (62). As Tracey painfully realizes, all the coats in the world couldn't make up for her inability to help Lakesha in a way that mattered when it was needed. As Orenna says at the end of her testimony, "Miz Gaines, she needed you to help her. And then you didn't even come get me, my car in the yard" (173).

After the trial – which offers a verdict as fair as local logic could

muster – Tracey and Dave, now a couple, endeavor to build a life together. Their efforts to grow with each other emulate the growth and change of the community around them. For example, at a tobacco auction – one of the county's last – Dave and Tracey come across a neighbor who's decided to shift away from planting and pulling tobacco in favor of rows of herb gardens "for the city folk" up in Raleigh (143). While to the very last moment, dark elements move throughout the novel, Nieman ends on a more positive note, when Artis Pennell tells Tracey, "[Y]ou can perch here, Tracey, forever, until you die, but you won't ever, ever be part of this place." However, Dave, whose Shawton roots are as deep as Artis's, replies on Tracey's behalf, "That's not true, Artis. She has roots with me. The two of us" (192).

As the characters in Nieman's and Hudson's books learn, it's nearly impossible to move into a new place and remain anonymous for long; there is no such thing as escape or isolation. "Southerners, like nature, abhor a vacuum" (11), Hudson's Elizabeth says. Anonymity – at least in these parts of the Carolinas – ends the moment they run down to the store for a loaf of bread and the newspaper, or they endeavor to take a run through the neighborhood, or they buy a coat for a little girl. Here, it is actions that define a person. And more often than not, the past won't simply go away because of change in geography; as Tracey learns, the past will simply manifest itself in new ways: "Sometimes you think you can get free

by leaving home," Tracey tells Dave. But "[s]ometimes all you do is get another angle on what you want, or can't have. Sometimes you have to go back" (79–80).

Southern historian C. Vann Woodward has suggested that all Southerners have left of their identity is their shared, collective experiences.\* Both *Accidental Birds* and *Blood Clay* are a testament to Northerners' efforts to become a part of that shared experience through the sometimes harsh lessons of meaningful engagement. Both Hudson's stories and Nieman's novel offer insight on how to understand and come to terms with the idiosyncratic attributes of these adopted homes and how to share in the experience of the history of the South and its future. More importantly, these works remind readers that no matter where they were born, they are at many levels responsible for their homes, adopted or otherwise. It's not just the practically feral animals, neglected gardens, or run-down farmhouses that need care and attention; it's the people, too. Like Hudson's Elizabeth says, as she embraces her expanded capacity for love, "I was a creature of this world, and like all living things, subject to the dizzying laws of nature" (23). As these characters find that elusive moment of peace, healing, and growth within themselves, they discover in the process that they might be able to provide peace and healing and growth for others. Like so many "accidental birds" who've found a spot to nest, these wayward characters are able finally to embrace being of a place rather than simply and transiently a visitor in it. ■

\* See C. Vann Woodward, *The Burden of Southern History*, 1960 (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1993) 16.

VALERIE NIEMAN is also the author of a collection of short stories, *Fidelities* (West Virginia University Press, 2004), and a poetry collection, *Wake, Wake, Wake* (Press 53, 2006; reviewed in *NCLR* 2007). Her poetry also appeared in *NCLR* 2011 and is forthcoming in the 2012 print issue.

*On the Beach*

BY VALERIE NIEMAN

**FINALIST IN THE 2011 JAMES APPLEWHITE  
POETRY PRIZE COMPETITION**

*“We came upon shells, mounds of shells, many ancient  
and weathered and gleaming white against the white-gray sand.”*  
—“Seashell Islands,” from *North with the Spring*, Edwin Way Teale

So many, such lives:  
oysters relentlessly seining  
the sea, mussels too,  
draining the insubstantial, parting  
the water from the waters,  
scallops improbably hunting  
on jet drive, oyster drills  
drilling, whelks inserting  
a toothed foot into the soft  
flesh of their brethren, coquinas  
rolling out of Carolina sand  
with each wave  
and furiously reburying,  
in such numbers that even with flesh  
tiny as baby’s fingernail,  
the multitudes, aggregated,  
would boil into a hearty broth.

Such onetime lives:  
carbonate castles  
knitted up from the waves,  
emptied, become home  
to hermit crabs  
trying on the concavities  
of the columella  
into which their soft abdomens  
like size 10 derrieres in size 8 jeans  
are snuggled –  
sometimes a wholesale  
resettlement,  
the largest, finding a  
greater gastropod,  
*moving on up*, and the next  
taking his former abode,  
down to the least  
and miserable clinger  
to a sponge or a worm shell  
now claiming a tiny palace.

The shells of bivalves, too,  
housing multitudes,  
first resting-place  
of coral and barnacle,  
kelp and sea urchins,  
oyster fry putting down  
roots on the half-shells  
that, storm-loosened,  
tumble whitely onto the beach  
for the collectors.

Eventually,  
eight-fingered tourists  
will pick up a skull in the wreck of a city,  
shake off the gray regolith  
(which they will taste, *must* taste)  
polish the zygomatic arch,  
listen for the surf pounding  
at the eyeholes.  
What beautiful remains!  
Each one alike yet different,  
thousands and millions  
shaped for beauty alone;  
consider the knitting of the fissures,  
the curve of the dome.



*Window on the Sea*, 1967 (oil on canvas, 51x39)  
by Claude Howell, courtesy of Lee Hansley Gallery

## REPORTS FROM UNDERGROUND

a review by Deborah Hooker

**Minnie Bruce Pratt. *Inside the Money Machine*. Durham: Carolina Wren Press, 2011.**

**DEBORAH HOOKER** is Teaching Associate Professor of English at NC State University, where she also serves as Director of Women's and Gender Studies. Her most recent article, "The Woman in the Race: Racing and Re-racing Thomas Hardy's 'Pure Woman' in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*," appeared in the Spring 2011 issue of *Nineteenth-Century Gender Studies*.

The author of six collections of poetry, **MINNIE BRUCE PRATT** received her PhD in English at UNC-Chapel Hill.

When Christina Bucher reviewed Minnie Bruce Pratt's *The Dirt She Ate: Selected and New Poems* for *NCLR* in 2006, the sampling of new poems at the end of that collection struck her as "lovely [and] evocative." She wondered if these "poetic snapshots" of working-class men and women struggling to find and keep work would provide the substance of Pratt's next volume.<sup>1</sup> They do. The eleven poems from that 2003 volume join fifty-eight others to flesh out *Inside the Money Machine*, an extraordinarily crafted, deceptively plain-spoken series of portraits of the economically disenfranchised and more. Much more.

Although Pratt tells us that this collection was inspired by reading "The Communist Manifesto for the first time – very late in life,"<sup>2</sup> she needs no primer on economic marginalization. From her first volume of poetry, *The Sound of One Fork* (Night Heron, 1981), through her work on the *Feminary* newsletter with the Durham/Chapel Hill women's collective in the 1970s, to her well-known essay, "Identity: Skin Blood Heart,"<sup>3</sup> through her more recent poetry and nonfiction, Pratt has consistently illuminated the intersecting streams of racism, sexism, and imperialism that create cultural and economic dispossession.

For example, her collection *Rebellion: Essays 1980-1991* reprints a 1989 speech, "Money and the Shape of Things," whose concluding questions clearly portend the concerns of *Inside the Money Machine*:

What do we have yet to learn about sharing our money? How do we figure out the way to do more than share our windfall, the rare winnings? How do we do more than sit and wait for people's luck to change? And how do we learn to change the shape of things so that money is not

what determines how people live, or if they die, or whether we live our life out bent to someone else's use, instead of in meaningful work and in joy?<sup>4</sup>

While the more incendiary poems in this new volume's final section, "If We Jump Up Now," urge us to action, the poems preceding it quietly mount one argument after another against the dehumanizing pressures that Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels described in 1848 and which persist across the globe today. Sometimes reported from a more distanced third-person perspective, sometimes voiced in the more immediate first person, poems like "Getting a Pink Slip," "Looking for Work," "Walking Home from Work," and "Collecting Social Security" focus on daily struggles; they document not merely a will to survive but a will to resist the circumscribed version of humanity offered by "the money machine."

Pratt's new collection immediately denounces that reductiveness in her first poem, "All That Work No One Knows": "We're not machines, you know. There's only so much we can take, / always more than we can, until we can't." That plaintive protest from a collective "we" starkly contrasts with the "muffled clanking[s]" of the "money machine" in "Getting Money at the ATM." In Pratt's hands, the products dispensed by that robotic staple of modern convenience and the accompanying description of a transcriptionist at work become reciprocal images, one "translated" magically into the other according to the arcane formula cloaked by the machine. When the transcriptionist visits the ATM, for example, "[t]he screen blinks and promises me *any time, / any where*." From its "hidden vault," money, "this

<sup>1</sup> Christina G. Bucher, "A 'book of pages waiting to be turned,'" rev. of *The Dirt She Ate: Selected and New Poems*, by Minnie Bruce Pratt, *NCLR* 15 (2006): 164.

<sup>2</sup> Minnie Bruce Pratt, "New Book – Anti-Capitalist Poetics in Action," *Minnie Bruce Pratt*, Blogspot 10 Feb. 2011, web.

<sup>3</sup> For more about Pratt and the *Feminary* newsletter and collective, see "'Hearing Me Into Speech': Lesbian Feminist Publishing in North Carolina" by Wynn Cherry and "Look What Happened Here: North Carolina's *Feminary* Collective" by Tamara M. Powell, both in *NCLR* 9 (2000). Pratt's "Identity" essay is in *Yours in Struggle: Three Feminist Perspectives on Anti-Semitism and Racism* (Ithaca: Firebrand, 1984).

<sup>4</sup> Minnie Bruce Pratt, *Rebellion: Essays 1980-1991* (Ithaca: Firebrand, 1991) 185.

magic skin mottled and blotched / with strange letters and numbers” appears at the command of a “secret password.” Later, at the “quickie mart,” pondering the hidden alchemy of exchange, she hands over “a paper token, a one-page / book,” that contains “all my comings and goings hidden in it, mystified.”

The opaque process of financial translation that Pratt’s poem evokes poses the essential question of a standard of value. In a world where more and more “wealth” is created by using money itself as a commodity, what is our relationship to that medium of exchange, to that fluctuating, intangible commodity and to those who own more and more of it? How does that medium relate to labors that do produce tangible goods and services? And finally, when the transcriptionist’s labors evoke that of the poet, with “words trembling on my tympanum, ten thousand words / pounding on the membrane, how many thousand clacking / between my teeth and tongue,” what magical equivalence machine calculates the value of *that* labor?

Throughout this volume, however, another metaphor, signifying a mystery of another order, challenges the opacity of the money machine – the underground, a concept that does multi-dimensional duty. On the one hand, as in “All That Work No One Knows,” the underground signifies the place of invisible, exploited labor. In that poem, the “pyramids of fruit piled up in supermarkets” serve as more than a metonym for the exploitation of farm workers and



PHOTOGRAPH BY KELLY WOOTEN; COURTESY OF THE SALLIE BINGHAM CENTER FOR WOMEN'S HISTORY AND CULTURE

their “invisible,” migratory lives: “the women packing apples into barrels, into baskets, into wooden lugs,” and after a season, “the people gone, the words between gone to the air.” Those pyramids are a quiet, cautionary symbol: they are the architectural remnants, also erected by slave labor, of a once-great civilization. The implications are obvious. And poem after poem reminds us that the most marginalized workers, those often engaged in what we call subsistence or “menial” labors, are, as Pratt says in “A Pile of Dirt at the Museum,” “the pillars, the foundation, / the unseen / holding up all that is visible.”

Other poems, however, remind us how easily the stubborn desire to do something appropriately and well, no matter how “menial,” can be exploited, how this desire can translate into daily acts of self-sacrifice or self-abnegation, like the woman in “Cutting Hair,” who ignores the constant “snips between / her fingers, the torn webbing” as the shorn hair, which pays her bills, accumulates “like a field of scythed hay beneath

her feet.” Or, as the speaker in “Ordering Paperclips” confesses, despite the manifest indignities of sweat-shop conditions, “*Fear is what keeps us in our jobs, until there is a bigger fear.*”

In other poems, the underground evokes not only the marginalized space from which these voices narrate their lives but also the revolutionary potential that Marx identified with the proletariat. In “Looking for Work,” for example, a son ponders what his father, a miner, “like[d] about work under ground? Was it the dark / or was it the breaking through?” The speaker intuits that “[t]he dark line of connection, / the seam of ore” is “a sentence to be read by other miners and him”; it is the literal handwriting on the wall – to seize the community forged in the dark as a weapon with which to challenge their exploitation.

“Driving a Subway Train,” one of the few poems in this volume to foreground sexual identity, similarly chronicles actual work underground. Detailing the daily journeys of a subway driver, Pratt offers the underground here as a

ABOVE Minnie Bruce Pratt (left) with South Carolina writer Dorothy Allison on the occasion of “Celebrating the Dorothy Allison Papers” at Duke University, Durham, NC, 23 Sept. 2011. During the event, Pratt read from her new collection as a panelist on “Out in the South: Writers in Conversation.”

metaphor for a transsexual half-life: on Mondays, the “nail polish off, carhart jacket on, he’s left behind / the clothes that fit her secret self”; for “[f]ive days a week he moves toward home under ground.” The poem ends on a celebratory note, however, when, at the end of the week, he emerges against a floral backdrop, where “the yellow bouffant skirts of forsythia” echo the broader dimensions of the obscured “secret self.”

That same possibility of emerging from the underground into the desired and “secret self” and the joy of that potential is also evoked in “Sparks Fly Upward.” In the poem’s autumnal setting, the persona is stopped in her tracks by “the trees blazing up in their dying,” and she realizes that

Dying and coming back is what trees  
promise us – coming back as ourselves,  
arms spread, the sun pulling life up  
through our veins, so we play a new song  
on our xylem xylophone.

Moments like these – of being arrested by and attentive to natural beauty – punctuate many of Pratt’s poems: in “Teaching a Child to Talk,” for example, a mother introduces her small son to more-than-human communication by having him listen to the “common sparrows talking in the hedge”; a lost job is mourned in “A Temporary Job” because the persona had “learned the way the sun laid its palm / over the side window in the morning, heavy / light, how I’ll never be held in that hand again.” Such moments of attentiveness illuminate a final element in the underground motif: they point to the realization that all we do to live, whether it takes the form of subsistence or more transcendent kinds of labor, depends entirely on the earth: a dark underground that nourishes the seed and the hidden alchemy of minerals that swim toward us through the roots and leaves we taste and savor.

Pratt pointedly evokes this beauty and this mystery in “The Great Leafing-Out.” The poem poses a heated moment of protest against “corporate greed” alongside the persona’s recent memory in which

the maple tree dropped its own reality  
at my feet, a twig waving red-green paws, curled  
with little finger muscles of seed. Over my head  
and further than I can see, the tree tops brighten  
in a green sunrise. The beautiful moment between  
when something has begun and is not finished yet.

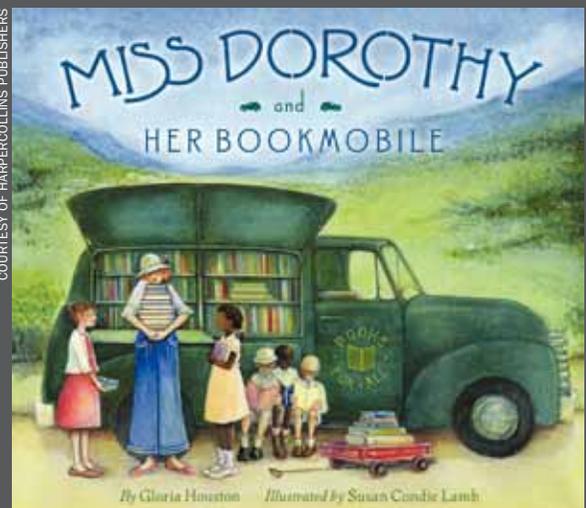
As a poem and as an image, “The Great Leafing-Out” suggests itself as a metaphor for waking up, for waking into collective action against an unbridled profit ethos; however, Pratt does not elaborate this organic motif of earthly beauty and natural mystery

into a systematic or romantic philosophy here. Rather, this and other organic images and metaphors represent the simple desire to bring us back to our senses: they affirm sight, smell, hearing, touch, and taste – the concretes of experience – against an empire of economic abstraction. They challenge models of “reality” based on mathematical obscurity and sleight of hand jargon with the things we actually touch and feel: the embodied knowledge of life and labor.

Finally, in “Fighting Fire,” as in many of the poems in the final “If We Jump Up Now” section, Pratt’s persona speaks directly to us. She urges us to obey the evidence of our senses in order to inspire us out of silence, out of apathy: “Jump up, jump up. Let the words leap out of our mouths, / let us follow ourselves out of the burning now, out of / the dying house, out from under the blood slowly dropping / onto our foreheads, onto our closed eyelids. Let’s get up now.”

It may be that this lovely and extremely accessible volume of poems will, as time passes, simply have borne witness to the dispossessions of our time. That is, Pratt’s poems may live on as a document of our collective and tragic failure to “jump up.” Or they may become something more. What is certain is that Pratt has done her part here, politically and poetically. The rest of the words, the rest of the labor, must be our own. ■

## 2011 NC AAUW AWARD



Gloria Houston received the 2011 North Carolina Association of American University Women Award for Juvenile Literature for *Miss Dorothy and Her Bookmobile* (HarperCollins), illustrated by Susan Condie Lamb. ■

## TAKING THE LONG WAY HOME

*a review by Art Taylor*

**John Hart. *Iron House*. New York: Thomas Dunne Books, 2011.**

NCLR Editorial Board member and North Carolina native ART TAYLOR, an Assistant Professor at George Mason University, contributes a monthly literary column to Raleigh's *Metro Magazine* and writes frequently on mysteries and thrillers for the *Washington Post* and *Mystery Scene* magazine. His fiction has appeared in publications ranging from *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine* to the *North American Review*. See his interviews with Margaret Maron in NCLR 1994 and with Michael Malone in NCLR 2011.

JOHN HART grew up in North Carolina and attended Davidson College, earning graduate degrees in both accounting and law. For more information, visit his website. Art Taylor reviewed Hart's three previous novels in NCLR 2009.

John Hart's first three books, *The King of Lies* (2006), *Down River* (2007), and *The Last Child* (2009), so firmly established a pattern of thematic concerns that it will come as no surprise to find those same motifs and messages at the heart of his latest novel, *Iron House*. Hart's books regularly explore how the ties of family and of class don't just bind but often constrain; examine how people, men usually, burdened by guilty secrets, struggle to atone and forge ahead; and exalt personal sacrifice as an often noble path to redemption. While Hart's first two novels limited themselves to single perspectives – privileged men, haunted by the past, facing an uncertain future – his third book, *The Last Child*, broadened that canvas to explore the perspectives of people across wide ranges of age, race, and class. *Iron House* seems to mark another stage of growth, expanding beyond the milieu of troubled North Carolina families to include as well the dangerous world of organized crime on the mean streets of New York.

Michael, the book's main character, grew up on those mean streets, an orphan from Appalachian North Carolina who ran off to the big city; managed to survive by wit, instinct, and force; and was eventually brought into the mob family of Otto Kaitlin, "[p]ossibly the most powerful crime boss in recent memory" (135). *Adopted* might be the more apt word here for a number of reasons: Kaitlin treats Michael like a son and feels closer to Michael than to his own flesh and blood son; Michael calls Kaitlin's real son, Stevan, his brother; and Michael has long followed the principle that family comes first. But Michael isn't officially family, and worse, he

suddenly wants out of the organization. He's fallen in love; his girlfriend, Elena, is pregnant; he has his eye on a new, clean life. Kaitlin himself, aged and near death, grants Michael this opportunity and offers best wishes, but others – most notably Stevan and the merciless Jimmy, who trained Michael – see Michael's choice as betrayal. As long as the elder Kaitlin lives, Michael is protected, but as soon as the patriarch passes on, Stevan and Jimmy plan to "take care of" Michael in their own way and eliminate the pregnant Elena as well.

To say more about what happens in *Iron House*'s New York sections (roughly the first fifty pages of the book) would diminish some of the considerable suspense and emotional weight of the novel's opening act – hardly fair to readers who want to experience the thrills of the thriller firsthand – but one twist must be revealed. As Michael escapes from the carnage, Stevan and Jimmy level a threat against someone potentially even more precious to Michael than his pregnant wife: the one real family member he long ago left behind.

Twenty-three years earlier, Michael and his younger, frail, and sensitive brother, Julian, had been living in the Iron Mountain Home for Boys, offering "*Shelter and Discipline since 1895*" (43). But despite that promise, the Iron House of the book's title was worse than Dickensian for these and other boys. The home's motto, "*Enter child, and know no fear but that of God*" (41), might as well have read "*Abandon all hope, ye who enter here*" for all the warmth and safety that the institution offered: negligence from the administrators, a reigning sense of lawlessness, the



stronger boys preying upon the weaker ones, and general survival of the fittest. “The place was tribal” (185), Michael says in retrospect, and in the midst of that pre-adolescent jungle, Michael proved his own fitness, but Julian broke, time and again, before the bullies terrorizing him.

Could Julian ever learn to take care of himself? Could he ever be strong like his older brother, Michael? Michael and Julian were to be adopted, but a cruel twist of events separates the boys and sends Michael into the world alone and ultimately into the bosom of a crime syndicate while Julian was more formally adopted into the home of a rising North Carolina politician and his wife. The moment of separation was the last time the boys saw one another until the mob begins gunning for Michael’s loved ones.

And so Michael heads south – homeward, one might say, though he himself has no real home here, only a brother he hasn’t seen in nearly a quarter century but now must protect; and homeward to glimpse the life he himself might have had, if only – well, if only *everything* had been different.

The arrival of a shadowy crime syndicate figure at the estate of

a wealthy and powerful senator – and the depressing family situation unfolding within those gates – begins to set into motion many of Hart’s trademark themes more completely: class struggles, questions about what one does for family, and myriad definitions of what the concept of family means at all. The senator’s wife, Abigail, is unhappily married, with a husband more concerned about his standing in the public eye and in the polls than about what’s really happening with his supposed loved ones. Abigail’s own focus has always been on her adopted son, Julian – that’s the family *she* really cares for – but though Julian has blossomed into a successful children’s book author under her care, he has also recently withdrawn into a psychological stupor reminiscent of his younger traumatic days. Abigail wants to help Julian; the senator wants to cover up the incident; Michael, newly arrived, questions what these people have done for and to his brother – and then a few whispered words from Julian himself lead Michael to discover a dead body in the lake. Quickly enough, more dead bodies are surfacing, corpses whose identities are soon sending everyone digging back

deeper into shared, secret histories. Michael is not just relentless but ruthless in his twin goals of protecting his kin and discovering the truth, whatever the threats from brute mob strength or political power plays and, ultimately, whatever the cost to himself in the process.

Hart has once more set the bar high from book to book, weaving perhaps his most intricate and ambitious plot ever. The summaries above only hint at the wealth of incident in the book, and at times *Iron House* seems like several novels layered atop one another. While mystery is predominant (who’s the killer? what has sent Julian into catatonia? and what really happened back at Iron Mountain?), the novel is also a sharp and frequently ultra-violent thriller, with the mob hot on the trail and a cold-blooded sadist leading the hunt. Just as this is Hart’s first mob novel, so too is it the first in which he begins to deal explicitly with politics (though this isn’t entirely a political thriller) and the first in which he plunges more intensely into psychological issues (though it’s not entirely a psychological thriller either).

That latter foray strikes me as perhaps the weakest aspect of the book: schizophrenia and multiple personality disorder already run the risk of seeming somewhat clichéd in a thriller (over a half-century since *Psycho* did it, after all), and Hart doesn’t add any fresh perspectives, either in his examination of these conditions or in his attempt to inhabit those voices inside his characters’ heads; instead of examining psychological issues in depth and

with sensitivity, the issues serve instead as impetuses to keep the plot moving and twisting. The story's overall velocity – as gripping as it is – also seems in conflict with some of the writing, as if Hart himself became so caught up in the momentum that he couldn't slow down enough to pay attention to his craft. Dialogue stalls and repeats as some scenes rush and stumble to find themselves, and elsewhere it's not entirely clear who's speaking at all – questions, objections, and interjections jumping into conversations briskly but not clearly in a character's voice. And this book –

more like his earlier *Down River* – seems prone to occasionally melodramatic flourishes.

Despite these missteps, Hart's passion as a writer, his dynamism, and his ambitiousness are more than enough to outweigh most objections, and the essential hopefulness at the heart of even the bleakest moments may well serve to prompt readers toward empathy and indulgence. When Hart writes about Julian's children's books, he might well be describing his own novels:

They're about damaged people finding a way to move beyond the things that damaged them. They're about

light and hope and sacrifice, love and faith and the fight to do better. . . . His characters go through hell and end up close to destroyed, but you see good in the people he makes. You see small strength and the power of choice, movement through fear and loathing and self-doubt. (206–207)

This is almost a mission statement for Hart's own approach. With *Iron House*, Hart once more reveals himself as an artist deeply self-aware and engaged in reaching farther and building higher upon the foundations he's established for himself. Readers are fortunate to be able to enjoy the products of Hart's artistic development. ■

## LOST COLONY VETERAN WILLIAM IVEY LONG: THIRD HARDEE RIVES DRAMATIC ARTS AWARD RECIPIENT

The Hardee Rives Dramatic Arts Award was endowed in 2009 by Ralph Hardee Rives. It is “presented annually to an individual, individuals, organization, project, or other entity in recognition of notable contribution(s) to the dramatic arts in North Carolina.” The third recipient, William Ivey Long, grew up in Seaboard, NC, also the home of writer Bernice Kelly Harris. He spent summers in Manteo, NC, where his parents worked on the production of Paul Green's outdoor drama *The Lost Colony*. During his acceptance remarks, Long credited Harris for inspiring his father to follow his dream, which brought the family to Manteo, where “Billy” would meet his own mentor, “Uncle Paul” Green.

Nominating Long, Bland Simpson, the 2010 recipient of this same award, remarked upon Long maintaining an “astonishingly strong” connection to his native state, particularly given his incredibly successful Broadway career (Long has won five Tony Awards for his costume designs and was inducted in 2005 into the Theater Hall of Fame). Long has served as production designer of *The Lost Colony* since 1988 and is president of the Eastern Seaboard Trust, a nonprofit “dedicated to the economic revitalization and historic preservation” of Long's hometown (Long website). Long is also a member of the North Carolina Order of



PHOTOGRAPH BY ALAN WESTMORELAND.  
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the Long Leaf Pine and a recipient of the North Carolina Award for Fine Arts.

North Carolina Literary and Historical Association Vice-President Monika Fleming presented the Hardee Rives Award to Long, noting that “we are honoring him for forty-six years with *The Lost Colony* – as actor, producer, and clothing designer.” ■

# CELEBRATING BLAND SIMPSON: 2011 recipient of the Roberts Award for Literary Inspiration

*presentation remarks by Jerry Leath Mills*

*Eastern North Carolina Literary Homecoming,  
23 September 2011*

I've been asked to include in my remarks an indication of why Bland Simpson merits the Roberts Award for Literary Inspiration. This is easy to do, though hard to do in adequate detail in less than an all-day session. And for me, it is a very good time to be doing it: just a couple of weeks ago, I read the manuscript draft of Bland's forthcoming book, his eighth book to date, and was led by that reading to consider the remarkable trajectory of his career over the forty years I've been the beneficiary of his friendship. I'll mention a few points on that trajectory tonight. Each of these points will illustrate the literary inspiration that this award is all about (in Bland's case, it includes musical inspiration as well), but not just the inspiration. I think the not-so-secret secret of Bland's achievement is his ability to combine inspiration with creative energy, the force that turns idea into act and translates private impulse into public art. When Bland gets a notion, he does not fool around. And, to paraphrase Shakespeare's Falstaff, Bland has been not only inspired but the source of inspiration to others. A list of writers, musicians, and students on whom his influence has settled would require yet another of those all-day sessions to cover.

First, I'd like to point out that Bland is here tonight as a result of a long-ago decision to defy fate. By the time he finished high school in 1966, his family, friends, and he had accepted the assumption that his destiny was to become a lawyer. His father was a lawyer, his grandfather was a lawyer, and both of his sisters became lawyers. Bland began and finished his college career as a political science major. Not long after he matriculated at UNC, he ran for and was elected President of his freshman class. (The university yearbook for that year contains a photograph of Bland, among the other class officers, looking every inch the budding politician, spiffily attired in sports jacket and necktie, in the era of the 1960s, when seeing an undergraduate in coat and tie

was as startling as spying an Eskimo in a bikini.) Later in college, he teamed up with cartoonist Bruce Strauch to write a column for the *Daily Tar Heel* that was chiefly, though not entirely, political in nature.

But at some point, maybe early in 1968, Bland's love of music and his continued interest in mostly self-taught piano performances led to a major burst of inspiration: he would become a singer-songwriter. Did he then change his major? Did he sign up for formal piano lessons? Did he start filling out applications to Julliard and the Berklee School of Music? No. He took the more inspired course of sticking out his thumb on a cold December day and hitchhiking up to New York State to visit, unannounced, with Bob Dylan. After a half-hour conversation with that Minnesota-bred singer in sub-zero weather on the front porch, Bland left with the encouragement and confidence he'd gone there to find. He was exhilarated and focused, though no doubt feeling, as he negotiated on foot the long and icy driveway through the woods, not unlike an Eskimo himself.

The next year Bland moved to New York City and went to work on his songwriting career, soon landing a contract with Columbia Records for his first album, *Simpson*. It was a mostly solo album, but included bits by an old Chapel Hill buddy, Dave Olney (thereafter famous for his Nashville group, Dave Olney and the X-Rays).

Back in Chapel Hill a year or so later, Bland combined with Jim Wann, Mike Sheehan, John Foley, and Jan Davidson (now the director of the John C. Campbell Folk School in Brasstown, NC) to form a group known as The Southern States Fidelity Choir. Soon, Simpson and Wann were at work on their first big musical dramatic hit *Diamond Studs* merging with the then recently formed group The Red Clay Ramblers. After opening in Chapel Hill, *Diamond Studs* played off-Broadway in New York to rave reviews and packed houses from New Year's Eve of 1974 to mid-July of 1975 before going on tour.

**JERRY LEATH MILLS** introduced *NCLR's* publication (in 2005) of the title song of Bland Simpson and the Coastal Cohorts' *King Mackerel and the Blues Are Running*. He also published a humorous personal essay in *NCLR* 2008.

**BLAND SIMPSON's** *NCLR* contributions also include a story in 2005, an essay in 2008, music on the 2008 humor issue CDs, and an article on musicians' theater in 2009.

I had gotten to know Bland around 1971, probably through some of his friends, including Wann and Olney, who took my courses at UNC. He and I often found each other at the same watering spots, including a wonderful establishment called Merritt's Service Station that dispensed beer and inspired country humor as well as providing gas and oil. At the time, Bland was supporting his creative endeavors by house painting and by a moving business he named City Transfer Co. This consisted of Bland and whomever he could enlist as assistants at a given time. The business employed as its sole vehicle a step van of the style used then as milk trucks and bread wagons. Bland had acquired this van for the price of a breakfast bought for its previous owner at the Carolina Coffee Shop, the only catch being that he had to go get it in New Hampshire. So, undaunted and accompanied by his friend and collaborator John Foley, he once again stuck out his thumb and headed north. I was one of his very first customers, and a satisfied one – he moved our family's household goods for the fee of a tank of gas and a case of beer, much of which I consumed myself during the project.

With his dramatic and musical career underway, Bland followed other forms of inspiration. After writing some articles on oddities in eastern North Carolina for the *Carolina Financial Times*, he decided to try some purely literary work for a while and began work on his first nonfiction novel, *The Mystery of Beautiful Nell Cropsey*, concerning a famous crime in his native Elizabeth City in 1900. That book was not published until several years later, but Bland's style so impressed an editor at one of the publishing houses that he extended an advance on royalties for another novel with a background of country music. Bland duly began regular and steady work on the book that became *Heart of the Country*. That book, published in 1983, was written mostly on his granddaddy's portable typewriter in my office at the UNC English Department. During the months of writing, the publishing house was sold to the *Playboy* financial empire, so Bland found himself working for Hugh Hefner.

One day the late Max Steele, then director of the creative writing program, asked me what Bland was doing with all that typing, and I told him the story. Max said that he was short on staff and wondered if Bland would like to teach a section of creative



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writing. Thus began an association that extends from 1982 to the present and includes the Tanner teaching award, a Bowman and Gordon Gray Professorship for inspirational undergraduate teaching, and Bland's current and permanent chair as Kenan Distinguished Professor of English and Creative Writing.

I could go on, but I think it will suffice to point out that in addition to his books, Bland has written well over a hundred songs, collaborated on eight major musical plays plus two ballets, and published numerous articles and essays in journals such as *Southern Cultures*, *Our State Magazine*, and the *North Carolina Literary Review*. He has received some fourteen prestigious awards that include the North Carolina Award for Fine Arts, the North Carolina Folklore Society's Brown-Hudson Folklore Award, and now the Roberts Award for Literary Inspiration. In these endeavors, he has been constantly accompanied, inspired, and often collaborated with by his wife Ann Cary Simpson, an accomplished photographer and Associate Dean for Development at the UNC Institute of Government. ■

ABOVE Bland Simpson, President of the UNC-Chapel Hill freshman class (left), posing for the *Yackety Yack* 1967 yearbook with the other officers: (left to right) Jean Roberts, Social Chair; Pete Powell, Vice President; Randy Merrill, Treasurer; and Judy Froeber, Secretary

## A Miscellany of Material

Margaret D. Bauer, Editor

This section provides quite a miscellany of material: reviews of poetry, from a debut collection to several *Selected Poems* collections; a review of three very different kinds of historical novels; and a review of a debut novel that has been decades in the writing. Also in this section, we have news of Michael Parker's latest award and a poem by the winner of the first James Applewhite Poetry Prize competition. The winning poem, as well as an essay by Parker, will then be published in the 2012 print issue.

Thinking about awards for writing, it is time to submit to the Doris Betts Fiction Prize competition, sponsored by the North Carolina Writers Network and managed by *NCLR*. The 2011 competition's first and second-place stories are forthcoming in *NCLR 2012*. Following the 2012 Betts competition's February 15 deadline, we will begin accepting submissions for our own James Applewhite Poetry Prize competition. The first year was a grand success, as readers can see by the finalists' poems in this issue and forthcoming in the print issue. We thank the Mary Duke Biddle Foundation for grant funding in support of these first two years of the Applewhite competition.

Please check out the Submissions page of our website for submission and eligibility guidelines for both of these competitions, as well as to find out

about submitting interviews with and articles on North Carolina writers. Remember that topics that do not fit the current or a past issue's special feature section will be considered for the North Carolina Miscellany section of either the print issue or now the online supplement. We would love to hear from you about a writer you would like to introduce or reintroduce to our readers.

Finally, we invite authors to send us (or have your publisher send us) the books you want us to consider reviewing in the next *NCLR Online*. It would help us considerably if those who are submitting their books to the various North Carolina book award competitions conducted by the North Carolina Literary and Historical Association would send us a review copy of their books at the same time. For more information about book reviews, go to Submissions on our website and then click on the Book Review tab.

Enjoy this final section of the premiere issue of *NCLR Online*, and then subscribe to receive the print issue or join the North Carolina Literary and Historical Association (all members receive *NCLR*, as well as the *North Carolina Historical Review*). Show your support for North Carolina writers, and help us to increase our subscription/membership base and weather the current economic climate. ■



PHOTOGRAPH BY DAWN WAINWRIGHT



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LEFT 2011 James Applewhite Poetry Prize competition finalists at the Eastern North Carolina Literary Homecoming, 23 Sept. 2011; left to right, C.G. Thompson, John Thomas York (winner), Valerie Nieman, and Susan Laughter Meyers (unable to attend, finalist Mark Smith-Soto and semifinalists whose poems are also forthcoming in 2012, Debra Kaufman and Glenis Gale Redmond)

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*Swimming by the Bridge* (acrylic on canvas, 38x31) by Jane Filer

## *The Fish Boy*

BY JOHN THOMAS YORK

### FINALIST IN THE 2011 JAMES APPLEWHITE POETRY PRIZE COMPETITION

When I felt the whirlpool, the suck of my parents' ship  
sinking in slow motion, I didn't splash or yell for help.  
I believed I could live underwater, the mermaids' darling.

I grew scales on fingers feet elbows ankles,  
a spreading fishiness up to my eyelids,  
eczema's crust a red burning under white flakes.  
Some days I feigned a fever to stay home.

But nothing hindered my progress as I swam  
through nights of insomnia, moon lowing like a fog horn,  
then the sun ya-honking like a ferry rising into the blue.

I was the fish boy – hooked –  
jerked out of the water by bully teacher friend, I gaped  
mute as a flounder in a world shouting bright.

**JOHN THOMAS YORK** won the first James Applewhite Poetry Prize. His winning poem, "Lamp," will be published in *NCLR* 2012. York was born in Winston-Salem, grew up in Yadkin County, and now lives in Greensboro, NC. He is the author of a chapbook, *Naming the Constellations* (Spring Street Editions, 2010) and a full-length collection, *Cold Spring Rising* (Press 53, 2012). Hear him read his winning James Applewhite Poetry Prize poem, "Lamp" at the 2011 Eastern North Carolina Literary Homecoming.

**JANE FILER** has an MFA from UNC-CH. Her work has appeared in such periodicals as *The Sun* and *NCLR* 2011 and is included in private, corporate, and museum collections state- and nationwide, as well as in Europe and Asia. She taught painting and drawing for over twenty years at the Carrboro Arts Center in Carrboro, NC, where a studio has since been named in her honor. See more of her work on her website and in the forthcoming print issue of *NCLR* 2012.

## FOUR FOR THE BOOKSHELF, FOUR FOR THE FUTURE

*a review by Al Maginnes*

**Peter Makuck.** *Long Lens: New and Selected Poems.* Rochester, NY: BOA Editions, Ltd, 2010.

**Heather Ross Miller.** *Lumina: A Town of Voices.* Hammond, LA: Louisiana Literature Press, 2011.

**David Rigsbee.** *The Red Tower: New and Selected Poems.* Montgomery, AL: New South Books, 2010.

**Eleanor Ross Taylor.** *Captive Voices: New and Selected Poems, 1960–2008.* Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2009.

**AL MAGINNES** has been a resident of North Carolina for over thirty years. He teaches writing and literature at Wake Technical Community College. He received his BA from ECU, and his MFA from the University of Arkansas. He is the author of four full-length poetry collections. The fourth, *Ghost Alphabet* (2008), won the White Pine Poetry Prize. See an interview with and poetry by Maginnes in *NCLR* 2007.

Despite the recent mania for collections of poems centered on a single story or concept, books of poems are, by and large, artificial constructs. Generally speaking, poems are written one at a time, not as part of a larger scheme. So when it comes time to put together a collection, the poet often finds him or herself treading water, looking for poems that fit together and wondering what to do with that rare brilliant outlier that seems to fit nowhere in the slowly coalescing collection, which is, at this point, simply a mass of pages spread across a table or living room floor.

If a poet is successful in putting together enough such hybrids, he or she might wind up in the position of putting together a volume of “selected poems,” along with a few new ones. These collections offer readers a fresh introduction to work published years before, even as such collections assure long-time readers of the poet that loyalty is justified. Such collections also offer a rare opportunity to see how a poet’s work of years and decades fits together. Of the four collections under consideration here, three are new and selected volumes, while the fourth is a collection of the kind I mentioned in the first paragraph, a collection centered around a small town and its inhabitants. The poets reviewed here are either North Carolina natives or long-time residents, and three of them still reside here.

The four writers reviewed here also have behind them long careers of writing and, in the cases of all but Eleanor Ross Taylor, distinguished careers as teachers of writing and literature, as well. I feel I should disclose that two of these poets I’m writing about here, Peter Makuck and Heather Ross Miller, were professors of mine, Makuck

at East Carolina University and Miller at the University of Arkansas. And David Rigsbee is a fellow Raleigh resident and a friend, but in the comradeship of North Carolina’s writing community, it would be strange if a writer-reviewer did not know fellow writers.

**David Rigsbee** is a native of Durham, NC, who, after living many other places, now resides in Raleigh where he is professor of English at Mount Olive College. *The Red Tower*, his volume of new and selected poems, culls poems going back to his first book of poems, *Stamping Ground*, which was published in 1976. Because *The Red Tower* is divided into two sections only, a short section of new poems and a much longer one simply called “Selected Poems,” it is impossible for the new reader of Rigsbee’s work to know the chronological order of the poems. So one is left to conclude that the strengths of this poet’s work – a world view steeped in art and philosophy, a knack for graceful lines, accessible language that never oversimplifies the conditions it describes – have been with him from the beginning.

“Wanted: a sky-blue life,” Rigsbee writes in “The Stone House,” an elegy for the literary critic Edmund Wilson. A few lines later he adds, “Wanted too, a meaning for these footsteps,” and these two lines might sum up what seem to be the two impulses of Rigsbee’s poetry. Throughout *The Red Tower*, there is both the desire for beauty as well as the need to attach some meaning to it. The fact that this poem is also an elegy for a writer of an earlier generation is indicative as well; Rigsbee’s work is often elegiac. There are several poems here for a younger brother who committed

COURTESY OF DAVID RIGSBEE



suicide but poems as well for the poets Joseph Brodsky and John Logan; the philosopher Richard Rorty; and the poet-musician Gil Scott-Heron, a one-time classmate of Rigsbee's.

There is a painterly aspect to Rigsbee's work, and there are references in his poems to Edward Hopper, Paul Cezanne, Michelangelo, and many other visual artists. The first line of the book's first poem, "Harp," describes a "bad painting, at once aggressive and shy." The poet is sitting "in a room / not mine" watching while "a young, bespectacled mother puts out the wash," and as the poem progresses, it becomes a textual version of the painting described in the first line. The poet keeps watching the ordinary scene he has drawn for us, wondering about a child's blue smock and the "absence of its little owner."

"Pointless speculation, says a contrapuntal voice, / and yet that is what I did with my life," the poem concludes. Yet Rigsbee is self-aware enough to know that this is what poets do: they watch and speculate and try to transform that watching into language. For Rigsbee, a simple description of the scene is inadequate. Visual art offers a way of thinking about the world, and Rigsbee is nothing if not a thinking poet. And he is a poet who is consoled by art, as in his Pushcart Prize poem "Russians," a poem that begins with memories of youthful folly before reminding us to:

look in on the Russians  
 passing out at the feet of their superiors,  
 emptying their wallets into the fireplace,  
 throwing their brain-stuffed heads

before the locomotive of History,  
 rather than face the vivid memory  
 of errors committed when the face  
 was hot and stared into the eyes  
 of that intransigent, that other face.

Here visual art offers a kind of consolation, if not absolution.

It is worth mentioning that few of Rigsbee's elegies deal in the sort of fashionable gossip of so much modern elegy where we are presented with the departed poet or friend saying something witty or profound, thereby leaving a brief, pithy impression upon the audience. In "Umbrian Odes," Rigsbee's elegy for Joseph Brodsky (about whom Rigsbee has also written a book of criticism), the deceased is mentioned only in passing, and then he is only addressed as "you" or by his first name. There are no tales told out of school here, no passing on of clever *bon mots*, only a stoic meditation on landscape and on the inadequacy of language to express grief: "As for us, our best lines lie in canceled stanzas, / no doubt, homogenized by a silence as thick / as ennui."

Yet, if Rigsbee can acknowledge the presence of ennui, no such ennui ensues from his poems. Rigsbee too profoundly respects the things of this world to surrender to any modish hand-wringing and despair. In "Gil's Sentence," a poem that will in future years be read as elegy (it was, in fact, written before Scott-Heron's recent death), Rigsbee remembers a brief poetry workshop encounter with the poet and musician Gil Scott-Heron when both were students at Columbia. Scott-Heron rises to the defense of the speaker's poem but rebuffs any attempts at further intimacy when they meet again: "But this was the weekend. He was in his / other world with his band, his other means." What is left is the speaker's memory of Scott-Heron "risen to that defense when justice / was poetic."

Yet Rigsbee is a poet who understands that art and philosophy provide only a temporary stay. At the end of the day, we are confronted with our own mortality, a topic Rigsbee does not shy away from. The most affecting of his mortality-grappling poems are those concerning the suicide of the poet's brother. In "Four Last Songs," the longest of Rigsbee's poems about his brother's suicide, the poet's insistence on logic breaks down when faced with immutable death.

For the most part, Rigsbee's poems play out like well-constructed arguments or exercises in logic. While the poems are seldom predictable, they follow

an internal logic that makes their reasoning and even their language seem inevitable. But in “Four Last Songs,” Rigsbee follows a different, more improvisatory logic, thereby illustrating how grief remakes our worlds and our existence. In such a realm, the things human beings create are revealed for the transitory constructions they are:

against the light as if  
one of the last songs wouldn't also be the twitter  
of remembered birds,  
(a twitter that flutes up  
at the end, where art loosens  
and passes into nature).

“[O]ne scarcely has time to think / of the escape of thinking,” Rigsbee writes several pages later, near the end of this seventeen-page poem. He is speaking of the velocity at which a bullet travels, but he might also be describing the way we encounter experience. First it happens, then we find or create language to explain what has happened. In David Rigsbee's hands, language is used to console, to instruct and deconstruct, and to give pleasure, all old and honorable functions of poetry. In the final lines of “Holding Lear,” Rigsbee offers both the life examined and unexamined and the unmistakable fact of the void in front of which art is often made:

Standing in Barnes & Noble, I reread  
the opening lines of *King Lear*, “I thought  
the king had more affected . . .” and put  
it down, the Arden edition with its  
massive apparatus, the text afloat  
on an ocean of explanatory notes,  
and on the cover, a bare tree crooking  
charcoal joints, leaves long in the process  
of blowing out over bare earth, a fact  
not even bad art can fail to get right.

**Peter Makuck's** first book, *Where We Live*, was published by BOA Editions Ltd. in 1982. Like many first collections, it was comprised of poems written over the years of trial and experimentation that are common to poets learning their craft, and it gave little hint that over the three decades and four ever-developing collections (not to mention a number of chapbooks and two short story collections – another is forthcoming) that the North Carolina coast would become Makuck's Yoknapatawpha, the postage stamp of soil that would allow his poems and stories to uncover the universal in the coastal Carolina particular.



PHOTOGRAPH BY DAWN WANNWRIGHT

The poems in *Where We Live* find the poet locating himself in the world, shaking off a sometimes reckless youth, and seeing where he has landed. A few of these early poems “selected” for inclusion in *Long Lens* contrast Makuck's native North with the South where he finds himself, as in “Southern Snow,” which “rends us by being rare,” something familiar to any resident of the South who has awakened to find the white stuff heaped and drifted on the familiar landscape. In “Hunger,” the poet watches his neighbor clean a deer and remembers his youth trapping “muskrat, mink, otter, and coon.” But he understands the difference between his youthful trapping for pocket money and the deeper need that drives his neighbor:

He smiles at me like an old buddy  
but a blade is between us, a carcass, and  
something else. Rifles bark in the hills.  
He smiles a demented smile.  
I quicken like a dog, stiffen.

The speaker of this poem knows he is cut off from his own past by the passage of time, by sensibility, by the unspoken “something else.” The same knowledge lives in the poem “Workin’ Construction,” a memory of a college summer spent as a mason's helper. “It took me a whole summer to read one thin book,” Makuck says of days spent “shouldering bricks up ladders.” Yet even this work offers the poet a vision of what he desires to escape. When the building rises high enough, he sees the town where he was raised, “whole and sadly small / for the first time, bordered by river, / rusty bridge, and walling hills.” If the apprentice labors to build walls, the landscape where he works has already constructed its own walls, walls he must work to escape even as he now works “to get the feeling / that will please me / as working construction once did.”

Before I consider Makuck's other work, I want to say that *Where We Live* contains two of my favorite poems that anyone has ever written, "Back Roads by Night," a meditation on driving and the unpredictable routes the mind takes on long solo voyages, and "Players," a love poem disguised as a poem about tennis. *Where We Live* was a debut that should have received more attention at the time of its publication because, in retrospect, it was a worthy foreshadowing of what was to come.

As Makuck's poems discovered and explored the North Carolina coast, they did not leave behind the wandering or the meditation of *Where We Live*. But the poems of the books that followed his first book arise from a home place that gives a greater breadth to Makuck's meditations on art and mortality, a home place that deepens the stories of his past. It is also telling that a subtle wit (not to mention the occasional all-out knee slapper like "Another Art") begins to assert itself in Makuck's poems. Part of this is simply time deepening the poet's skill and sense of craft, but there is something else at play here. Having found his spiritual and physical home, Makuck finds a deeper mystery and pleasure in this microcosm.

In "Answering Voices," Makuck faces this mystery, beginning, "We address an emptiness in the street / or in the mute space of a journal," and moves into a consideration of how voices and phrases we once heard linger with us, alive as long as we are alive, even if the sources of these voices are gone. "And we have answered the angels," Makuck tells us half-way through the poem before remembering the voice of an uncle "ragged with tobacco and vodka" telling him how to throw a baseball. The ways in which we communicate or fail to communicate are an ongoing theme in Makuck's work. "Trafficking with Voices" and "Dogwood Again" are two more poems that consider how humans communicate with each other.

Memory is also one of the guiding stars of Makuck's poems – over and over we find ourselves in one scene only to be delivered into another, the shifts often as quick and unpredictable as memory itself. In "Trail," Makuck lags behind on a hike with his son and some friends and sees "again, Paul, drunk and perched / on the porch rail, trying to tie / his shoe," before falling to the ground and playing dead while his friends taunt him. This is followed by the vision of seeing Paul laid out again "by this time not / by laughter." The veil between the living and the dead is delicately permeable in the world of Makuck's poems;

they visit, they comment on our circumstances, they judge. And sometimes they are simply there to watch us "sweating and breathing hard."

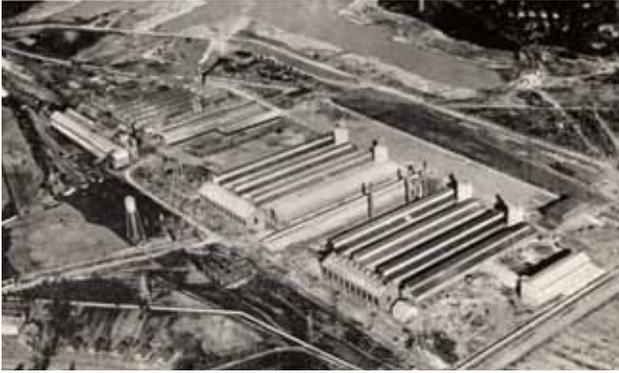
Makuck, who taught English for more than thirty years at East Carolina University and founded *Tar River Poetry*, has never played the career game as obsessively as many of his contemporaries. (That could actually be said of all the poets under review here.) Avoiding trends and poetic fads, he has, over the course of three decades, fashioned a body of poems remarkable for their quiet strength and their empathy for the human condition. *Long Lens* is a collection not only for those who read and love poetry but also for those who love our human condition.

The aluminum industry is not an enterprise that one automatically associates with North Carolina, but its history in this state stretches at least as far back as 1915. In her most recent collection, *Lumina*, **Heather Ross Miller** uses the aluminum factory as a backdrop for the play of voices, both living and dead, around the fictional town of Lumina, NC. As she says in a note on the acknowledgments page of the book, the town of Lumina "never existed," although "its people did." The book tells its stories not in a linear fashion but through echo and commentary, one poem illuminating something mentioned in passing in an earlier poem. What we are left with is a welter of complex and not always satisfying literary lives and voices working to make sense of their circumstances.

At the center of this not quite story is Nell Panther, who witnesses the damming of the Yadkin River, which led to the construction of the aluminum plant. The impact of the Tennessee Valley Authority on the people of eastern Tennessee and western North Carolina has been well documented, and Miller avoids any unnecessary and repetitive historical or sociological analysis here. The stories of her people, which are, after all, what history is made of, are more than enough.

The first section of the book is a tangled narrative told in the intertwined voices of Nell; her husband, Bill, whom she does not love; and their children, who drown with Nell's lover, Toby, whose attraction for Nell might be that he has escaped the aluminum factory. "A switchman for the railroad, [he] made things move."

For a series of dramatic monologues to work most effectively, each voice must stand apart from the others. The first section of *Lumina* achieves that. As might be expected, Nell's is the most luminous language here: "I tell you true," she says in the opening



PHOTOGRAPHIC ARCHIVES, WILSON LIBRARY, UNC-CHAPEL HILL

poem, and we believe that Nell tells us, at least, the truth as she sees it. The poems in Bill's voice seethe with a barely restrained anger. Speaking of the dam he says, "Two hundred feet of cold water / Nell, when it breaks / you'll have little, if any, / warning." Later, after his children are drowned with his wife's lover and he is left with his wife to raise a child fathered by Toby, he says, "God drowns us / to get even."

A story this complicated and fraught could overwhelm the book were the language of these poems not so strong. Throughout this book, aptly made metaphors and turns of phrase enchant the reader and at times push the narrative to the background. I often tell students that the first functions of poetry in society were narrative and prayer, and the poems of *Lumina* achieve both. "Out of / unpredictable blood, salt / and fire, and a pure rare / mineral, Lumina bloomed," Miller writes early in the book, and this book seems beautifully spun from the same unlikely and disparate elements.

"Stories never tell one-hundred / per cent true," begins a poem ("Falls Road") in the book's second section. This section's poems observe many of the town's residents and relate their stories. Here the stories of *Lumina* spin away from Nell and offer some larger background. The most important characters here are Lucia, Nell and Toby's daughter, who seems to have been born without illusions; and her husband, Eugene, who dreams of stacking aluminum ingots "until they gleamed rich as moonbeams" as proof of his love for Lucia.

Miller touches lightly on those cornerstones of Southern writing – race and religion – in the characters of Amos and Bonnie Mae Boulware, the book's African American characters. "This is his life's work," Miller says describing Amos's work in the aluminum factory, "his calling to God, his burning / magnetizing ministry." Another poem, "Adjer Stoker Feeds the Cats

in the Carbon Kiln" begins, "Aluminum is the religion / of the ingot yard." A town bound so closely to a single enterprise must finally come to see that enterprise as something larger than a business or industry. Indeed, the town's fate must be somehow tied to the workings of the heavens and the cosmos.

In the third section of the book, Nell, aged but no less fierce, reappears. Nell, whose dilemma seems to foreshadow and somehow loom larger than the book's other stories (even that of Julian Longwood who dies in World War II), sits down to write her story for her granddaughter, Lucia and Eugene's child: "I want to write down this place / built out of my two drowned and freckled / children, and my two hands tearing water / trying to get them back." This might not be the sort of thing one expects from a grandmother, but Nell is no ordinary grandmother or ordinary character.

Both the blurbs on the back of *Lumina* mention Edgar Lee Masters's *Spoon River Anthology* (1915) as a touchstone for this book, and I would not disagree with that. But in Masters's book, no single tale is larger than any other, which creates a kind of flattening, an implication that death levels us all. Readers closing *Lumina* are most likely to remember Nell Panther standing bright and apart from all the other characters in this masterful book.

It is probably wise not to make too much of the fact that the final poet under review here, **Eleanor Ross Taylor**, was Heather Ross Miller's aunt. Still, it is an inescapable fact that all of Eleanor Ross Taylor's siblings went on to publish poetry and fiction and journalism and that her sister, Jean Ross Justice, married the poet Donald Justice. Eleanor Ross Taylor was herself married to the fiction writer Peter Taylor, a marriage to which her own rather late emergence as a poet has been attributed. Whether Taylor's slow output – about one book per decade – was a result of a life spent rearing children, hosting social events, and nurturing her husband's career, or simply a matter of temperament and personal timing, it's hard to say. Certainly poets with far fewer claims on their time – Philip Larkin comes to mind – have maintained a similarly deliberate pace. **Captive Voices**, published in 2009 by Louisiana State University Press, offers a selection of Taylor's work over five decades and has made possible a long overdue assessment of Taylor's place in the world of poetry.

"Our flesh / delivers ghosts," Taylor says in her poem "Maternity Ward," and there are ghosts aplenty

in Taylor's work, particularly as the years pass and friends and family die. The early poems here focus, as one might expect, on family and the past. But Taylor never allows herself to indulge in sentimentality. Too often family makes liars of writers. Out of a too tender regard for hurt feelings or simply because we lack the courage to speak or write the truth, matters are glossed over or not spoken of (I'm aware that exactly the opposite trend prevails in some corners, but that is a matter for another day). Taylor's work is not inclined to prevarication. "The wars of marriage and the family burst around us," she says in "Sister," a poem from her first book, *Wilderness of Ladies* (Astor-Honor Inc, 1960).

COURTESY OF MARTHA BLAKEY HODGES SPECIAL COLLECTIONS AND UNIVERSITY ARCHIVES, UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA-GREENSBORO



Southern poets have been both praised and damned for the use of narrative, and I have spoken of it in relation to some of the poets in this review. Narrative seems to be a basic human impulse, one of the strongest I would argue, but it does not follow that every writer is automatically stronger when he or she uses narrative. Taylor, for one, is strongest when she leaves narrative behind and

allows the voice of the poem to lead her to mysterious but rewarding unknown realms. In an early poem, "Woman as Artist," she writes,

I'm mother.  
I hunt alone.  
There is no bone  
Too dry for me, mother,  
Or too extra.

In "Gift," a brief lyric from the section of new poems that ends the book, she says,

Gift snubs artist,  
lives its own life,  
sometimes in the same room with  
its human habitation,

sometimes wandering alone  
on empty streets.

If she eschews the possibilities of narrative, Taylor finds other literary possibilities opening to her. In "After Twenty Years," conflicting narrative strands twine and move away from one another as the poet interrupts herself, then interrupts again. Such disjointedness might be said to be a forerunner of the quirky elliptical poem that is all too fashionable these days, but Taylor is always writing *about something*, a lesson the would-be stylish poets of our time would be wise to heed:

Oh the acres of undistinguished  
Crosses make me sick.  
Mother could mark Papa's grave  
In the churchyard a mile from home,  
By its firs and shaft. . . .  
Your nothing grave . . .  
Shame!  
God I am of little understanding. . . .  
But with God all things are possible. . . .  
Give my son another life -  
A Norwood ugliness, a bourgeois rot,  
Dust and concrete, Falcons and Mustangs, not . . .

And there the poem ends. What begins as a missive to a son in France, "Do you dream in French, my son," becomes a meditation on mortality, marriage, and finally, a prayer to a God the speaker does not quite recognize, a prayer for the son to return to the safe suburban life he has rejected.

As the years progressed, Taylor's work grew sharper, more angular, and her poems, often shorter, offer fewer of the consolations of landscape and imagery but allow for a wider and deeper field of metaphor. In "At the Altar," a poem from her 1991 collection *Days Going / Days Coming Back* (U of Utah P), we understand that the luggage spoken of in the poem's first lines - "That bag you packed me / when you sent me / to the universe" - is not simply the suitcase and clothes any traveler carries. The phrase "to the universe" tips us off that something larger is going on here, and the speaker's later realization that "[t]he more I pull out, / the more it seems, some days, / is left inside," confirms that.

The last stanza of this poem, "Some days now I wonder if I'll ever / dare face my given garments - / permanently wrinkled, / surely out of date," acknowledges the difficulty of facing the past and seeing it clearly. As the years go on and the past lengthens,

some of Taylor's poems become more fragmentary. Many of the poems in *Late Leisure* (Louisiana State UP, 1999) deal not only with the illness and death of her husband but with the simple fact of time passing. "Long-Dreaded Event Takes Place" begins, "it blurs / happening as on canvas / distanced / almost out of earshot." Another poem, "Find Me," uses the title as a first line and continues "by my trail of fragments." But whatever there is of grief and despair in these poems gives way to the determination to survive. The title poem of *Late Leisure* describes a "past my expiration date" speaker sewing embroidery and concludes, "If I get to the last rows / of this kit, I'll have to find / another one as slow and interim; / but no need [to] plan that yet."

Eleanor Ross Taylor is the perfect antidote for readers who despair of poets who seemingly write only for prizes and tenure. Over the years of a busy and at times difficult life, she crafted a body of work that stands apart from the trends of the times in which it was written. *Captive Voices* is a book that will be read long after the various schools and schisms that characterize so much recent poetry have fallen by the wayside.

The four poets reviewed here have enjoyed long careers, in part because each of them has ignored to a large extent the faddishness that often grips young writers – and even older writers who should know better. Slowly, poem by poem and book by book, they have built bodies of work that stand beside – and deserve to be – considered among the best of our time. ■

## HEARTBREAK AND HUMOR

*a review*  
by Peter Makuck

**Timothy McBride.**  
*The Manageable Cold.*  
Evanston, IL: TriQuarterly  
Books/Northwestern  
University Press, 2010.

See the interview with and poems by **PETER MAKUCK** in *NCLR* 2007. His poems also appear in the 1995 and 1996 issues, and he interviewed *NCLR*'s Founding Editor, Alex Albright, for the 2002, tenth anniversary issue.

**TIMOTHY MCBRIDE** works at SAS Institute in Cary, NC. His poetry has been published in such venues as *Shenandoah*, *Seneca Review*, and *Poetry Northwest*.

I've recently become more aware of "poems," essentially word games, formed by what might be called a postmodern or deconstructionist aesthetic – anti-narrative, nothing-beyond-the-text, elliptical, non sequitural, surreal, nonsensical, impersonal – that increasingly appear in some mainstream literary journals, even in *The New Yorker*, and on websites like *Verse Daily*. After reading this kind of – let's call it "stuff" – I usually scratch my head: *What the hell was that all about?* And just as quickly answer, *I really don't care.*

By contrast, Timothy McBride's poems immediately make us care, put before us experiences and observations we can relate to. Whether about love, death, family, priests and nuns, famous boxers, a dishwasher, Shakespearean bawdy, jazz, birds, mice, dogs, or horses, the poems give us to ourselves in fresh and insightful ways and unfold with compelling story, humor, energy, and trustworthy language. These poems understand the brutal paradoxes of love and the inevitability of loss but nonetheless reach for ways that help us manage the resultant cold.

This impressive debut volume begins with "Snow Fence," a dark narrative that has the speaker remembering and wondering about his grandparents, realizing he might never know "[w]hat turned them against each other" because it

was nothing they could say to me,  
the grandson, who would come each week  
to work for an hour or so  
cutting the grass, raking leaves,  
shoveling the sidewalk and the driveway.

What has driven them to separate rooms, silent meals, even a refusal to sound each other's name? The speaker cannot say, but he does remember something they did together, the three of them putting up a snow fence, "how they stayed each end of the coiled wire" while he "moved back and forth

along the ground, / stretching the frets to their angled shadows, / pounding the stakes at their feet.” One thinks of Frost, those good fences that make good neighbors, but there is nothing good or redemptive about the invisible barbed wire separating this old couple. With fine understatement, McBride concludes by saying that it was “our last and longest season: / split wood, storm shutters, the manageable cold.” I like the way “last” unobtrusively lingers, his grandparents now seen from the telling perspective of distance and death.

At the center of the book are a number of poems that describe another difficult relationship. However, before we get to that series with its cutting final separation, I'd like to show how McBride skillfully and subtly provides us with a thematic preview of this amputation, loss, and adjustment. In a poem that precedes the series, “Daily Round,” McBride suggests how habitual routine can deaden one's senses, make one unaware until, at a stop light, a white-collar worker adjusts the rearview mirror to inspect his bleeding chin, cut while shaving, and catches something beyond his own reflected face from a new angle:

Instead the backward backdrop startles him  
with something that he's never seen straight on:  
Each roadside tree is barbered, the wide boughs  
cropped flat so that the aisles of wire  
can run between them like a poison vine.  
Oak, birch, willow – each is hale and halt:  
a sprawl of branches, a sudden making way.

The horn behind him redirects his eye.  
He shifts the clutch, tunes the radio,  
and finds a song he hasn't heard in years.  
The words come back unbidden and he sings,  
half wondering how the rootwork marks its loss,  
those vanished hemispheres and phantom limbs,  
the docked remainder, its odd lopsided bloom.

The amputation of tree limbs will be recalled in “Surgery Rotation,” in which a woman does a post-mortem on her relationship with the speaker and coldly applies the scalpel, explaining that

Something vital had failed to develop  
and died, though the attachment  
remained, deforming and unhealthy,  
draining life from the viable one,  
and needed to be severed – quickly,  
decisively. . . .

A few lines later, the closure hits hard:

For the first time all summer,  
you spoke with a kind of glee,  
the week you said, “I want to be a surgeon”  
and ended things with me.

The neatness of the rhyme contrasts powerfully with the unstated emotional devastation of the speaker seen in the next four or five poems. But like those trees (from the earlier poem) that also endured severed limbs and survived, and like famous boxers who appear in various other poems, the speaker will lift himself from the canvas, recover balance, fight on, and eventually manage.

Along with loss of love, we find the loss of a certain kind of religious belief. Before moving to Raleigh, McBride spent a Roman Catholic boyhood near Rochester, NY. In a number of poems, some of them funny, we encounter priests, nuns, and an ecclesiastical vocabulary. The beginning of disbelief comes in “Small Change,” when Father Conner plays a math trick on several boys he pays to pick up beer cans and wrappers around the playground and convent. In “Ecce Homo,” “three long-haired altar boys,” after midnight, visit the spot where a local gangster was killed by a car bomb in order to piss on the damaged pavement and feel the thrill of “blaspheming” as they intone, “*Baptizo te in nomine . . . diaboli.*” And in a lovely sonnet, “By Blue Ontario's Shore,” the speaker and friends have skipped school to enjoy the lakeside freedom while “Sister Myra bored our history class.” At day's end, they encounter an old fisherman and ask what he has caught.

. . . “A week's meals,”  
he sneered, tapping a bucket with his rod.  
The surface roiled – black and thick with eels.  
We ran. Remember? The thrill of it? The fear?  
The first time you said, “There isn't any god”?

“Father Damien of Molokai” begins humorously with the speaker remembering how in school he thought he heard the nun say “leopard colony” instead of leper colony. But years later, as a tourist in Hawaii, where there are “no cats worth speaking of,” he quite accidentally finds himself at the Damien Museum. He realizes that “god's work was stranger than it seemed” and

that there are other ways to be destroyed.  
I knew that you could walk  
for years along the shores of Molokai  
and not see what was eating you alive.

McBride may have given up on religion, but still he finds ways to manage the cold and to be uplifted by friends, family, music, birds, and a dog. His work is full of affirmation, and he celebrates even the memory of man-made things, like a new dishwasher in his boyhood home. I like the way in “Grace After Meals” he uses those church words to describe how he and his siblings worshipped this machine, “knelt” and listened to its “spun music.” It was their “Jericho of waste”:

A squat, boxed promise, it glowed  
green as dawn across its numbered dials,  
no mistake beyond absolving, its staid  
confessional calm guaranteed to reign forever,  
whirled without end. “Amen,” we answered,  
cleaned and scrubbed and lullabied to sleep,  
its broken iambs cradling our dreams:  
*Rinse-Wash-Rinse-Wash-Rinse-Rinse-Dry.*

The whole poem had me smiling, the pun “whirled without end” laughing out loud. From heartbreak to comedy, skillfully using open forms, sonnets, and villanelles, McBride’s work reveals variety and ambition, surprise and delight. This is a worthy first volume. ■

## DORIANNE LAUX RECEIVES 2011 ROANOKE-CHOWAN AWARD

*presentation remarks by Michael McFee*

*North Carolina Literary and Historical Association Meeting  
Raleigh, NC, 14 November 2011*

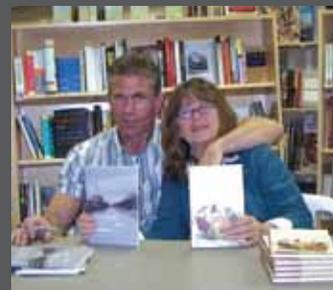
I’m pleased to present the 2011 Roanoke-Chowan Award to Dorianne Laux of Raleigh for her fine collection of poetry called *The Book of Men*.

This prize couldn’t be timed better for this book. Last month, Phillip Levine became the Poet Laureate of the United States; *The Book of Men* is dedicated to him; it includes a poem called “Mine Own Phil Levine”; and above all it is firmly in the tradition of American working class poetry, a tenacious strain that stretches from Levine back through James Wright, William Carlos Williams, and Walt Whitman, writers who like Dorianne Laux knew from personal experience that “hard work / was the order of each day” and wrote fresh, honest poems about labor and laborers and their unromanticized lives. That is a tradition very much at home here in North Carolina, a state built on the backs of its yeoman farmers and mill hands.

Laux, as I say, is a working-class poet, by experience and practice, but with an obvious difference from all the aforementioned writers: she is a woman. That doesn’t mean her work is any less tough than theirs – it is emphatically not – but it does mean that she brings a welcome and somewhat new perspective to this kind of poetry and to the subjects of her poems, which include working in Alaska, learning to drive, stealing a lighter, homicide detectives, a pregnant mare, a mother lost in Costco, and “The Mysterious Human Heart in New York.”

The title of *The Book of Men* is not ironic or sarcastic or angry. In fact, many of its clear-eyed poems are about men, not just Phil Levine but also a soldier in an airport, an old boyfriend, Bob Dylan, and a foster brother. Laux begins her poem “Men” by saying, “It’s tough being a guy, having to be gruff / and buff, the strong silent type, having to laugh / it off.” It would be too glib to call her poetry a “celebration” of men or of her other subjects, but – despite this work’s intense engagement of the loss, darkness, silence, and death that visit us all – she does write what one poem calls “anti-lamentations,” inviting us to “Regret nothing,” to savor the basic pleasures that can be found in a plain old apple, in Cher before all that plastic surgery, in the human back, in a “dog moon” that inspires local howling, and in the color gold found in very unlikely places.

There are many verbal pleasures to be found in *The Book of Men* – for example, Mick Jagger “yowling / with his rubber mouth,” with his “rugose cheeks and beef / jerky jowls,” his skinny self onstage “fluttering like the pages / of a dirty book.” I encourage you to read this book aloud, and to feel how its poems resonate in the mouth, the ear, the body. This is sensual, sensuous, well-made poetry. ■



COURTESY OF QUAIL RIDGE BOOKS

DORIANNE LAUX teaches poetry in the MFA program at NCSU. *The Book of Men* (W.W. Norton, 2011) is her fifth collection.

UNC-CH creative writing professor MICHAEL MCFEE received the Roanoke-Chowan Award in 2001 for *Earthly* (Carnegie Mellon University Press, 2001). *NCLR* has published his poems in 1997, 2008, and 2010 and reviewed his books in 1994, 2002, and 2008.

**PERSON, PLACE,  
THING, OR IDEA:  
READING THE  
PAST IN THREE  
NORTH CAROLINA  
SET HISTORICAL  
NOVELS**

*a review by Matthew Luter*

**Steve Berry. *The Jefferson Key*. New York: Ballantine Books, 2011.**

**Michael Parker. *The Watery Part of the World*. Chapel Hill: Algonquin Books, 2011.**

**Laura S. Wharton. *The Pirate's Bastard*. Kernersville, NC: Second Wind, 2010.**

**MATTHEW LUTER** is a Visiting Assistant Professor of English at Davidson College in Davidson, NC. He received his MA and PhD from UNC-CH and specializes in contemporary American and Southern literature.

**STEVE BERRY** has published six novels in the Cotton Malone series and three other novels, as well as several short stories. He spent the summers of his youth with his mother's family in eastern North Carolina and returned to the state while researching *The Jefferson Key*. In 2011, Berry was a guest on UNC-TV's series *North Carolina Bookwatch*.

I do not try to explain here what confluence of forces has resulted in the past year giving us three novels, each set at least in part in North Carolina, whose plot lines somehow incorporate the actions of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century pirates. In reading these three books, though – one a contemporary political thriller, one a literary meditation on the inhabitants of a small plot of land, and one an historical romance – I was struck not only by the differences in these novelists' prose, but also by the writers' radically different uses of the raw material of the past.

**Steve Berry** is the author of several bestselling thrillers already. As *The Jefferson Key* opens, American intelligence officer Cotton Malone has just been framed for an assassination attempt on the President. His associates' investigation reveals that the real culprits are the Commonwealth, a shadowy (and as far as we and Berry know, fictional) alliance of a few families with proven conspiratorial connections to all four successful presidential assassinations. The culprits bear an odd kind of apparent invulnerability, though, due to their ancestors' ownership of a letter of marque, issued by the federal government in accordance with Article I, Section 8 of the Constitution, that gave them – and their descendants – immunity from almost all

criminal charges while acting as privateers during the Revolutionary War era. Malone's pursuit of them takes him up and down the eastern seaboard as all involved hunt down the only historical proof of the letter, two pages torn out of the Congressional record by an enraged Andrew Jackson.

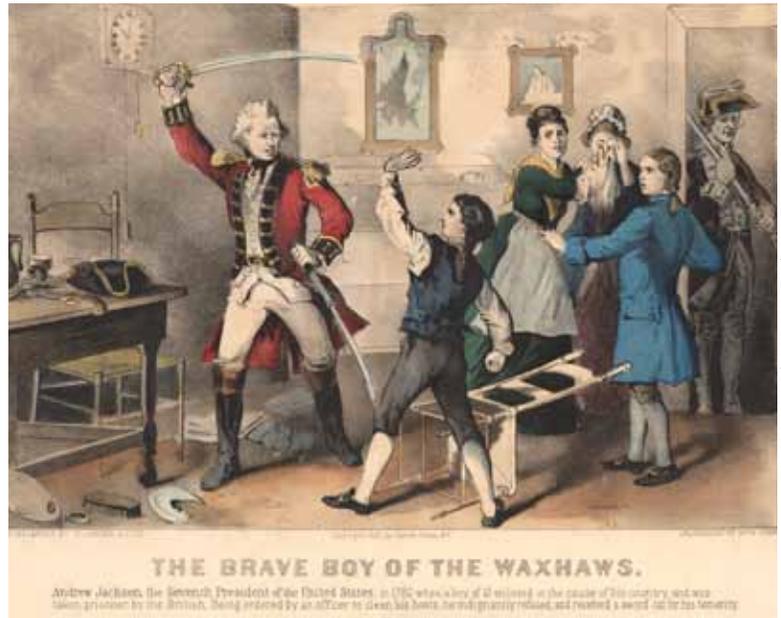
With all that backstory in mind, it's a good thing Berry has a skill for incorporating exposition without shoehorning huge chunks of explanation into places where they don't belong. Action scenes, though, don't work as well here. The frequent narrative back-and-forth between multiple perspectives in the book's handful of gunfights, for instance, confuses and frustrates more than it excites. Berry's chapters are short, and nearly every one ends with some small revelation, calculated to make the reader gasp, pause, or scratch the head in confusion, only to find further explanation delayed as the following chapter travels to another location and set of characters entirely. This quasi-cinematic reliance on frequent crosscutting keeps the plot moving, to be sure, but it also keeps any character from getting constructed past the point that he or she must serve as a plot device. Bad guys and gals here are bad, good ones are good, and the only recognizable feature attached to those whose allegiances are unclear is indeterminacy itself.

**STEPHANIE WHITLOCK DICKEN** has designed for *NCLR* since 2001 and served as *NCLR*'s Art Director from 2002 to 2008. She designed the poetry and reviews in this premiere issue of *NCLR Online*. She is an instructor of graphic design at Pitt Community College in Greenville, NC, and can be reached at StephanieWDicken@gmail.com for freelance design work.

It's a book driven not by people but by situation and spectacle, particularly in a few grisly scenes depicting pirate societies' techniques of punishment and execution.

Like any number of popular thrillers, *The Jefferson Key* is more interested in history and historic figures as a backdrop for action than in history as an independent narrative. Thomas Jefferson is invoked as an author, an architect of Monticello, and surprisingly, as an effective amateur cryptographer; but nothing about his political philosophy or storied personal life is ever really problematized or discussed in a way that moves past the information one would find in a civics textbook or a museum display. The same is true of Jackson and all four assassinated US presidents, who become less people than devices. Characters and author alike, it seems, understand these figures as important because "History" says so, but oddly, for a novel that draws so much of its structure and character motivation from a quartet of events as momentous as the four presidential assassinations, *The Jefferson Key* emerges as a novel that's not really all that interested in understanding the past.

The same cannot be said of **Michael Parker's *The Watery Part of the World***, an accomplished and meditative novel that draws inspiration from one location, the North Carolina coast, depicted in both the early nineteenth and the late twentieth centuries. Theodosia Burr, the daughter of disgraced former Vice President



Aaron Burr, is traveling to New York with a plan in mind to save her father's reputation. En route, she is captured by pirates who spare her life only because they think she is insane, after which she enters into an uneasy relationship founded on self-preservation. Parker intertwines this plot with the story of the last three inhabitants of Yaupon Island, two aging sisters named Maggie and Whaley who are descendants of Theodosia and an African American man named Woodrow who serves as their de facto caretaker.

These are rounded characters who are neither entirely saints nor entirely sinners. Indeed, one of the book's central questions is who (if anyone at all) bears responsibility for the death of Woodrow's wife, Sarah, in a storm. By foregrounding unanswered and unanswerable questions about

the past, Parker skillfully and subtly posits connections between past and present without spelling these connections out fully. The two parallel plot lines, set centuries apart, are rarely overtly linked, but Parker's prose deftly weaves past and present within the span of single sentences. Furthermore, meditation on the past is hardly limited to implied connections between the sisters and their ancestor. In one of the novel's most effective passages, Parker describes the sisters' childhood game of pretending to be Virginia Dare, the first child of English colonists who was born in the New World. Whaley "knew the history better," but Maggie was "better at *being* Virginia," we're told (99), highlighting not only a difference between history as disembodied story and as lived reality, but also in historical interpretation: "The



difference in the way Maggie and Whaley understood the world was exemplified not only in how they played Virginia but in what they felt the story was *about*" (100), disagreeing over whether the story's primary value lay in its civics textbook accuracy or in the quotidian details of colonial life.

What emerges most clearly and effectively is a detailed picture of a site of lived history. When Whaley reads supermarket circulars aloud to anyone who will listen (which often means to no one in particular), readers learn less about her as a particular character than they do about how these people live in this place: what they valued, what they found interesting, and what they did without, often by choice. And while I would assert that the 1970-set plot is more engaging than that 1813-set story, Parker discourages readers from viewing this small island community as a gallery of curiosities. When some

characters arrive who do just that, a handful of university researchers recording oral histories whom the island inhabitants refer to half derisively as "the Tape Recorders," Parker reminds us of the danger inherent in viewing anyone voyeuristically. Woodrow thinks of the historians' recording of the island's small community: "They wanted to turn it into something else again: something they wanted to believe in, something about how lost the three of them were across the water, all cut off from the rest of the world and

turned peculiar because of it" (18–19). He knows that however hard we try as readers to observe these characters and to understand their histories objectively, we judge – and alter – their world in our act of observation, just as these recording historians narrativize – and hence alter for themselves – their own world in their act of recording.

**Laura S. Wharton's *The Pirate's Bastard*** evokes no single location with the same vibrancy. At the center of the novel is Edward Marshall, the child of a pirate and a prostitute who moves up the ranks of the shipbuilding industry of colonial Barbados and North Carolina. He woos the daughter of a wealthy merchant, only to find these plans complicated by an old associate of his dead father who tries to blackmail Edward into splitting Edward's inheritance. The book's plot holds few surprises, largely because it's structured

as a steady climb upwards for Edward. He experiences few setbacks on his road to becoming a successful ship builder. He seems largely without flaws and his eventual victories are rarely in doubt. He's a nice guy who makes good and makes good, and makes good, repeatedly. Even when Edward and his new bride, while at sea, decide to fire on a ship carrying his wife's disapproving relatives, Wharton depicts the ensuing battle as inevitably winnable. Though an unexpected tragedy in the final pages casts a genuine pall over the (to that point) swashbuckling proceedings, it's a tragedy that's really no one's fault, and so contributes no dramatic tension.

Where the book succeeds, though, is in its skillful evocation of the past through small physical details of colonial and seafaring life. Flora and fauna, parts of ships, and the process of irrigation are described with meticulous attention to elements that were once features of everyday life. These passages evince painstaking research, and even if they sometimes border on the pedantic (telling readers about objects instead of showing them), these descriptions create for the reader the fabric of the past. The linguistic detail is so well considered that in those moments when some recent usages enter, like a reference to lumber as a "renewable resource" (28), the sudden anachronism is distractingly discordant. Plotting and characterization tend to be predictable, but the book will interest readers who enjoy encountering the past in such physical specifics.

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Of these three books, the one that will linger the longest in my mind is undoubtedly Parker's. Its characters are the most rounded, its plot the most compelling, and its meditation on the synchronicity of past and present the most complex. I must admit some surprise, then, that the book that emerges as closest to a novel of ideas is Berry's. If we read *The Jefferson Key* with the assumption that an historical novel inevitably tells us as much (or more) about our present than it tells us of our past, then Berry's book has much to say about contemporary American political life.

In many ways, Berry has given us a remarkably apolitical book about the inner workings of the federal government. He describes a post-9/11 intelligence community comprised of dozens

of shadowy agencies, none of which are depicted as focused on international terrorism, even after the book opens with an attempted presidential assassination. Yet in small moments, tiny pieces of political commentary surface, noncontroversial at first glance and subtly provocative on the second glance. One of the book's most effective moments, for instance,

consists of the president's tirade against "[t]his monstrosity of government called homeland security," a state of affairs that has only managed to "create 300 new intelligence organizations [that] produce over 50,000 intelligence reports each year" (280; italics in novel), few of which he says actually get read. The scene succeeds because it's a point at which this essentially escapist novel engages directly with a complex political reality.

Non-intelligence-based domestic political disputes receive attention as well. The Commonwealth villains who oppose Malone trace their beliefs back to the Revolutionary War era, value a strict constructionist reading of one clause of the US Constitution, and own yachts decorated in "a juxtaposition of conservative appointments

in wenge wood, ivory, and leather" (431). The villains' ringleader is given to expressing his annoyance that "[t]his ungrateful government, which his family had dutifully served, would not leave him alone" (439), an ironic gripe from a character who throughout the whole novel seeks Constitutional immunity. Taken together, details like these point to a subtextual critique of a certain type of far right, small government advocacy. Similarly, when Malone tries to escape his troubles (at least in the moment) by reading up on pirates and concludes that "[t]heirs was an existence based on profit and survival, and he had no reason to assume that the modern version was any different. . . . Their only goal was success, and who they hurt in the process meant nothing" (402), can we read this as a poke at anti-regulation, super-laissez-faire capitalists? Berry leaves that intriguing possibility open.

It may seem an odd exercise to juxtapose novels of such different purposes. Berry's novel is clearly meant to be a quick and escapist airport read; Parker's work is far more complex and meditative; and the mix of swashbuckling fun and historical grounding in Wharton's story places it somewhere in between. I still can't entirely attribute to any particular stimulus the sudden appearance of multiple novels' plots set in motion by acts of piracy, though it probably involves some combination of contemporary real life piracy in the news and Disney flicks in the multiplex. This set of books, by drawing equally from legend and fact, interprets the past while creating new narratives. ■

## PARKER RECEIVES PARKER AWARD

*adapted from presentation remarks by Margaret D. Bauer*

*North Carolina Literary and Historical Association Meeting*

*Raleigh, NC, 18 November 2011*

In the afternoon program earlier today, we celebrated twenty years of the *North Carolina Literary Review*. Michael Parker is a writer who was also just getting started about twenty years ago. His first novel, *Hello Down There*, was published in 1993, and that year, too, he published an essay in *NCLR* titled “I Know 8,000 Lunatics: Reflections of an Apple-Stealing S.O.B.” Michael was perhaps at this very meeting the next year when his 1994 collection of short stories, *The Geographical Cure*, received the Sir Walter Raleigh Award for Fiction. And the next year, another *NCLR* essay.

*NCLR* also published an interview with Michael (in 2005) in which he expresses his concern about the declining role of the imagination in our technological world. Michael Parker is definitely *not* lacking in imagination: in 2001, he published a third book, *Towns without Rivers*, a sequel to his first novel. I was sorry my reading schedule runs a couple of years behind because by the time I got to this book, my *own* book on Southern writers who are echoing Faulkner in style and substance was already in press, so it was too late to add another chapter – but maybe I’ll write a sequel to explore how Michael’s character Reka Speight is reminiscent of Faulkner’s Lena Grove – and the Faulknerian echoes continue in the little postage stamp of North Carolina soil that Michael Parker writes about. Sure enough, with Michael’s next two novels, *Virginia Lovers* (2004) and *If You Want Me to Stay* (2005), reviewers regularly compared him to Faulkner.

*Virginia Lovers* may be my favorite of Michael’s books so far, but I’ve fallen behind again – I haven’t yet read the new novel, *The Watery Part of the World*, which he is going to talk about tonight. I’m also partial to his most recent collection of stories, *Don’t Make*



PHOTOGRAPH BY ALAN WESTMORELAND; COURTESY OF NC STATE ARCHIVES

*Me Stop Now* (2007), which includes the *hilarious* story “Hidden Meanings: Treatment of Time, Supreme Irony, and Life Experiences in the Song ‘Ain’t Gonna Bump No More No Big Fat Woman.’” If you were not an *NCLR* subscriber back in 2008 when we included a recording of Michael reading this story on the CDs that accompanied the humor issue, you have missed a truly entertaining listening opportunity, comparable to the famous recording of Eudora Welty reading her story “Why I Live at the P.O.” (it’s not too late – those CDs are still available for purchase). I was certainly not surprised to learn after the first time I heard Michael read that story that it had been selected for *New Stories of the South: The Year’s Best*.

MARGARET D. BAUER is the Editor of *NCLR*. Her book on Faulkner and other Southern writers is called *William Faulkner’s Legacy: “what shadow, what stain, what mark”* (University Press of Florida, 2005).

ABOVE Recipient of the 2011 R. Hunt Parker Award Michael Parker giving the Keats and Elizabeth Sparrow Keynote Address at the annual meeting of the North Carolina Literary and Historical Association, Raleigh, 18 Nov. 2011

It was not Michael's first appearance in that annual, and his stories have also been selected for the O. Henry Award's *Prize Stories* and the Pushcart Prize anthology, among other compilations.

Michael's other honors include fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts and the North Carolina Arts Council, the Hobson Award for Arts and Letters, and the North Carolina Award for Literature, an award, I believe, that recognizes Michael Parker the professor's service to this state as much as it does his contribution to the state's literature as Michael Parker the writer.

Professor Parker teaches at UNC-Greensboro. And it is in that capacity that he recently became my hero when, responding to D.G. Martin on *North Carolina Bookwatch*, who asked him how he turns students into great writers, Michael said that he doesn't "set out to make a great writer" but rather that he tries to help his students become great readers, to teach them to read the right stuff, to read well, and to apply the techniques of great writers to their own writing. As someone who has been trying to bring students back to the book for some years now, I was thrilled to hear him remind writers of the value of reading great literature.

Michael also pointed out to D.G.'s audience that more important than having the potential to be a great writer is "perspiration and determination and perseverance," which is certainly reflected in his own prolific canon, a canon that keeps growing – he has another novel, *Five Thousand Dollar Car*, forthcoming from Algonquin Books in 2013.

All this is to tell you why when Michael Parker comes up here to give the Keats and Elizabeth Sparrow keynote address, I will present him with the R. Hunt Parker Memorial Award for his significant contribution to North Carolina Literature – and so, join me in congratulating Michael Parker on his most recent award. ■



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## ADDENDUM *excerpted from* *Michael Parker's acceptance remarks*

. . . I am honored to be included among the past (and future) recipients of this award; however, with all due respect to R. Hunt Parker, I confess that I wish the name of the award might have been different, for more than one person has asked if Mr. Parker is my uncle. Stung by the suggestion of nepotism, I took the matter up with my father. My dad spent forty years editing small town newspapers in North Carolina and, except for his years serving in the infantry during the Second World War, has spent his entire life in this state; what he does not know about this state, he so convincingly makes up that I could care less to know the difference. At least we're not really kin, I told him, at which point he allowed that, since Judge Parker was from Enfield, and our people are out of Edgecombe County, and he had not yet met a Parker in his eighty-seven years from eastern North Carolina who was not in some way kin to him, and therefore to me, it might be best for me to just say I won some award and leave it at that. . . . ■

Read **MICHAEL PARKER's** keynote address in *NCLR* 2012. Watch his interview with D.G. Martin, which premiered on UNC-TV's *North Carolina Bookwatch* on 5 Aug. 2011.

ABOVE **Michael Parker** listening as Margaret Bauer introduces him and announces his most recent award at the North Carolina Literary and Historical Association meeting

## “DREAMS OF THE GOOD AND THE KILLERS OF THE DREAM”

a review by  
Christina G. Bucher

Anna Jean Mayhew. *The Dry Grass of August*. New York: Kensington, 2011.

CHRISTINA G. BUCHER is an associate professor of English, Rhetoric, and Writing at Berry College in Rome, GA. She has published articles on Kate Chopin's "Fedora" in *Mississippi Quarterly*, the poetry of Pauli Murray in *NCLR* 2004, Gloria Naylor and Charles W. Chesnutt's approaches to the conjure tradition in *Studies in the Literary Imagination*, and several book reviews for *NCLR*. She recently presented a conference paper on Kathryn Stockett's *The Help*, focusing on its wild popularity, the wide range of reader responses to the novel, and the potential reasons for both.

In *Killers of the Dream*, Lillian Smith's landmark 1949 memoir of the tangled relationships of race, gender, class, and sex and the damage they wreaked on the South, the author begins with the sentence, "Even its children knew that the South was in trouble."<sup>1</sup> Jubie Watts, the thirteen-year-old white protagonist of Anna Jean Mayhew's debut novel, *The Dry Grass of August*, spends the summer of 1954 learning hard lessons of just how much trouble the South is in because of such issues. Poignant, at times lyrical, brutal, perhaps rushed at the end, gingerly – and partly successfully – walking the line of presenting a story about black/white relationships in the South, particularly the interplay between domestic workers and the families who employ them, the novel is a strong first work that will please many readers.

Mayhew, a native of Charlotte, NC, worked for eighteen years on the novel, and while she had published a story when she was in her forties, this book marks her first major entrance into the literary world at the age of seventy-one, a fact she quips about in the acknowledgements, thanking her editors for taking a chance on her at that ripe age and suggesting it makes for a wonderful marketing angle (282). Certainly, her perseverance and the quality of the prose should inspire those embarking on their literary careers at any age.

The novel opens in August of 1954 as the Watts family is preparing for a family vacation, during which they will drive from Charlotte to Pawleys Island, SC, by way of Pensacola to visit a relative. Paula, the sad, ineffectual, sometimes good-hearted mother; Stell (short for Estelle), the serious sixteen-year-old daughter,

who has recently been saved and has thrown herself full force into all things religious; Puddin', the younger sister; Davie, the youngest at two years old; and Jubie are setting out sans their volatile, sometimes violent father, Bill, a successful businessman, who plans to join them at Pawleys Island after they make their detour to Pensacola. Another traveler, crucial to the novel's plot and themes, is Mary Luther, the family's African American maid, who is going along to tend to the children and help with cooking so Paula can have a "real" vacation. In chapters that alternate between present and past narration up until chapter eighteen (at which point narration shifts entirely to the present for the remaining fifteen chapters), Mayhew guides readers through the Watts family history as well as through Jubie's growing awareness of the evils of the Jim Crow South.

As the family makes a stop in Claxton, GA, to buy fruitcakes, an automobile accident forces them to remain in the town for several days, and Stell's desire to attend an advertised tent revival at a local African Methodist Episcopal church leads to events that mark Jubie's full introduction to the "trouble" of the South and that propel her toward adulthood as her family crumbles around her.

While certainly the novel is a traditional coming of age story that centers on a young woman gaining knowledge of the secrets that are eating away at the core of her family, the changes her body is going through and her budding sexuality (including her attraction to Leesum, a young relative of Mary's), and the degree to which she will assert her independence as a young adult, the author's specific focus seems to be on

<sup>1</sup> Lillian Smith, *Killers of the Dream*, 1949 (New York: Norton, 1994) 25.

Jubie's growing awareness of racial discrimination and hatred, hatred so strong that it drives some to violence and consumes the society in which she lives. That knowledge is particularly painful to Jubie, whose attachment to Mary is intense and devoted and, for most readers, genuine.

This relationship between white children and the black women who took care of them or between white employers and their black "help" is not new terrain for Southern white writers, but it can be treacherous. As Howell Raines noted in his famous 1991 *New York Times* essay, "Grady's Gift,"

There is no trickier subject for a writer from the South than that of affection between a black person and a white one in the unequal world of segregation. For the dishonesty upon which such a society is founded makes every emotion suspect, makes it impossible to know whether what flowed between two people was honest feeling or pity or pragmatism. Indeed, for the black person, the feigning of an expected emotion could be the very coinage of survival.<sup>2</sup>

Mayhew doesn't sail completely smoothly through the rough waters that white writers must navigate in depicting and giving voice to black characters, especially of this time period, but for the most part she creates a rounded, dignified character in Mary Luther and offers a thorough if not always clearly connected analysis of how the system of segregation remained so firmly in place for so long.

Mrs. Mary Constance Culpepper Luther came to work for the Watts family when Jubie was five years old. Mayhew takes care to

suggest that while the rest of the Watts family views Mary as merely an employee and usually as a lesser being, Jubie looks upon her as more, is interested in her comfort and well-being, and is most affected by what happens to Mary. The author takes time to show their developing relationship and, while depicting a relationship of reciprocal love between a white child and her black caretaker marks one of those treacherous spots in the telling of such a story (since the love was not necessarily reciprocal), Mayhew gives some understanding as to why Mary does feel affection for Jubie. Jubie's attitude is protective of Mary, her thirteen-year-old self not yet infected with the condescending racial superiority many others demonstrate. For example, Jubie is disturbed that her handsome cousin who comes to stay with them while on a break from West Point treats Mary "as if she were no more than a piece of furniture" (131) and resolves to speak to him about this treatment – though Jubie does not. She is concerned when the family arrives at her uncle's home in Pensacola and Mary is given a small, sweltering room in the attic. And on their travels, Jubie observes with consternation the more overt forms of Jim Crow encountered than those she is aware of in Charlotte – that is portrayed, at least until the end of the novel,



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as not so harsh in its actual practice of segregation. Traveling in the year of *Brown v. Board of Education*, Jubie starts noticing signs in people's yards saying "SEPARATE BUT EQUAL IS GOOD FOR EVERYONE" (7) and signs at town limits proclaiming,

**NEGROES**  
Observe Curfew!  
**WHITES ONLY**  
After Sundown! (10).

And while she is aware that in their home Mary uses a bathroom in the basement that no one in the family seems to use, Jubie still is a careful observer when on the road she sees that Mary must use dirty outhouses behind gas stations or bathrooms off the kitchens of greasy spoons where they eat. This sympathetic stance is particularly understandable considering Jubie's family's poisonous dynamic – her father's rages that he takes out in physically abusing Jubie and her

<sup>2</sup> Howell Raines, "Grady's Gift," *New York Times* 1 Dec. 1991: web.

mother's tacit acceptance of these beatings; it is not surprising that Jubie believes that Mary, who treats her like an adult and pays attention to her, is "the heart of our home" (246).

Given Jubie's adolescent empathy with Mary, wherever it arises from, readers may be more willing to suspend their disbelief that Mary will speak openly to a thirteen-year-old white girl about race relations. We get a glimpse of Mary's biting wit as well as her frustration with the daily degradations she must suffer, as when the family stops at the Sleep Inn Motel in Wickens, GA, where the manager has a shabby cabin behind the office that he "allows" Mary to stay in, though Paula has to pay more for it than for the room she has secured for herself and the children. Jubie sneaks out to visit Mary before turning in that night, and when she asks Mary where her bathroom is, Mary replies, "What you think this is, a castle for colored folks? There's an outhouse, little ways into the field, and the pitcher and bowl there. . . . The lord of this here moe-tell let me fill it from a tap outside" (12–13). Later when Mary, Stell, and Jubie are on their way to the revival that will lead to the novel's tragedy, the three of them discuss school desegregation. Mary tells the two young white girls, "I 'spect your mama's right. Won't see Negro children going to school with white children here. Not for a while. But it'll happen. Just people needs to

register, vote. Take time, but we do it." Jubie has the smarts to know "[s]he meant *her* people, not us" (173; emphasis added).

Mayhew also has Mary speak forthrightly at times to white adults in the novel. When one of the Watts's neighbors remarks within Mary's hearing that a friend of theirs is so dimwitted that she'd "make a nigger look smart," Mary confronts her calmly but firmly from the doorway: "Miz Feaster, you ought to know better than to say such a thing." Paula semi-apologizes, saying they didn't know Mary was standing there, but Mary does not relinquish her stance, stating, "That is no excuse for talking trash," and when told she is forgetting her place, she simply says, "No, ma'am," and leaves the room (68). The scene is a powerful one, one that impresses both Jubie and the reader, though some readers may find themselves wondering how typical this kind of outspokenness was from "the help" in the 1950s and what repercussions they might suffer for such behavior.

Mary's heroism, however, is most apparent in the scenes in which she acts to protect Jubie. The first is when she interrupts a horrific beating Mr. Watts is giving Jubie for having read from Stell's diary. Mayhew does not sugarcoat this scene's brutality, and as Jubie is being lashed with the buckle end of a belt on her bare legs, thinking that this time her father surely will kill her, suddenly Mary's voice rings out: "Mr. Watts! . . .

Mr. Watts, you stop that now. . . . You're all het up, Mr. Watts" (24). She even touches him on the arm as if to calm him. While he jerks away and Paula arrives and dismisses Mary with her eyes, even though it's clear Mary has more to say, it's apparent that Mary's intervention has brought the beating to an end. Most important is the climactic scene of the novel when Mary, Stell, and Jubie are attacked by three white men while walking through an all-white neighborhood on their way home from the AME Zion revival. Mary understands that the men are after her and urges the girls to run, but after one of the men alludes to raping all three of them, Mary pleads, consciously lapsing into thick dialect, "Dey don't know 'bout pleasin' a man. I can show you boys a good time. All you." When one of the men retorts that "Nigger gals are born wanting it," Mary simply says, "Yessuh . . . yessuh, you right" (182), just before she's tossed into the back seat of a car and driven away. (It is worth noting that Mayhew wisely shows Mary using various dialects and levels of colloquialisms in different situations; she has Mary "code switching," if you will, which protects the author from the charge of falling into stereotypical or inaccurate black dialect for her main African American character).

In these instances, Mayhew is on potentially dangerous ground in making Mary the kind of saintly and overly heroic black character who is the means to salvation in

**"In this South I lived as a child. . . . And it is of it that my story is made. I shall not tell, here, of experiences that were different and special and belonged only to me, but those most white southerners born at the turn of the century share with each other. Out of the intricate weaving of unnumbered threads, I shall pick out a few strands . . . that have to do with what we call color and race . . . and dreams of the Good and killers of dreams."—Lillian Smith, *Killers of the Dream* (27)**

the lives or consciences of white characters – a standard trope ever since Harriet Beecher Stowe gave us Uncle Tom in 1852 (and one that is especially apparent in films like *The Green Mile* [1999], *The Legend of Bagger Vance* [2000], and arguably in *The Shawshank Redemption* [1994]). This characterization of Mary might also strike some readers as a re-inscription of the loyal “mammy” stereotype, of the black caretaker who will do anything, including sacrificing her life, for her white charges. That such characters almost always come from the pens of white writers makes such characters even more problematic, especially but not exclusively for African American readers.

Mayhew, however, resists this stereotype by making sure that we see other sides to Mary Luther. For example, Jubie is privy to seeing that Mary has a life beyond that of the Watts family. One instance occurs during the trip, when they are going to stop for lunch. Mary spots a black roadside grill a short distance from the restaurant the Watts family has chosen. She tells Mrs. Watt she will walk back there to get her lunch. While the rest of the family heads into the restaurant, Jubie stays with Mary for a moment and watches while she gets her bag out of the trunk, trades her Keds for a pair of red high heels, puts on jewelry and makeup, dons a jaunty cap, and then heads down the road “click-clacking on her heels.” “I watched her go,” says

Jubie, “my mouth hanging open.” Mary then looks over her shoulder and winks, quipping, “Feels like Sunday” (30). This scene presents Mary as a *woman*, apart from a maid, and a woman who is not desexualized as the mammy stereotype often is. This image is reinforced in an earlier scene when Jubie visits Mary in the shabby cottage behind the Sleep Inn Motel, and she asks Mary how she knew it was her knock, since it “[m]ight have been a gentleman stopping to see you” (12). “Might have,” says Mary matter of factly.

Jubie also learns through various conversations with Mary about Mary’s family – how her husband died, who her siblings are, and about her children (Young Mary and Link) and their successes in life. Later, Jubie learns that Mary had a child who lived for two months in 1946 and realizes, “She had a whole life I never knew, a baby who lived and died before I ever met her, a husband whose death I didn’t remember” (230). By portraying Mary as a woman with a full life outside her work for the Watts family, Mayhew avoids inscribing yet another example of the “sainted Negro savior” or offering up “Neo-mammyism.”

Mayhew also deserves praise for portraying the entrenched and intertwined systems of racism and patriarchy and sexual anxieties that kept segregation in place for so long and that still contribute to racism today. Some readers may at first be alarmed that it seems that the lower class “white



PHOTOGRAPH BY ALAN WESTMORELAND; COURTESY OF NC STATE ARCHIVES

trash” characters whom the Watts family and Mary encounter in Georgia and Alabama are going to be the villains in the story. The small-town hotel and restaurant proprietors who utter “nigger” as easily as if they were saying “the,” the oily young man who gives the family a ride to a motel after the car accident in Claxton and who is later revealed to be one of those who attack Mary – they are presented as the people who are overtly racist, who will commit acts of violence in response to efforts to desegregate. However, Mayhew indicts the broader white South, especially the Watts family members themselves.

From the beginning, Mr. Watts is presented as menacing and downright sadistic in his regular beatings of Jubie. He is also racist in his attitudes, and we learn that not only does he cheat on his wife with her sister-in-law, but he also makes a pass at Mary’s daughter, who was to take care of the household while the family was on



PHOTOGRAPH BY ALAN WESTMORELAND; COURTESY OF NC STATE ARCHIVES

their journey. Ultimately, too, he is revealed to be a corrupt businessman who is cutting corners on the materials he uses in his concrete business so he can filter money into the White Businessmen's Association of Charlotte to prevent blacks from registering to vote. (This cutting of corners results in a death and a suicide. On top of the incidents in Claxton, these events in the final chapters of the novel will feel overdone and rushed to many readers.) Additionally, while Paula is presented as having some sympathy for Mary and as admiring of Jubie's most audacious act, there's little evidence by the close of the book that Jubie's mother has yet experienced any real growth in racial matters.

The novel's ending, in fact, may prove problematic for some readers. Here Mayhew comes close again to presenting Mary as the black "savior" figure. Readers will have to make up their own minds on this issue as they finish the book; however, it is safe to say that some readers may tire of another novel or film that allows the white protagonist to gain wisdom and experience through the conduit of a black character.

Still, Mayhew is not quite so pat. It is also possible to read the ending of the novel more pessimistically, or – for the time – realistically. One may see in *The Dry Grass of August* Mayhew's refusal to end the story "neatly" or to shy away from the violence of the period. Nor does she shy away from the fact that despite the Claxton sheriff's letter to Paula explaining the details of what happened to Mary, it is likely that little will be done to prosecute those involved. The sheriff remarks, "*Although the outcome should be forgone, there are no guarantees*" (265; italics in original). Indeed. Nor is Mayhew's scene of Jubie returning to Charlotte after the incidents in Claxton and visiting with Mary's church family a "let's all join our black and white hands together and sing 'Kum Ba Yah'" picture of racial harmony. The scene is marked by a cool reception of Jubie on the part of Mary's two children. Moreover, everyone in the church seems alarmed when Leesum shows up, squeezes in beside Jubie, and holds her hand during the service – even the kindly Mrs. Coley who had earlier met Jubie. Certainly their reactions may be driven by fear for Leesum's safety (the novel is set just a year before Emmett Till is murdered in real life), but there's also a general sense of discomfort with the closeness between these two adolescents, a young black male and a young white female. Thus, again, all is not neatly wrapped up at the novel's close.

This is especially true for the final chapter of the book. It is perhaps meant to be optimistic, with Paula and the children moving into

a small rental house and Paula explaining that the rotting leaves covering the grass in the backyard can easily be raked into the creek, "no big deal." One might be tempted to read this image as a metaphor, that this family will emerge from under the decay of the world around them, particularly the rottenness of hatred and bigotry, like the grass will emerge from under the decaying leaves. Perhaps they will. As Jubie closes the story, she says, "Lately Mama had answers for everything" (279). However, one wonders what those answers might be. Can any of Paula's answers counteract what happens to Mary Constance Culpepper Luther? Will Jubie be forever changed by these events? Will this experience lead Jubie to work to overturn a system that is still so entrenched? One wonders if a line from Stell toward the novel's end may be very telling. Jubie is asking her older sister about visiting Mary's family, and Stell says she's not sure Mary's children would want them there. "But she was our friend," protests Jubie. "We paid her to be," replies Stell (211).

It seems remiss not to make at least a brief comparison between *The Dry Grass of August* and Kathryn Stockett's *The Help* (2009), given their similar themes and, to a degree, plots, and their publication just two years apart. Few readers will be unaware of Stockett's runaway bestseller, set in 1962 Jackson, MS, about a young, privileged, mildly rebellious white woman who manages to persuade the maids of many of her friends and family to tell their stories anonymously, which, in the

book, also produces a runaway bestseller. The popularity of *The Help* is undeniable. It has been perched atop the *New York Times* bestseller list, either in hardback or paperback, for nearly two years now, having sold over three million copies, and has already been adapted to the screen; it has over 4600 customer reviews on Amazon.com. However, despite the popularity of the novel, the degree to which Stockett successfully negotiates the “tricky subject” Howell Raines speaks of is debatable. The book and its author have received heavy criticism for the use of haphazard first-person black dialect, for trafficking in stereotypes in both the black and white characters, for overly comedic plotting, for historical inaccuracies, and for a tidy ending

in which the white heroine gets to run off to New York to work for a famous publisher while the maids are left to contend with the situation in Mississippi.

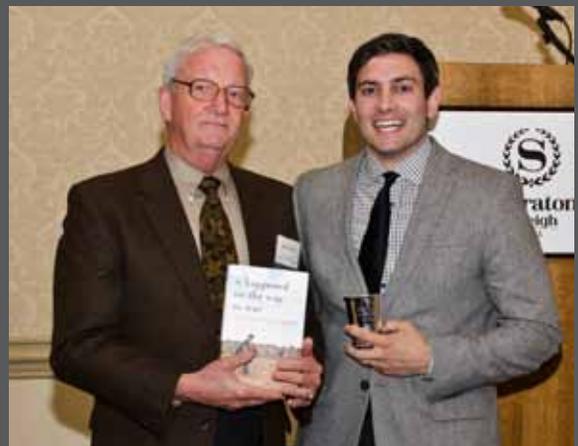
Some of the reviews of *The Dry Grass of August* make direct comparisons to *The Help*. Most notably, though not a “highbrow” publication but one with a massive readership, *Woman’s World* noted that Mayhew’s book is “a must-read for fans of *The Help*.”<sup>3</sup> I would agree. While as I have noted, Mayhew is at times on rocky ground with her subject matter and her portrayal of Mary, *The Dry Grass of August* is a superior book to *The Help*, even if it doesn’t sell three million copies. It should instead join the ranks of other white writers’ works that examine black/white

domestic relations during the civil rights era: Ellen Douglas’s novel *Can’t Quit You, Baby* (1988); the oral history collection by Susan Tucker, *Telling Memories Among Southern Women: Domestic Workers and their Employers in the Segregated South* (1988); the film *The Long Walk Home* (1990); the television series *I’ll Fly Away* (1991–93); more recently, the narrative poem cycle *Cradle Song* (2009) by Stacey Lynn Brown; and Southern literary scholar Minrose Gwin’s stunning debut novel, *The Queen of Palmyra* (2010) – all works that offer a more nuanced view of this complicated, troublesome time in the not-so-distant past, when it was debatable that “dreams of the Good” would – or could – prevail over the “killers of the dream.” ■

## 2011 RAGAN OLD NORTH STATE AWARD

*excerpted from the presentation remarks by James W. Clark, Jr.  
North Carolina Literary and Historical Association Meeting  
Raleigh, NC, 18 November 2011*

The winner of the Ragan Old North State Award for nonfiction this year is *It Happened on the Way to War: A Marine’s Path To Peace* (Bloomsbury, 2011). Beginning in childhood, the book’s author, Rye Barcott, had viewed himself as someone destined to be short-lived, but someone who always felt a special responsibility to live compassionately. In his committed rush through undergraduate school, he co-founded Carolina for Kibera, a participatory youth leadership development program in the largest slum in Nairobi, Kenya. After graduating with a military commission in 2001, young Barcott led Marines in dangerous theaters of modern war and simultaneously performed collaborative humanitarian services in East Africa. ■



PHOTOGRAPH BY ALAN WESTMORELAND.  
COURTESY OF NC STATE ARCHIVES

ABOVE Rye Barcott receives the 2011 Ragan Award from James Clark at the North Carolina Literary and Historical Association meeting, Raleigh, 18 Nov. 2011.

<sup>3</sup> *Woman’s World* 16 May 2011: 6.



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