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Writer savors hero's welcome
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Lillington -- On Sunday, a folk hero returned to the county that inspired his first novel and, 12 years ago, sent him packing, all but tarred and feathered. In a presentation at the Harnett County Library in Lillington, renowned Southern novelist **Clyde Edgerton** entertained a standing-room-only crowd with banjo tunes and readings from his 1985 book, "Raney," and other works. Other than a visit to one of the local book clubs, this was **Edgerton's** first public speaking event in Harnett since 1985.

It was a triumphant return.

The crowd showered him with loud applause and boisterous laughter as he read passages from a new short story and some of the seven novels he has written.

Between signing books and catching up with old friends, **Edgerton** talked about his work, freedom of speech, the controversy over his first work and the path his life has taken since he left Harnett.

In 1985 Algonquin published "Raney," a satire about an Episcopalian guy from Atlanta married to an attractive, but vapid, Free Will Baptist. The novel was set in a small, conservative Southern town similar to Buies Creek, in Harnett County, where **Edgerton** worked as a professor at conservative Campbell University.

There were those at the time in rural Harnett County who didn't find **Edgerton's** satire very funny. The president, provost and dean of Campbell University were alarmed by the book.

"Raney" was due out in March, but in February, **Edgerton** gave advance copies to the school's president. "I was teaching English teachers" how to teach, he recalled. "And I was very proud. I gave the book ... out of pride."

At the time he was also waiting for his teaching contract to be renewed. "I had been there seven years, I had asked for tenure and a sabbatical." He enjoyed his job, and by accounts from people who worked with him, was well-liked. **Edgerton** said he assumed that the contract would be renewed.

Then he received a call from the dean of the school, saying they needed to meet. As it turned out, the administration had a big problem with his novel, and, as a result, a problem with his contract.

"My wife had just finished a five-year tenure at N.C. State," and wasn't working, he said. "I had a 3-year-old child. And my contract is being held up because of something I had written."

In a subsequent meeting with the school's provost and dean, he was told the school didn't like the book because it characterized the church and "showed a clash between the old and new with the new replacing the old, and showed alcohol as a catalyst." To this day, alcohol is not allowed anywhere at Campbell University. It is prohibited even in the private homes the school rents to employees. After some time, and a great deal of public controversy, Campbell University finally offered to renew his contract. But **Edgerton** had accepted a job elsewhere and moved on.

Since then, his seven novels have sold more than a million copies and three have been adapted for the stage. Next fall, **Edgerton** begins work as a professor of creative writing at the University of North Carolina at Wilmington.

On Sunday, as he signed book jackets and shook hands, he said it was good to see old friends, and even a nemesis or two.

But in 1985, "I was outraged and flabbergasted this could happen to someone trying to do their job," **Edgerton** said.

In Harnett County these days, a full shelf at the library is stocked with **Edgerton's** novels.

But there are those who live in Buies Creek who remain afraid to leave "Raney" out on a bookshelf, even though it is probably one of the most widely read books in Harnett County.

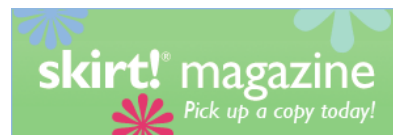
And of those at the book signings, most declined to be quoted, feeling that their public appearance in support of **Edgerton** was risky enough. "It's too bad the people at Campbell weren't smart enough to keep him on staff," one admirer said, preferring to remain unnamed.

Shelby Stephenson, well-known poet and former chairman of the English department at Campbell, was there to cheer on his old friend. "He's one of the funniest people in the world," Stephenson said. "If [Raney]'s a satire, it's a gentle satire," he added.

Long after the controversy has passed, **Edgerton** "will be remembered as a storyteller in the same tradition as Mark Twain," Stephenson said.

Illustration: c photo; photo; map; staff

Local novelist Clyde Edgerton reads aloud from his works at the



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novelist signs 'Raney' for an admirer in Harnett County.
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