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Feasting on Gruel

George Singleton had two purposes when he wrote his first novel, *Novel*, with a lead character named . . . Novel.

First, he wanted to write lines such as these: “I’m a detective, Novel,” and “I thought you’d puzzle out this mystery, Novel.”

Second, he wanted to get all those agents off his back, the ones who phoned his home in Dacusville, S.C., after he’d published three collections of short stories and asked, “Have you ever thought of writing a novel?”

“No, you moron!” he would scream. “I never thought of that!”

Some didn’t receive even that courtesy. They’d make it only to “I’m an agent with . . .” before Singleton slammed down the phone.

Singleton, a 1980 Furman graduate, is living proof that Southern-fried characters haven’t gone with the wind. Imaginative, acerbic and unflinchingly candid, Singleton seems unaffected by his astounding success over the past four years.

Consider: In 2001 his first collection of short stories, *These People Are Us*, brought a \$1,500 advance. In 2002, *The Half-Mammals of Dixie* fetched \$10,000. He used it to buy a used Jeep Cherokee.

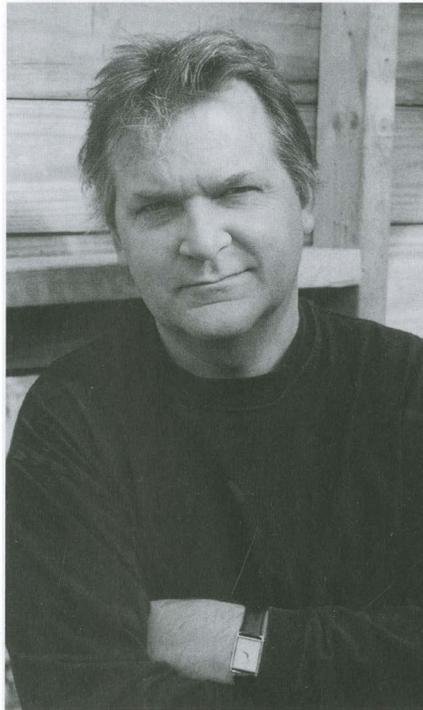
In 2004, *Why Dogs Chase Cars* earned a \$25,000 advance. With the newly released *Novel* and a switch in publishers from Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill to Harcourt of New York, he landed \$125,000 and a Proust-reading editor who wants to accompany him on a book tour of the deep South.

Singleton still drives the ’99 Jeep — but is splurging on overalls and a John Deere cap for the Yankee editor.

Novel began, appropriately, as a short story born of hearing “Have you ever thought of writing . . .?” one too many times. “I was just messing with people,” he says. “I like doing that.”

But the story about a hard-drinking snake handler who moonlights as a lieutenant governor’s speechwriter spun out of control. Set in fictional Gruel, South Carolina, the book follows Novel Akers’ attempts to write an autobiography, ferret

Singleton’s Southern-fried skills take a Novel turn



GLENDAGUION

The Atlanta Journal-Constitution included George Singleton’s *Novel* on its list of good summer reads.

out Gruel’s secrets, manage a weight-loss clinic based on sneezing, operate a writers’ retreat, tear down the Gruel Inn, rebuild the Gruel Inn, and a bunch of other things.

When Novel uncovers Gruel’s art forgery ring, his duplicitous wife tells him that Bob Jones University up in Greenville has been the major buyer of religious fakes. “If you think back over the years,” she adds, “you might remember that I’ve never said anything bad about a Christian, Novel.”

He’s relentless, our George.

Singleton has always been famously disciplined, arising before dawn to write 600 words before teaching at the South Carolina Governor’s School for the Arts and Humanities. By the time he turned in *Novel* in June 2004, he had already completed a handful of follow-up Gruel stories. That collection, *Drowning in Gruel*, is set for a June 2006 release. Seventeen of its 19 stories have been snapped up for publication by major magazines.

He has also wrapped up a second novel, part of which appeared in this summer’s fiction issue of *The Atlantic Monthly*.

Only that one, he wrote sober. Last November, Singleton entered an outpatient rehabilitation clinic to end a 30-year drinking habit.

“It’s so much easier to re-write now,” he says. “A lot of times my main character would change names or jobs in mid-stream, and I’d be like, ‘What the hell happened there?’

“It was a crutch,” he says of his daily fifth-of-bourbon regimen. “In the early days, I always drank coffee or Dr Pepper when I wrote. I just had to get used to doing that again.”

Meanwhile, *Oxford American* magazine asked for his favorite hangover remedy. He submitted an essay titled “An Ode to Hangovers” with a made-up recipe for Poor Man’s Paté — Vienna sausage, onions, hot peppers, relish, mayonnaise and mustard. The piece was chosen for an anthology of best food writing for 2005.

“People who get picked are like James Beard and Emeril,” Singleton laughs. “Now I won’t take out the garbage unless Glenda (Guion, his longtime partner) calls me Chef George.”

If success hasn’t changed Singleton’s lifestyle, it has changed his life’s pace. Publicity tours, media interviews and requests to write book jacket blurbs are now part of his daily routine. And then he’s got to keep an eye on George W. Bush, whom he blames for environmental toxicity, health insurance rates, vicious dogs and bad weather.

“What I’m writing now has all this Republican conspiracy crap going on,” he says. “I’m just having a good ol’ time.”

— Deb Richardson-Moore

Deb Richardson-Moore, formerly an award-winning reporter for The Greenville News, is pastor of Triune Chapel and director of Triune Mercy Center in Greenville.