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Up Close: Southern Gothic...With Jokes

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UP CLOSE

Southern Gothic...With Jokes

Writer George Singleton has produced a body of work that is at once recognizable and jarring.

"Nothing is funnier than unhappiness," says Nell in Samuel Beckett's *Endgame*. This is a premise writer **George Singleton '80** might agree with, although if Beckett's characters wait to go nowhere, Singleton's characters aren't waiting at all—they're actively going nowhere.

Consider Mendal Dawes in Singleton's *Why Dogs Chase Cars*. Dawes has a habit of burying dogs who have been run over in his front yard—their literal tracks stopped on the property he overlooks—even though the story is informed by Dawes's unhealing ache to flee Forty-Five, his hometown.

"[The perfect story] is both funny and sad," says Singleton, "and the reader gets pissed off because they can't decide how they should react."

In his latest collection of short stories, *Between Wrecks*, Singleton once more sets his sight on the convergence of funny and sad, along with the rural South, where he often finds the tragicomic crossroads of the absurd. For those who expect to find front porch rockers, sweet teas, and wide-brimmed hats...look elsewhere. Singleton's South is instead full of weird customs, strange ailments, self-proclaimed "talents," and characters whose peculiarities, however occasionally repellent, prompt insights into our common culture.

For example, in "No Shade Ever," the wife of Singleton's main character has lied to her husband about a pregnancy in order to get away for cosmetic surgery. Such details, both uncomfortable and humorous, provide a mirror that Singleton wants—in this case on vanity, shallowness, and the lengths gone to for both—which, even if we resist, we can't help looking into.

Such hard looking is aided and abetted by an earthy, rhythmic writing style that makes reading Singleton's stories feel like guilty pleasures:

Because I'd seen part of a documentary on gurus who slept on beds of nails—and because I'd tried to quit smoking before my wife came back home after leaving for nine months in order to birth our first child, though she would come back childless and say it was all a lie she made up in order to check into some kind of speech clinic up in Minnesota to lose her bilateral lisp—I had a dream of chairs and beds adorned entirely with ancient car cigarette lighters.

"I've written all kinds of really bad stories," Singleton admits. "At Furman, I wrote bad poems, bad plays, 450 pages of a bad novel. At page 200 I knew it was really bad, but I kept going. One of my professors, Gil Allen, said that I 'had the disease.' And I did."

Despite all of the manuscripts that were tossed in the trash, Singleton says the efforts were valuable for the "minor characters I would take from one story—or one sentence, or one scene—and start over and over again until I had something better."

Such laborious salvaging has added up to six collections of short stories, two novels, and an instructional book on fiction writing.

In 2009, Singleton was named a Guggenheim Fellow, and in 2011 he received the Hillsdale Award for Fiction by The Fellowship of Southern Writers. Now the John C. Cobb Endowed Chair in the Humanities at Wofford College, Singleton teaches a variety of courses, including fiction writing, as well as classes focused on "Grit Lit," a literary movement in which his own works figure.

Grit Lit serves as an alternative to the romanticized stories of the South, attempting to more closely capture the spirit of Southerners, highlighting their candor, authenticity, and bravery.

Or, as Singleton says, these are "stories of the rough South, usually with lower-to-middle class people who drink, smoke, and fight."

Singleton says he never knows "if something will be considered 'good' or not," but that he'll continue to write because "it's a blast."

An interesting thought, coming from an author who never shies away from connecting the amusing to the abject. F

—Lindsay Niedringhaus '07