



# Preface

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SOME YEARS AGO, CORMAC MCCARTHY GAVE ME this advice about writing fiction and the difficulty of doing it well.

“It’s a peculiar thing,” he wrote in response to a short story I had sent him. “I think you’ll have to write some more before you’re fully tuned into the I that writes. *Some* writers with a body of work behind them and some considerable reputations never have done it. They can write an essay in good sensible English, but as soon as they sit down to write fiction something strange happens to them, and they begin to speak in tongues. Only a literary person could read their stuff. Children and dogs know immediately that it’s bogus.”

Cormac and I eventually stopped corresponding as he became more famous and sought after, and I moved on to other projects, but I was sad we were not able to reconnect before he died in 2023.

Still, his observation about writing fiction rings true, especially his assertion that “bogus” attempts to create fictional narratives are easy to spot. Perhaps that is one reason I have avoided for the most part any further public airing of my fiction, something I realize is a thinly veiled, cowardly attempt to avoid the kindly letdown my friend Cormac delivered while he was in the midst of finishing up what many critics consider his finest work, *Blood Meridian*.

The more mundane reason I abandoned fiction writing is a purely practical one. I needed to make a living. The results of that choice, for better or worse, are documented in miles of newsprint and magazine galleys where my journalistic efforts appeared over the years and in the pages of the dozens of books I edited, developed, or ghostwrote for the most part, nearly all of them nonfiction. That was then; this is now.

The reason “now” is different is due to a fiction writing group I joined more than ten years ago in Alexandria, Virginia. The group, formed by a local award-winning novelist, Leslie Pietrzyk, is a comforting, supportive refuge for aspiring fiction writers trying to find their voice. The group met, at least until COVID times, the second Wednesday of every month at a local restaurant where we’d buy a round of coffee and/or breakfast pastries while we chitchatted in anticipation of settling down to the happy but serious business of making stuff up.

Mostly, we’re a prompt-writing group. Leslie gives us a prompt (usually two), and then we write for thirty minutes anxiously dreading her “time’s up” call. Then, if one of us feels the muse has given us something worth sharing, we volunteer to read out loud. It’s a no-pressure group that supports the art and craft of writing. As such, we do not criticize one another’s pieces and instead work hard to

find even the thinnest strand of workable narrative. It's a practice of patience and grace that means we mostly read what we've written even if we don't like it much ourselves.

I have been amazed, and even awed, by what a group of writers can come up with in such a short amount of time. What is more astounding is that Leslie's simple, innocuous prompt words (window, wander, difficult, habit, patience, tree) have been the planted seeds for narratives that eventually found their way into various literary journals and/or other fiction or even nonfiction narrative collections. A good number of these creative seeds (or at least a cutting or two from a prompt's mature planting) can be found in Leslie's 2021 book, *Admit This to No One* (Unnamed Press). And now, I guess, this collection of short stories.

Greenwood is not my first published book. That book, a collection of portraits and essays called *Images of the Southern Writer* (UGA Press), is about spending time (sometimes days) with a number of the South's most recognizable writers—Tennessee Williams, Eudora Welty, Robert Penn Warren, Anne Tyler, William Styron, Lee Smith, Walker Percy, Cormac McCarthy, Barry Hannah, Ernest Gaines, James Dickey, Erskine Caldwell, and dozens of others—and was a deep dive into my literary heritage as a Southerner.

It was a book that took five years to finish as I begged and cajoled for an audience with these writers despite having no reputation as a photographer or writer and, perhaps worse, no contract or even the promise of one. How this turned around at the last minute is its own story of wholesale naivete, inexperience, blind luck, and ultimately the kindness of strangers.

And although I didn't appreciate it at the time, the years-long journey of corresponding with these writers—all the while studying

their work in preparation for meeting them one day—was work that gave me a deep appreciation of both their unique voices and their outsized contribution to American literature. That profound appreciation is surely embedded in these stories and is perhaps hiding in plain sight.

The characters here are, in the most fundamental of ways, recognizably Southern. At the same time, finding their counterparts in any group of humans who gather together as a community is an easy task, whether they live in New York, Kansas, Ohio, North Dakota, Arizona, or California. To put it more directly, we are all, in one way or another, residents of Greenwood, bound and connected by the imperfect fabric of our shared humanity and subject to the same human foibles and spectacular lapses in judgment the good citizens of Greenwood sometimes exhibit.

Clearly, Merle Flack, in the story “Sara Jean’s Bees,” should have known better than to put an active beehive in the backseat of his car, part of a kindhearted effort to help his sister move her “fragile things” to her new home. It was an acquiescence on his part that defied all common sense given his fear of bees, a terror driven by his memory of stepping on a yellow jacket nest in the woods as a child. He still vividly remembers how it felt watching from the backseat of the family’s sedan, his head resting in his mother’s lap, as his father careened through the streets of Greenwood on the way to the hospital.

Larry Fine, in the story “Consequences,” clearly did not consider the true cost of his one-time infidelity, a levy that grew exponentially larger when a substantial portion of the town’s smug citizenry viewed an illegally obtained video of him in flagrante delicto with one of his publishing colleagues underneath a poolside clamshell daybed at a high-end Virginia Beach hotel.

And was it Robert Lee Johnson's enlightenment or naivete in the story "A Game of Chess" that convinced the straitlaced insurance agent that hiking the Appalachian Trail was a good idea? This was an especially odd choice given Robert Lee's long history of making it crystal clear that he hated absolutely everything about the wilderness whenever the subject came up—and in particular, the inescapable requirement of sleeping on the ground.

The other narrative fiber that ties these stories together is a sense of place, something often associated with Southern fiction, although this is certainly not a feeling exclusive to the region south of the Mason-Dixon Line. Few characters in the collection abandon their hometowns, and those who choose to leave and return always find a renewed sense of meaning and purpose as they settle in and become part of their native communities again.

Hamilton Green, in the signature story "Greenwood," is the great-great-grandson of the town's founder Lester Hamilton Green. Hamilton was happy to have escaped Greenwood until his aunt convinced him to return from Washington, DC, to direct the family's nonprofit foundation, an organization charged with looking after his family's ancestral mansion, a landmark that is a local tourist attraction. Hamilton ultimately finds fulfillment in his "small pond celebrity," noting that Washington was a place where his family's reputation hardly bought him "a free cup of coffee" unless one of his state senators or representatives was offering it.

After a lunch with his wife, a former Washington power broker, at Dixie's Diner in downtown Greenwood, he reflects on how simple activities, such as having lunch surrounded by the buzz of conversation among other patrons and his lively, familiar exchanges with the restaurant's owner "can unleash a flood of emotions that leaves me

feeling grateful and perhaps a little sad. Gratitude on the one hand for the sweetness of my life and its meaningful, deep connections, and on the other hand, loss, regret, and sadness for abandoning the warm embrace of my family and our community for all these years.”

In the collection’s final story, “Milton Gets His Freedom,” an adolescent boy constrained under his mother’s protective thumb takes a road trip to Raleigh with his charismatic grandfather, Bentley Thomas, a sales representative for the Reynolds Tobacco Company. Bentley grew up in the state capital and was allowed to explore the city unsupervised and unconstrained by fear. Bentley hopes that by giving his grandson a similar taste of freedom—allowing him to explore the capitol grounds alone—it will release him from his mother’s powerful grip and instill in him a new sense of autonomy and agency.

“Bentley’s hope, as fanciful as it seemed, was that some residual of his own spirit of fearlessness, and perhaps stupidity at times, might have seeped into the surrounding soil and would, like an ancient warrior’s ghost, rise up to inhabit Milton’s sheltered heart.”

Milton does eventually find the courage to explore the wider world and with his grandfather’s sense of wonder and curiosity. This newfound connection to the wider world eventually motivates him to leave Greenwood’s comfortable but ultimately limiting confines to live a more adventurous adulthood.

“Years later Milton would develop a near obsession with reading historical placards, something that compelled him to pull off the road to read them, an activity that drew him into imagining what had happened there and if something did, whether it might be good story to tell, or perhaps even something to write about.”