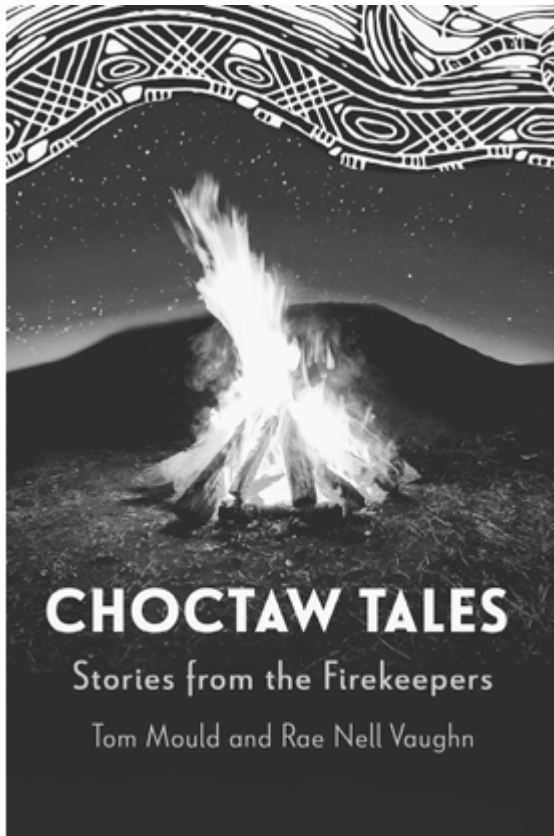


Reviews

Choctaw Tales: Stories from the Firekeepers. By Tom Mould and Rae Nell Vaughn. (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2025. Pp. xxix + 331, foreword by Chief Phillip Martin, preface to the second edition, preface to the first edition, annotations, notes, sources cited, index, and 45 photographs).

Tom Mould and Rae Nell Vaughn's new book is the culmination of well over two decades of fieldwork with the Choctaw of Mississippi. Mould began working with the Choctaw as a doctoral student, and he has written prolifically on Choctaw folklore, belief, and narratives. He published *Choctaw Tales* in 2004, and this new revised edition further develops important documentation and insights into their storytelling traditions. Mould used collaborative approaches and teamed up with Vaughn, who is member of the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians and an elected official and archivist for the tribe. This new volume includes a wealth of newly documented and published narratives, reflections on the fieldwork process and collaborative research, and expanded selections of stories written in the Choctaw language. Mould and Vaughn pay tribute to the firekeepers who preserve and honor the legacy of Choctaw verbal artistry. Their work continues to contribute the preservation of Choctaw cultural expression as well as adding important resources for sustaining and supporting efforts to preserve the language.



Their book is a major documentation of American Indian expressive culture within the Delta and surrounding regions. The authors draw from archival resources as well as ethno-graphic fieldwork with keepers of Choctaw tradition. The initial work was encouraged by Choctaw leaders and educators who invited Mould to assist with the documentation of the narrative over thirty years ago. He has maintained his early connections within various communities and further expanded his work to include a wide range of contributors to this project. A major section of the book is devoted to the storytellers, past and present, and Mould and Vaughn completed excellent documentation to give short biographic sketches of the tellers and

to find photographs from a range of sources to preserve a record of those who contributed their narratives to written sources. Mould gives excellent content for a wide range of texts, and he completed a significant revision of earlier work that focused largely on storytelling genres and contexts in the original volume. The book also contributes to readers' understanding of the narratives through extensive annotations that provide information on the documentation of the texts as well as resources for finding additional scholarly sources for gaining richer understanding of the culture.

The bulk of the book consists of texts arranged by genres and themes. Originally, Mould wrote of an emic genre named *shokhanṇopa*. This term literally translates as "hog talk," and it conveys rich meanings that relate to Choctaw ideas about humorous discourse and the communicative norms about who may tell these tales. Originally, Mould had termed another class of stories as "talk of the elders." These narratives are more serious in content and tone, and they embody deep truths within the culture. Following Mould's original writing, a new term has emerged for this body of narrative. The Choctaw coined the term *hopáki ikhana* to classify stories connected more to tribal history than more recently told narratives. This second class of genre consists primarily of what they characterize as legend, old stories, and history. *Hopáki ikhana* would also include other etic genres—namely myths and etiological narratives—but the storytellers, themselves, do not necessarily make these kinds of distinctions.

Mould and Vaughn balance insider genres with external terms in their organization of the volume. Chapters consist of Creation Stories and Myths, Supernatural Legends and Encounters, Historical Tales, Prophecy, Jokes and Tall Stories, and Animal Stories, followed by a selection of nineteen stories that are told in the Choctaw language. It is especially intriguing to examine these untranslated stories and compare them with English translations to gain a sense of the lexicon and syntax of Choctaw. There is a resurgent interest in teaching the language, and the book provides important resources for educators and language enthusiasts.

The book is rich in its variety and scope of Choctaw folklore. Choctaw creation narratives are intriguing, and these stories continue as an on-going verbal legacy. One of my favorite selections is the story of "Fani Losa and the Sun." This selection is documented through an in situ recording of a 2024 telling by Ray Nell Vaughn to children. Fani losa is a black squirrel, who shows up in an old story about an eclipse. Vaughn's transcription of the story provides a vibrant representation of the telling, and gives readers a sense of her own abilities as a teller and her ways of engaging young listeners. Readers also will find accounts of important historical figures. Among the most important is Pushmataha, a 19th century chief who supported Indigenous rights and died a suspicious death in Washington, DC. These stories are important texts within the larger category of *hopáki ikhana*. Other figures also show up within this system, including a shape-shifter named Skate'ne as well as less directly named figures such as *na losa chitto*, a demon-like figure, and

nishkin chafa, a one-eyed supernatural figure who is part of their supernatural belief system. Other fascinating characters include the bohpoli. They are Choctaw little people, similar to gnomes or dwarves in European folklore. They are seen as having their own societies, and they can be mysterious and even mischievous. Other stories represent them as being connected to tribal medicine and healing beliefs, and their presence shows parallels to other Indigenous traditions throughout North America.

Choctaw Tales: Stories from the Firekeepers is an important contribution that continues the work of Tom Mould and Rae Nell Vaughn to safeguard the traditional expressive culture of the Choctaw. The range of narratives and the various forms of presentation are excellent. There is an excellent overview of the historical context that sets the stage for gaining a strong appreciation of their verbal artistry as well as the sharp humor that is part of the tradition. The discussion both the texts and contexts is supported by a clear discussion of metacommunicative devices, including the use of attributive phrases that connect the contemporary tellings to Choctaw history as well as subtle distinctions that relate to various construction of history as the long past—or ttók in Choctaw—versus the more immediate past termed tok. These points are intriguing and interesting to consider. They provide a window into the contemporary context for the tellings and add to the ways readers may envision how the stories have been told and continue to be part of contemporary storytelling. In this respect, both Mould and Vaughn continue to contribute to the important work of the culture's firekeepers.

--Gregory Hansen

Visual Chords. By Jianqing Zheng. (Raleigh, North Carolina: Broken Tribe Press, 2025. Pp. 100, \$14.00, paperback)

Jianqing Zheng offers readers a historic and visual view of the United States through his recent collection of ekphrastic poetry, *Visual Chords*. Zheng, Professor of English at Mississippi

VISUAL CHORDS



Jianqing Zheng

Valley State University where he founded and edits the *Journal of Ethnic American Literature and Valley Voices: A Literary Review*, has published three other collections of poetry, *The Dog Years of Reeducation*, *A Way of Looking*, and *Soulful Dancer*. He's also published four chapbooks of original haiku, written over forty articles on poetry, and edited or co-edited eleven scholarly books.

Visual Chords, one of two works published in 2025 (*Soulful Dancer* being the other), is divided into five sections. The first four sections of this book remain mostly focused on the South with the fifth section moving to other parts of the United States. In sections I, II, and IV Zheng reflects on works by particular photographers: Dorothea Lange, William Ferris, and Leo Touchet, keying readers through choosing quotes on their work from each photographer to open each

section. In sections III and V, readers will discover pieces that reflect on photography from various artists, each mentioned in the caption of the poem.

In Section I, readers will encounter poems about photos captured by Dorothea Lange, some quite familiar and others less so. I found myself often visiting the virtual collections for each of the photographers, trying to find the images Zheng so vividly describes in this collection. In this section, I felt struck by Zheng's "Responses," a poem about a photo titled "I Am an American" (and the book's cover art). In this poem, broken into four stanzas, Zheng explains the history behind the photo with prose poetry in stanzas one and three while allowing readers into a seeming memory or reflection in stanzas two and four. Zheng uses the technique of mixing prose and verse poetry effectively throughout this collection.

Section III continues the theme of centering the photos of one photographer, William Ferris. Ferris was born in Vicksburg, Mississippi, and has used his photography skills to document the daily lives of people living in Mississippi, especially in the Delta region. In this portion of the book, both Ferris and Zheng's love of Mississippi and the American South at large carries forward brightly. One poem that sparked for me is "After Church" which showcases a church in silence, between services. Here Zheng describes a fan left behind in a pew as "a kitten curling up to reclaim the good / of silence which sprawls like kudzu"

In Section IV, Zheng's focus turns to works by photographer Leo Touchet, images that tend to lean more abstract than ones chosen for other sections of this collection. Touchet photographed desert dunes and other natural landscapes as well as "jazz funerals" in Louisiana among other subjects. "Seeing the Shadows" from this section ponders an image of the Monahan Sandhills Dunes State Park, taking readers on a reflective journey, seeing one image in many different ways through this poem.

In Section II, Zheng's poetry focuses on photography from various artists that are mostly well-known. In this section, one poem that endured for me is "Time Off for the Hillbilly Cat" which describes a photo of Elvis Presley with his face pressed to a mirror taken by Ben Mancuso in 1957. After sharing the details of this photo, Zheng, in the next stanza, refers to "Maowang['s]" pompadour hairstyle, referencing some of the ways that Elvis is spoken about in China and offering an image of people dancing to 1950s rock 'n' roll in the wet streets of their own neighborhood, imagery which offers juxtaposition to the brooding visual of Elvis pouting at his own reflection. Section V showcases photos from many different parts of the United States, again from various artists. I found myself drawn to "Into Autumn" after a photograph by Scott T. Smith. In this poem, Zheng inserts the narrator into the position of the photographer, letting this voice guide the poem and tell a story. He uses this perspective in many poems in this collection, something that adds a layer of analysis into the poem that is refreshing and allows the reader into the story of the photo and the poem.

Many of the photos that Zheng references in this work could be described as having a voyeur- istic lens. Dorothea Lange, for instance, photo- graphed many people who were suffering the harsh consequences of poverty while she was her- self one-step (or more) removed from the circum- stances she was hired to document when she worked for the Resettlement Administration, later called the Farm Security Administration, during the Great Depression. Though the pho- tographs collected through projects initiated by the federal government provided invaluable doc-

umentation of American history and memory, these projects were also often extractive and representative of larger societal problems of racism and classism, issues we still face today. This collection reflects the artistic capabilities and expressions of the photographers more often than it reflects the struggles faced by their subjects; in some ways this collection could be said to uncritically romanticize the poverty inherent in the rural parts of the United States. Other photographers' images referenced in this collection contain similar points of view. They appear removed from their subjects or are seemingly unwilling to grapple with the ways their presence changes the very scenes they are documenting.

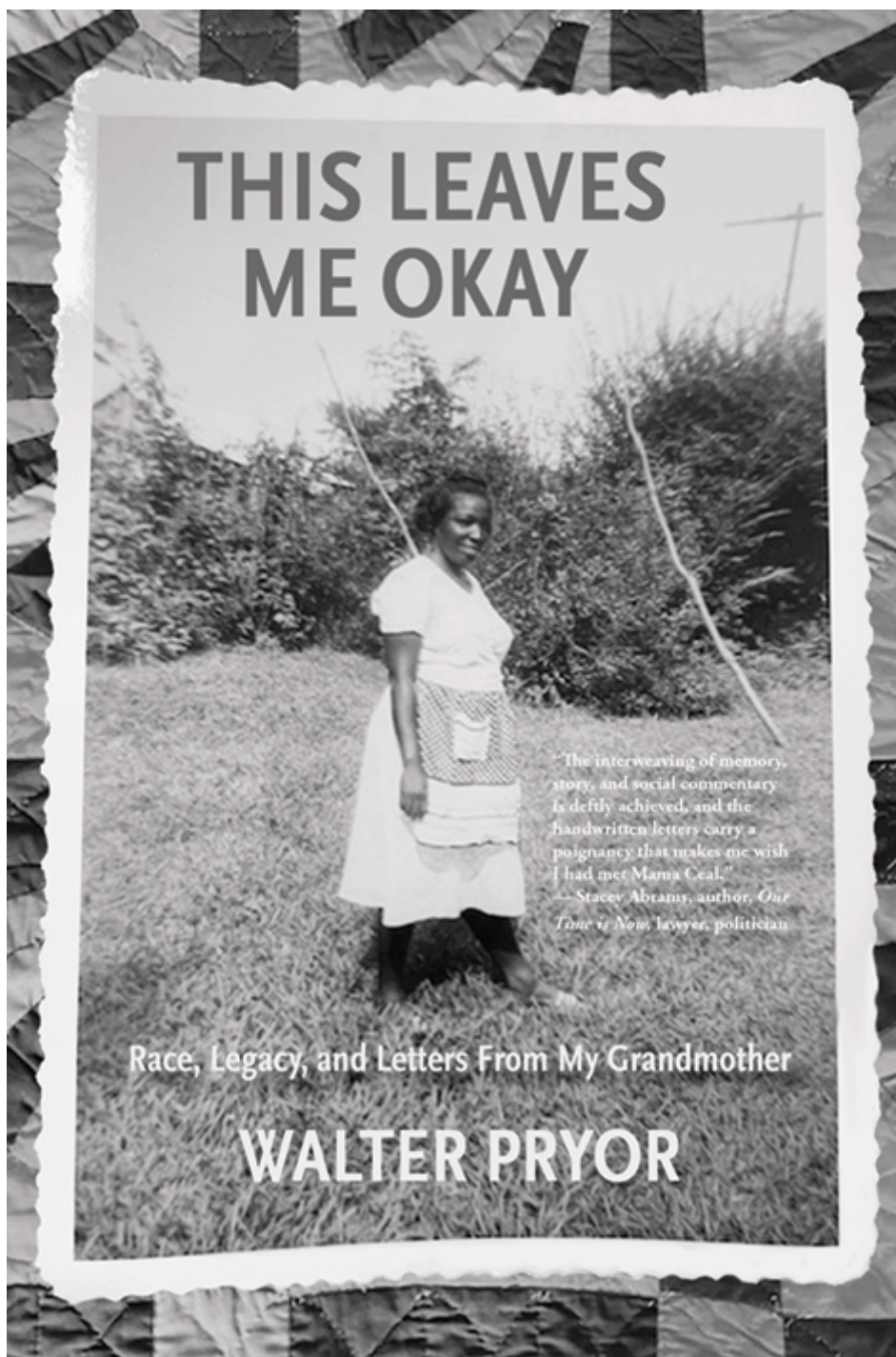
I would like to have seen the addition of an author's statement about these types of issues and concerns within photography and humanities fieldwork in the past and in the present. Yet Zheng, recipient of the 2019 Gerald Cable Book prize, the 2001 Slapering Hol Press Chapbook Award, and poetry fellowships from the Mississippi Arts Council, most certainly has a deep love and appreciation for the American landscape and people, especially the landscapes found in areas with sparse populations and wide natural vistas. Further, the value of his poetic voice, reflecting upon the world with an eye towards the past and future and with an eye towards joy and resilience, most certainly rings through this work clearly and loudly.

--Lauren Adams Willette

This Leaves Me Okay: Race, Legacy, and Letters from My Grandmother. By Walter Pryor. (New York: Heliotrope Books, 2025. Pp. 214, foreword, acknowledgments. \$20.00, paper)

Walter Pryor is a cum laude graduate of Hendrix College and graduate of Georgetown University Law Center. In his career, Pryor has worked in multiple legal sectors such as law firms, corporations, government, and higher education. With the publication of *This Leaves Me Okay*, he proves himself to be a gifted writer as well.

At the heart of the memoir is Lucille Hatch



Eldridge—Mama Ceal—the woman who wrote her grandson weekly letters beginning when he was a small boy and continuing until her death. As an adult, Pryor recognizes the unique nature of the correspondence: “What is remarkable about her letters is that she sat down to write at

all. My grandmother had only an eighth-grade education which she received at a time in our country's history when schooling for Black children—especially those in southern rural areas like Madison, Arkansas—was not well funded” (p. 20). Through these letters and Pryor's narrative of the contexts for them, the reader learns how southern black families formed communities to navigate and survive the oppression and violence of the early to mid-twentieth century.

In addition to the letters, which are the foundation of the book, Pryor also includes photographs, conversations with family and friends, and speculative recreations of the events of his grandmother's life. The text of the memoir includes facsimiles of the handwritten letters and Pryor calls attention to their reproduction: “It is not surprising then that Mama Ceal's letters demonstrate that her grammar was fickle and her handwriting sometimes unclear. Those details, however, endear them—and her—to me even more” (p. 20). With this material, Pryor pieces together a family history that is both representative and remarkable.

The memoir begins with four-year old Lucille and her younger sister Dessie Mae playing in the yard of their uncle Jerry in Cassoe, Arkansas, in 1920. The two girls had been sent to live with relatives after the death of their mother and their father's realization that he would not be able to take care of two young children on his own.

Although Pryor begins with a scene from his grandmother's childhood, the memoir does not follow a linear path. Facts about his grandmother's life, as well as his own, emerge poignantly through the juxtaposition of the letters and Pryor's reflections on them. We learn much about Lucille's life and consequently much about Pryor's family history including the birth of LaRuth, Pryor's mother; the death of Pryor's grandfather, Walter, from a tragic boating accident;

Route 1 Box 315-
Forrest City Ark

Dear Walter,

Oh it were so good to talk
to you and that you were
ok, this here were ok, I went
to Church and told Selmer
Lee that you said he say he sure
to come to the Church Bom Bom
& Connie was all send there love
Oh yes give Juliette Hixson
my ok I am getting excited
about coming to Washington
I hope the Buss strak will
be over soon is durn good
in school she were on over
Ras also Bakter & David
Will you be a good Bak
and pray for me love
Mama,

One of Mama Ceal's letters to her grandson.
Image courtesy of Walter Pryor.

LaRuth's move to her aunt Elizabeth's home in Forrest City, to attend better schools; and the marriage of Pryor's parents. Despite the documentation and preservation of his family history, which are valuable in themselves, Pryor's focus extends beyond the personal. The stories recounted in the memoir emphasize the significance of family, the importance of education, and

gratitude for one's ancestors.

The nonlinear storytelling device allows Pryor to unravel meaningful parallels and contrasts between his life and his grandmother's. Pryor does not place the letters in chronological order. The first letter that appears in the book is not the first written to him but rather one from 1988 when Pryor is 22 years old. The letter begins "Dear Grandson, Well This leve me ok. Thank the Lord" (p. 20). Mama Ceal then expresses hope that he is well, gives him news of family and friends (including their pride in him),



Mama Ceal (middle), grandson Walter (right),
and granddaughter Jacquie (left).

Photograph courtesy of Walter Pryor.

advice to be good and continue praying, and ends with a recipe for brownies (p. 20). Other letters follow a similar pattern of Mama Ceal sending her love to Walter, hoping he is well, updating him on news from Forrest City, and expressing interest in Walter's life. Each letter allows Pryor to fill in details of his own life, present-day reflections on how the past continues to influence the present.

At the time he is writing the memoir, Pryor and his wife Juliette are successful professionals with a daughter in law school and a son interning with an architect in Italy. As they listen to a hymn one Sunday morning, Pryor thinks of Mama Ceal and how far he and his family had traveled from

her life as a maid for over forty years in rural Jim Crow Arkansas to that day in which her grandson who used to wear sandals made from too small sneakers had purchased a house in Martha's

Vineyard. . . . I wondered what she would think and how she might be in awe of this achievement had she lived to see it. I wondered whether she would be proud. For that matter, what would others of our ancestors, for whom property ownership may have seemed almost fantastical, have thought? Had I become the “hope and dream of the slave” that Maya Angelou wrote about in her poem “Still I Rise”? (p. 33)

Pryor’s beautifully insightful memoir shares his life and recollections of a grandmother whose letters arrived even before he was old enough to read: Mama Ceal’s writing, he says, “told me that I was important enough to receive mail. That I mattered” (p. 201). He dedicates the memoir to his wife, daughter, and son as well as “all the ancestors, families, and loved ones who hold us up and propel us forward” (p. 5). In the last words of the acknowledgments, Pryor encourages readers to do the same: “investigate the sheroes and heroes of your own family—deceased and living. Call their names. Celebrate them. Tell your children and loved ones about them. And whisper a quiet prayer of gratitude that they lived” (p. 213).

--Janelle Collins

Charles Portis for the Early Twenty-first Century

by Bryan L. Moore

Discussed in this essay:

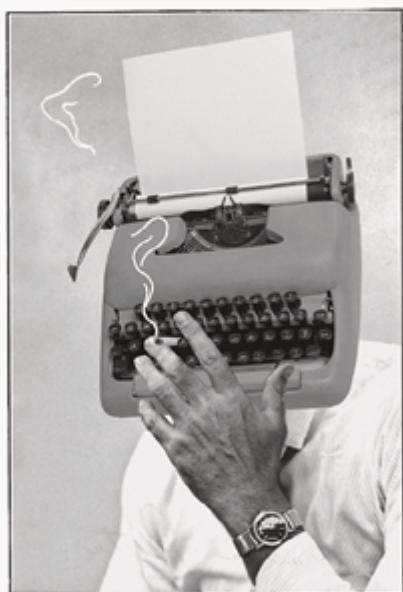
Escape Velocity: A Charles Portis Miscellany. Charles Portis. Jay Jennings, ed. (New York: Overlook, - Pp. 364. \$19.00, illustrations by Mike Reddy, paperback)

A Haunted Man's Report: Reading Charles Portis. Robert Cochran. (Fayetteville: The University of Arkansas Press, 2024, Pp. 224. \$25.95, b/w and color photos, paperback)

Reading Jay Jennings's wonderful collection *Escape Velocity: A Charles Portis Miscellany* was for me an unexpected twenty-first century Portis bonus following the author's death in 2020, and it appeared at just at the right time, amid our current decidedly unfunny national period. I was aware of this book when it was published, but something would always come up, and I did not read it until now. Perhaps I unconsciously tabled it in the knowledge that Portis-wise this would be it. I have admired Portis's fiction since my brother recommended *The Dog of the South* to me in the early '80s. When I read it, my reaction was strong and immediate. I didn't know anyone

A CHARLES PORTIS MISCELLANY

ESCAPE VELOCITY



**COLLECTED
NONFICTION,
SHORT STORIES
& DRAMA
BY THE
AUTHOR OF
THE NO.1
NEW YORK TIMES
BESTSELLER
TRUE GRIT**

EDITED BY JAY JENNINGS

**CHARLES
PORTIS**



could write like that, could be so funny. Thirty years or so later, I read the novel for (I think) the fourth time, as I was dealing with a bulging disc in my back and an accompanying stabbing sciatica. I downloaded the novel to my reading device knowing it would make me feel better, and it was the best medicine, though thank God for opiates and Biofreeze patches. You know a book (or song,

movie, etc.) is special when it helps you through a tough, unfunny time.

Yet my track record in selling him to others

has not been great. Long ago, when such an in-person summer literature class might make, I taught *True Grit* in American Novel. A few students enjoyed it, while others did not read it. One announced in class she did not like it or any of the novels we read that term, and another told me she did not like Westerns, period, and so during our viewing of the delightful 2010 Coen Brothers film adaptation she looked into her lap. I can't recall my reaction; it was, on some level, an impressive demonstration of boredom. (Is this novel a Western? Of course; it has all the basic elements. But it is also a realist novel and character study. I would not disagree with those who say it is his best.) Years ago, I had a gentle disagreement with a longtime friend at another Arkansas university concerning the state's "greatest novelist." I nominated you know who, while he insisted on Donald Harington. Of Harington's relatively large novel output, I have read only *The Architecture of the Arkansas Ozarks*, a sort of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* of our most rural Newton County, which made me laugh frequently. I've forgotten how I defended Portis, but it was a timewasting debate anyway, and we dropped it.

More recently, I recommended *The Dog of the South* to someone as the funniest novel I have read. I was impressed that he read it, but when I bumped into him a few weeks later, he said, "It's okay, but it's not as funny as *A Confederacy of Dunces*." I agreed that that novel, which I read not long after it was published, is funny, but I've, again, forgotten what I said, as I felt offended and defeated. It's not like this person has no sense of humor, but I'm not convinced his tastes go toward Portis's deadpan, which is not something I can explain well. It might be a snobby question, but did he get it? Portis's drollness expresses the center of our common oddness, our irrationality and crankiness, as in a gentle brag about beating a kid with short arms in three ping-pong matches. Arguably, some of Portis's jokes do not work, and some have not aged well, yet his trained eye for observation and pared style grounds him in a long line of great realists, including Flaubert and Chekhov, both of whom made the trivial interesting and were extraordinary deadpanners.

In 2012, Little Rock's Butler Center for Arkansas Studies did the world a great service by publishing *Escape Velocity*, which collects Portis's nonfiction, short stories, and a play. The edition reviewed was reprinted in 2023 by Overlook Press, which has also done the world a great service by reprinting all five of the author's novels. This printing adds a short story, "Damn!," which Portis published as a twenty-three-year-old journalism major at the University of Arkansas, following three years as a Marine (1952-55), including service in the Korean War. Readers familiar with the author will notice in this slight story the budding comic voice that would approach maturity after six years of newspaper reporting with his first novel, *Norwood* (1966). The earliest newspaper pieces included show comic traces, as in the opening sentence of the first piece collected, from 1958, for the *Memphis Commercial Appeal* on city Jaycees "capturing" a flatboat with "cap gun volleys and a lot of rebel yelling" (p. 3). Similarly, in a 1962 *New York Herald Tribune* piece (referenced above) the author wins three matches of ping-pong against a kid: "He had little short arms and all I had to do was tip the ball over the net out of his reach" (p. 28). The collection's final published piece, "The Wind Bloweth Where it Listeth" (Oxford American, 2005), is an examination of the old idea that a hundred monkeys on typewriters would eventually write the complete works of Shakespeare. The ear and sense of humor are intact into our present century, as it is rough

going for the mon- keys, though it is perhaps the thinnest piece here. In addition to many mostly brief newspaper pub- lications, the book collects eleven works, a 2001

interview with Portis conducted by Roy Reed for the Arkansas Gazette Project (see pryorcenter.uark.edu), and an Appendix with five tributes from admirers, including Dona Tartt on True Grit.

Editor Jay Jennings, who more recently edited the Library of America volume of Portis's Collected Works (2023), provides a good sampling of journalistic pieces, though these are the only ones I recall having read. They are in their way as illuminating and welcome as the more literary ones. Some of them, as shown, demonstrate Portis's comic precision and are all well-tuned to a general newspaper reading audience. These include a Commercial Appeal story on Elvis Presley and his mother and several "Our Town" columns he wrote during his year and a half employment for the Arkansas Gazette. More important because more serious are eight news reports for the Herald Tribune, where he was employed from 1960 to 1964, the final year as the paper's London bureau chief. In his Introduction, Jennings writes that although Portis's reporting has long been "recognized for its excellence," his civil rights reporting has been neglected by historians of the era (xvii). Portis's voice is restrained and sympathetic in covering Civil Rights Movement events in Alabama and Mississippi. In May 1963, Birmingham was the center of the movement as police used dogs and water hoses to attack Black children nonviolently protesting segregation. Television footage of these occurrences, which came to be known as the Children's March (or Crusade), would create global outrage and eventually lead to the Civil Rights Act.

A month later in Jackson, Mississippi, NAACP director Medgar Evers was shot to death outside his home. Portis's report on the murder is direct and economical as he allows the details to do their work, including an extended quoting of a fearless Evers from a year previous and his wife, who said, "Nothing can bring him back, but this cause can live on" (p. 56). In these pieces, Portis builds trust with his readers by indicating where the atrocities are coming from, who is kicking whom. He quotes Eugene "Bull" Connor, Birmingham's Commissioner of Public Safety, regarding Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth, a key leader in the Birmingham campaign of 1963, injured by the police: "I been waitin' a week to see Shuttlesworth knocked down. . . . Too bad it wasn't a hearse." Portis wonders about racist ruffians taking such statements as a call to arms; he asks, "What will happen if young, white roughnecks—who have been the storm troopers previously against Negro demonstrations—come on the Birmingham scene?" (p. 37). As reporter, Portis is occasionally (and justifiably) pointed, as when he notes that a day after Evers's murder, the Jackson police are tired and frustrated but "seemed to draw relief by clubbing a Negro girl on the head and a white 'n-----lover'" (p. 57). He suggests how such unjust acts lead to more injustices, including threats against a free press: "The Jackson police do not like to have people taking notes when they are going about their business" (p. 58).

A very different piece of journalism is the first-person "An Auto Odyssey through Darkest Baja," which may be read as a rehearsal for his novels *The Dog of the South* and *Gringos*, both of which are set largely in Mexico. It shows a keen eye for everyday details and ear for funny, idiosyncratic dialogue that never falls into clichés or triteness. It shows a fascination with travel and cultures featured in all his novels but the fourth, *Masters of Atlantis*, which celebrates mundanity in its own

secret society universe. Like *Norwood*, which was published the year before, the narrative establishes the centrality of an automobile (often found wanting) and finances in general (often precarious), as he and an Arkie friend, Andy Davis, set out to drive down Baja California from Los Angeles in a Studebaker truck. They pick up a hitchhiker, Miguel, who, Portis

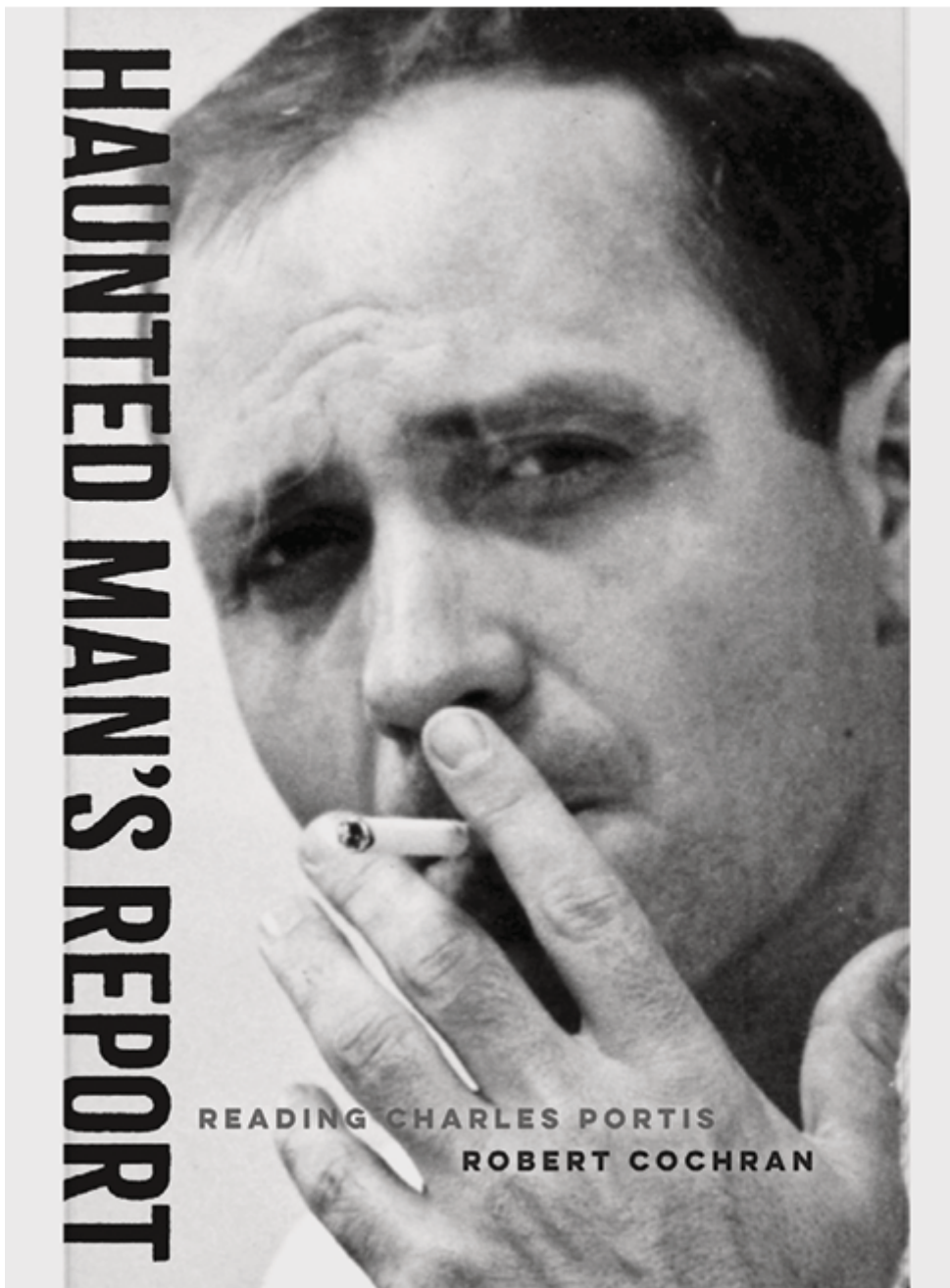
writes, “refused to understand my Spanish even after I had treated him to a pack of Dentyne” (p. 92). As the trip conditions grow rougher, Portis suggests snippiness between the travelers, as “Andy started belching, more than seemed necessary, and blamed it on the heat. I said that didn’t make any sense. He said it made as much sense as my wearing that stupid cowboy hat all the time” (p. 105).

The piece shows Portis as a practitioner of New Journalism at a time when similar, much more famous work began appearing regularly by Joan Didion, Tom Wolfe, and others, including Hunter S. Thompson, an excerpt of whose book *Hell’s Angels* also appeared in the same 1967 issue of the *Sunday LA Times* magazine *Home* as “Auto Odyssey.” This piece and the 1991 *Arkansas Times* first-person essay “The Forgotten River,” on tracing the course of the Ouachita River across southern Arkansas, where Portis grew up, into Louisiana, made me wonder about an alternate career the author might have chosen, a road not taken. The nonfiction included provides a fuller picture of how (arguably) the state’s greatest novelist, after fighting in a war and covering one of the most important eras in American history, retired from journalism and in 1964 returned to his home state for good to write fiction. Like Ray Midge of *The Dog of the South*, Portis traveled widely but never achieved “escape velocity” from Arkansas.

The five stories are welcome points of light from a writer known as a novelist. “Nights Can Turn Cool in Viborra,” a travelogue burlesque of a fictional place, and “I Don’t Talk Service No More,” which brings readers as close to the author’s Korea experience as we are likely to get, are the two standouts, moderate though they are. The author’s only published play, the three-act *Delray’s New Moon*, was workshopped by the *Arkansas Repertory Theatre* in 1996. It revolves around the imminent displacement of some senior citizens from their domicile, which is in the process of being, through shady dealings, converted into a glitzy club. This is the book’s longest work and is as satisfying as anything collected, as deadpans emanate from the mouths of mostly elderly Arkansans. Uncollected in the Portis LOA, the book is worth \$19 for this play alone. Predictably, reading *Escape Velocity* made me yearn for more Portis. I wonder about Jennings’s subtitle word “Miscellany”—is there more, somewhere? Not likely, though in 2025, *Harper’s Magazine* published “The Keys to Veracruz,” from an unfinished novel, *The Woman from Nowhere*, which seems like a cross between *Masters of Atlantis* in its (pseudo) hermeticism and *Gringos*, as it is set in Mexico. The notion of a major Portis female character is intriguing and, in that sense, comparable to Melville’s unpublished, lost novella *The Isle of the Cross*.

To date, Robert Cochran’s *A Haunted Man’s Report: Reading Charles Portis* is one of the very few (perhaps only) books on Portis, not including secondary sources on *True Grit*. It is the work of a Portis scholar and longtime University of Arkansas English professor who has published on a variety of subjects, including Vance Randolph and Samuel Beckett. He taught a graduate seminar on the writer, and his research is meticulously documented. Clearly, Cochran is also, like me, a Portis fanboy who understands as well as anyone the rare gift of the novelist’s comic vision of the world. On occasion, the book reads like a Portis *CliffsNotes* that recounts jokes from the novels, but Cochran mostly avoids this. Some Portis lovers may appreciate a well-organized, thought-out

retelling with (surely reflecting at least some of the UA seminar) an often-enlight- ening examination of the contexts. Anyone who does not care for Portis's writing will probably not be won over by Cochran (and certainly not by me). This is obviously not the place to begin



reading Portis; it is a book about Portis, by a Portis fan, for Portis fans.

Casting his critical net widely, Cochran draws from Homer (Norwood as Telemachus) and Dante (True Grit's Tom Chaney as thief Vanni Fucci). "I Don't Talk Service No More" and Beckett's Krapp's Last Tape are, he writes, "retrospective monologues by codger loners" (p. 148). He compares Portis's (inarguably?) greatest conman in a corpus filled with such characters, Dr. Reo Symes of *The Dog of the South* (1979), with Chaucer's Pardoner, Melville's herb doctor in *The Confidence-Man*, and Twain's duke and king. These are certainly in the ballpark, though it strikes me that Symes's scheming is ultimately— and typically for Portis—much more innocuous, less bitter than the others. One might easily add other similar characters, such as those populating Flannery

O'Connor's fiction (e.g., *Hazel Motes* or *Manley Pointer*). Cochran's comparisons made me think of an article I wrote on Portis more than thirty years ago, as I was entering the job market and eagerly welcomed any publication to beef up my thin grad student CV. It was good student paper, but it is not a good scholarly article. (I got up to dig it out as I was drafting this, but anticipating the cringe involved, I sat back down.) I attempted to show how Portis, though traditional in respects, is akin to post-modern fiction writers born around the same time as him such as Thomas Pynchon and Donald Barthelme in their absurdity, though they are absurdities of different types. Portis's fiction, *True Grit* excepted, is more purely comic, about the gags themselves, than philosophical.

Cochran quotes a passage in which Symes tells the novel's young main character, Ray Midge, about one of his schemes, the ridiculous theme park idea of "Jefferson Davis Land." Symes says he would himself dress up as "Davis in a frock coat and greet tourists as they stepped off the ferry." In the afternoons, General Lee would appear, "take off his gray coat and wrestle an alligator in a mud hole" (qtd. p. 73). A few years after my article appeared, I read latter-day postmodernist George Saunders's brilliant 1996 debut collection *CivilWarLand in Bad Decline*, partly because of the glowing Pynchon blurb on the back cover, and I reconsidered whether my article was really all that bad. Saunders's readers will remember that in the title story, the ridiculously conceived theme park *CivilWarLand*, a tasteless gimmick in a world shorn of good will, is in the process of going belly up. A reader of the Saunders story would see immediate similarities, though I have no idea if Saunders has read Portis or did so before writing his story. (Saunders would revisit the bad theme park concept in other stories.) Though Portis does suggest some skepticism toward our thoroughly commercialized world, it becomes a firehose in Saunders.

The subtitle, "Reading Charles Portis," states clearly what this book is up to—the author's reading of Portis, based on his research and

teaching. It is not a biography, though some bi- ography is relevant here and there. Before reading this book, I had not thought much about Portis at UA, where he was, Cochran points out, a student when the highly respected Ben Kimpel and Duncan Eaves taught in its English Depart- ment. This would surely have helped open ave- nues of thought for the young veteran, who obviously showed some bookishness, yet there is no indication Portis took either professor. Co- chran helped me think about Portis's reading, which he does not particularly show off in his fic- tion (as compared to Borges or Woolf). It is dif- ficult to imagine a scholar investigating Portis's many literary and historical references more thor- oughly. Occasionally, Cochran seems to go off into the weeds, as when he suggests Portis, with Gringos in particular, may be read as a critic of Euro-American colonialism. This surprised me; I have never read Portis that way, anything like the way I do, say, Joseph Conrad or Chinua Achebe, but perhaps I will come around to this notion.

Readers and researchers can draw and find value from the book as needed. He lauds Portis the reporter but wisely points out some less than stellar stories, such as "The Marchers: A Blue- print for Protest" (not included in the Jennings collection), which Cochran writes, "comes across as a puzzling, peevish, even slapdash perform- ance" (p. 18). He provides fresh information (for me) about True Grit, which, he notes, "has out- sold by a factor of at least five the author's other four efforts combined" (p. 45). He skillfully navigates Portis's occasional use of (at least arguably) dated, insensitive language. His thoughts on the complexity of his greatest character, Mattie Ross, are open-eyed, as he points out that though academics typically conclude she is something of a bigot, such obser- vations "have gained little traction outside the faculty lounge" (p. 59). The concluding para- graphs are, I think, persuasive in summing up Portis as, overall, rather affirmative.

Many of the illustrations in the Cochran are interesting and, as far as I know, unique. (The Overlook Edition of *Escape Velocity* preserves the breezy Butler Center illustrations by Mike Reddy.) The photograph of George Maledon, real-life jailer and hangman for Judge Parker, who employs the (fictional) Rooster Cogburn, jumps out, and I had never seen the photograph of a young Portis as a Marine in full gear, leaning against a rock, presumably in Korea, writing in a notebook with a pencil. The author did not talk much or write explicitly about his service, yet his simple grave marker—Cochran's photo of which is included—notes his name, dates, and (presum- ably) his preferred identity, "SGT US MARINE CORPS / KOREA." I was initially surprised by the cover of the book, with a full-sized photo- graph of Portis smoking. Somehow, I had not seen it before. Given the strange, insidious, but undeniable idea that smoking makes anyone look cool, it seemed more like a book on Kerouac or Bukowski. (I asked AI if Portis ever quit smok- ing, and for what it is worth, it said he did not.) Available pictures of the reclusive author are a lit- tle scarce, so why not use this one? It is a rare Por- tis closeup, and it does make him look cool. Part of me loves this photo, but for some reason, per- haps for its daftness, the Overlook edition cover seems to me the better representation of the au- thor, who always preferred that readers know him through his writing. It uses a small insert of the same portrait, a portable typewriter hanging, obscuring his face, the cigarette inserted in the space between the keys.

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