

A Drawerful of Secrets

Mark Childress plumbs the depths of small-town life in *Georgia Bottoms*.

by Mark Hughes Cobb

After *Crazy in Alabama*, *One Mississippi* and now *Georgia Bottoms* (Little, Brown and Company, 2011), novelist Mark Childress has no plans for a *Kiss-A-Me Florida* or *Did Tennessee What Arkansas?*

"It was not intentional," the University of Alabama graduate and Monroeville, Ala.-born Childress said, laughing, about three of his seven novels winding up with Southern-state names. "But if I do it again, it will be intentional."

Georgia is the salty protagonist of the new book, and it is, in fact, set in the fictional town of Six Points, Ala., not our neighbor to the east. Her family name was amended from Butts, but Georgia's surname also suggests what happens to the seemingly prosperous, sophisticated lady through the often-bawdy course of the novel. "I just loved her name when I thought of it," Childress said. "But I knew she was in Alabama."

Although he's lived all around—New York, San Francisco, New Orleans, Fairhope, Costa Rica and now Key West—and moved a lot while growing up, he keeps this state close to his heart. "I carry Alabama with me wherever I go. All the people in my family are from there," he said.

Childress graduated from UA in 1978, working at the *Birmingham News*, *Southern Living* and the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* until 1987, when he became able to write fiction full-time. Of his seven novels for adults—he's also written three picture-books for children—four are set wholly or mostly in Alabama.

Unlike his previous novel, *One Mis-*

issippi, and some of the racially charged 1960s atmosphere of *Crazy in Alabama*, there's little to no autobiographical content in *Georgia Bottoms*. "This one is definitely not anything from my experience at all, except people I know are all blended into her," he said.

While *Georgia Bottoms* is often light, it originated from a dark place. "I was in New York, living downtown, on 9/11," Childress said. "That's when this book was born. In the midst of that crazy day, I heard about the mayor of a tiny town who had sent the police over to cover the local water tower. How touching, that this reached out to this little place, and brought out this side of the mayor. What a [bold] thing to do! She's gonna keep al-Qaida off with one cop."

That image stayed with him and remained in the book, but the story grew up not around the mayor, but with one of her friends, the last maybe-sane member of a once-prosperous family. Georgia keeps up appearances, going to church even though she doesn't believe and presiding over grand society functions. But in the old carriage house apartment out back, she entertains well-to-do gentleman callers, all pillars of the community, all married, who leave her entirely unsolicited gifts of money. Each gets one night a week tailored to his particular tastes; she keeps the various costumes and toys they favor in the drawers of a highboy. Georgia is an actress, but her act gradually unravels in the coming chapters and years.

Almost a decade after that initial idea, the book came out, which is not too unusual for Childress, whose first novel, *A World Made of Fire*, was published in 1984. "I kind of let something stir around," he said. "I usually sit down and try to write a few paragraphs out of an idea. I have hundreds of novels that



Mark Childress

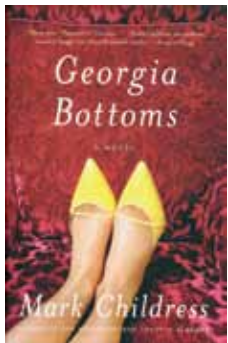
never got born. But somehow if I find myself on the fourth paragraph and the fifth paragraph, I often keep going."

Chapter one starts with Georgia in church, not following the sermon, instead ruminating on her busy acting life, until something the preacher says startles her back to the moment. Childress was originally trying to build toward the scene with the mayor at the water tower.

"But when I realized the revelation about the preacher, I thought, 'Oops, maybe there's a story here. She's not as genteel as she seems.' I was fascinated by the idea of somebody trying to live a secret life in a small town where everybody knows your business. So in the middle of this tragedy, this little comedy was born."

But like most of even his comic novels, *Georgia Bottoms* has serious undertones. The final chapter—and this is a bit of a spoiler—is what Childress thinks of as the "Harper Valley PTA" scene, where Georgia stands up in church and derides the hypocrites.

Some early reviewers also saw similarities between Georgia and Lucille of *Crazy in Alabama*, who beheads her husband and drives with him (well, his head in a hatbox, anyway) out west to become a star. "But Georgia is exactly the opposite of Lucille, who is so ambitious and so Hollywood cross-eyed," Childress said. "All Georgia wants is to



be left alone.”

The women may share an indomitability of spirit, and Georgia’s monologues could be seen as slightly delusional, though not so much as Lucille’s, who believes she’s conversing with her dead hubby’s head. “But Georgia really thinks she’s doing those guys a favor,” he said. “She’s convinced herself of her rightness. And if it helps her do for her mom, keep her house up, she’s doing what she has to do to get by.”

Mark Hughes Cobb is an arts and entertainment writer for the Tuscaloosa News; article adapted with permission from that paper.

MORE NEW BOOKS

Stealing Magnolias

by **Debra Shriver**, '79
Glitterati Inc., New York, 2010
hardcover, 192 pp., \$60

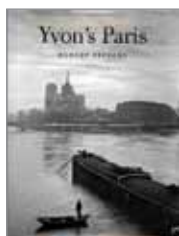
Stealing Magnolias gives readers a tour behind the courtyard walls and private gates of New Orleans, often considered the “Paris of America.” With full-color photos by more than 20 photographers and artists accompanied by textual descriptions, chapters highlight food and entertainment, decorating, gardens, landscapes, local traditions, interiors and architecture. The book explores the New Orleans’ lifestyle in a style that is part-love letter, part-scrapbook, serving as both a cultural guidebook and historical reference to America’s most European city.



Yvon’s Paris

by **Robert Stevens**, '73
W.W. Norton & Company, New York, 2010
hardcover, 144 pp., \$40

In Yvon’s Paris, Stevens compiles more than 70 famous photos by master photographer Pierre Yves Petit, or Yvon, as he called himself. Many of Yvon’s photographs are remembered as iconic postcard images of Paris in



the early 20th century. He wandered the streets of Paris between World War I and World War II, photographing a bookseller sitting along the Seine, a dramatic gargoyle atop Notre Dame and boatmen in the early morning light, among many other scenes. His postcards became the most popular in the world, and are still sought by collectors today.

Dictionary of Louisiana French

contributed to by **Dr. Michael D. Picone**
University of Mississippi Press, Jackson, Miss., 2010
hardcover, 892 pp., \$38

When Picone, UA professor of French and linguistics, along with others, set out to form the Dictionary of Louisiana French: As Spoken in Cajun, Creole and American Indian Communities, their goal was to document the language before it vanished. This collection catalogs French vocabulary as spoken in five regions of Louisiana, and reflects the speech of the period from 1930 to present. It includes each word in French spelling, the pronunciation, the part of speech, the word in English and its use in everyday phrases. Most of Picone’s contributions came from fieldwork in the St. Landry and Vermilion parishes. The dictionary was named the Louisiana Endowment for the Humanities’ 2011 Humanities Book of the Year.



Stories from the Hart

by **Anne Hart Preus**, '71
AuthorHouse, Bloomington, Ill., 2011
paperback, 133 pp., \$11.95

Stories from the Hart is composed entirely of true stories of one girl’s life during the 1950s and 1960s, ranging from the ins and outs of daily life in the Mississippi Delta to bona fide brushes with history. The memoir is set against a backdrop of social change, including events like the Emmett Till murder trial and trips to Memphis to see the Beatles and Elvis Presley. Read-

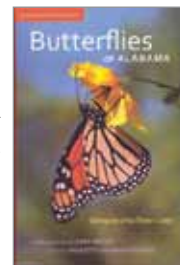


ers will be introduced to characters that include family members, friends and townspeople from Tallahatchie County, Miss., in accounts that are often funny, dramatic or wistful, as Preus remembers what it was like to grow up in a community where everyone knew everyone.

Butterflies of Alabama

text by **Paulette Haywood Ogard**,
photographs by **Sara Bright**
UA Press, Tuscaloosa, Ala., 2010
paperback, 486 pp., \$34.95

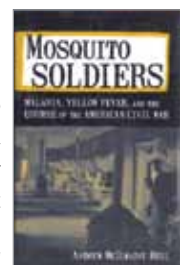
This is a full-color, richly illustrated guide to the 84 known species of “true” butterflies within the state’s borders. Each species entry is accompanied by both color photographs of live subjects in their natural habitats and text that explains relationships between butterflies and the plants upon which they depend, as well as specialized adaptations that enable their survival. The book contains information for both the budding and experienced butterfly enthusiast, and addresses conservation issues. It also contains appendices with checklists of the state’s butterflies, a list of accidentals and strays and information about butterfly organizations.



Mosquito Soldiers

by **Andrew McIlwaine Bell**, '93
Louisiana State University Press,
Baton Rouge, La., 2010
hardback, 192 pp., \$29.95

Of the 620,000 soldiers who died during the American Civil War, a majority met their fate not from war wounds, but from disease. In Mosquito Soldiers: Malaria, Yellow Fever, and the Course of the American Civil War, Bell explores the impact of both diseases on soldiers during America’s bloodiest conflict. In addition to how they affected the military, he discusses the effects of disease on the civilian population and how shortages of malarial medicine helped change traditional gender roles by turning upper-class Southern women into smugglers. He also reinterprets familiar battles and events from an epidemiological standpoint, adding a medical perspective to military history.



When Universities Are Destroyed

by Dr. Jack Kushner, MD '64
iUniverse Inc., New York, 2010
paperback, 57 pp., \$9.95

In *When Universities Are Destroyed: How Tulane University and The University of Alabama Rebuilt After the Disaster*, Kushner discusses how Tulane, after suffering \$650 million in losses in the wake of 2005's Hurricane Katrina, sought direction from The University of Alabama, looking at how it rebuilt after it was destroyed by fire during the Civil War in 1865. The author describes the destruction of



both campuses and compares each institution's efforts to overcome hard times and rebuild. The book details how Tulane cleaned up after the hurricane, as well as how Reconstruction delayed the rebuilding of UA after the war.

Nature Journal

by L.J. Davenport
UA Press, Tuscaloosa, Ala., 2010
hardback, 235 pp., \$24.95

Nature Journal is an innovative presentation of common species encountered in the Alabama outdoors, with each of its 25 chapters a self-contained lesson in close observation of morphology, behavior and habitat, research, photography or drawing of the subject, and a written description of the natural phenomenon. Many of the chapters are accompanied by Davenport's witty personal stories. The book is intended for broad nature-study use by the general reader and nature enthusiast in Alabama and the Southeast, as well as out-of-state visitors to museums and outdoor centers. Davenport is a professor of biology at Samford University.



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'35

Alto Loftin Jackson Sr., JD '37, celebrated his 70th wedding anniversary to Pearl Norton Jackson on March 28, 2011. Alto, who is 97 years old, is retired from his law practice and also from teaching at Troy State University. He lives in Clio with his wife, who is retired from the Barbour County school system.

'54

Hobart Grooms wrote the preface for French military historian Luc Braeuer's book *Les Incroyables Echanges—un exemple d'humanité en temps de guerre* (*The Incredible Exchanges—an example of*

humanity in time of war). With Braeuer's help, Grooms had previously written and co-produced a documentary film titled *For One English Officer*, first aired in 2004.

'58

Jim Oakley has been named to the board of directors for the *Alabama Baptist*, a Christian newspaper with a subscription base of nearly 100,000. Oakley is the career development director for the College of Communication and Information Sciences at UA, where he helps the college's 2,000-plus communication students find internships and jobs.

BENTON BURROUGHS, BS '67, and his wife, Dorinda, co-chaired a capital campaign to raise more than \$5 million for Ronald McDonald House Charities of Greater Washington D.C. in order to build a new house near Children's Hospital. The campaign, which began in 2005, has helped construct one of three Leadership in Energy & Environmental Design-certified Ronald McDonald Houses in the world. Ronald McDonald Houses serve families whose children



are in area hospitals due to significant and critical illnesses. The new facility has 26 bedrooms—more than double the capacity of the old house—and includes four family suites for children who have compromised immune systems. "The individuals that come to the house for help are just regular people,

and we are happy that this new house will provide some comfort and help in their time of need," Benton said. "For the families, it is very important when one or more of their children is facing life-threatening situations to have a place where they can come to have shelter and a hot meal and be as a family." Benton's law firm, Reed Smith LLP, provided all the legal work for the campaign, pro bono. Dorinda, who has served on the charity's board of directors for 12 years, said she originally saw raising the money as a formidable task. However, after several large donations, including a contribution of \$1.25 million from the local McDonald's owner-operators, they reached their goal. "Caring for the family of a critically ill child is an integral part of the entire recovery of a child," Dorinda said. "We enable families to stay together during these critical times."