

Author to Author with Mindy Friddle

The Author: George Singleton

The Book: *Drowning in Gruel* (Harcourt, 2006)

I caught up with acclaimed short story writer George Singleton recently at Greenville's Open Book where he was signing copies of *Living in Gruel*, his fifth and most recent book. Singleton, who lives in Pickens County with ceramicist Glenda Guion, teaches writing at the South Carolina Governor's School for the Arts and Humanities. A Furman graduate, he earned an MFA at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. His stories have appeared in a variety of magazines and literary journals, including *The Atlantic Monthly*, *Harper's*, *Playboy*, *The Georgia Review*, and *The North American Review*. His first novel, *Novel*, was published last June and is now out in paperback.

In a recent review, *Publishers Weekly* had this to say about *Living in Gruel*: "From the owner of Roughhouse Billiards, who sells hot dogs, to the proprietor of the army-navy surplus store, who hawks gas masks as Valentine's Day gifts, the citizens of Gruel form a backdrop against which the more transient characters...stand out in sharper relief for their quirky loneliness and creative longings."

Q. *Drowning in Gruel* is your newest book, a story collection about "the lives and schemes" of citizens in the fictitious South Carolina town of Gruel. What inspired these 19 tales?

A. I think I started this book in or around May 2003. I had in mind writing a collection of stories centered around the square in Gruel, and at the time I wanted every story to be set during a holiday. That changed, of course. I couldn't quite figure out the conflict for Arbor Day, you know. Anyway, I wrote a handful of stories, and then started a short story titled *Novel* that got out of control. So I finished *Novel* the novel, then went back--in about September 2004, to finish these stories. After *Novel*, it wasn't so difficult understanding the characters' interaction with themselves and their odd hamlet.

Q. The town of Gruel was also the setting in *Novel*. Will it be the setting for future books as well?

A. No more Gruel. I have a novel coming out next year called *Work Shirts for Madmen*, and in an early draft the couple moves from their tiny, tiny town--it's a slab of granite called Glow Ember--to Gruel, but I nixed it, finally, cutting.

Q. Your writing is often described as comic, with characters both hilarious and tragic. Was it always so? Were your first drafts as a graduate student UNC Greensboro or as an undergraduate at Furman vastly different in tone and style-- or was that tragicomedy always there?

A. Oh, Lord. In the early days I depended on slapstick, which doesn't work in fiction. Larry, Moe, and Curly are funny to watch, but on the page it doesn't come off well: "Larry hit Moe with a nine-iron. Moe hit Curly with a frying pan. Curly made a yuck-yuck-yuck noise." I'm the epitome of the hard-headed slow learner, I suppose. Rejections didn't bother me and I plowed on until I found a voice, and understood that I would try to write about how the saddest moments can be the funniest.

Q. Even as readers—and critics-- laugh at your southern characters, you manage to avoid stereotyping. How do you accomplish this? (You make it look easy...but it's not, of course.) As the Seattle Times said about *Novel*: "What Singleton does best in *Novel* is fabricate characters from the raw material of his native South. Stereotypes of uneducated, slow-talking, slow-moving Southerners are exploited, then mashed like ripe melon on hot pavement....Singleton's first novel is done with a wink — you'll get a chuckle."

A. I'm not so sure that I pull this off at all times. But I guess the writer has to love his characters, and not make fun of them. And it's also kind of like this: It's okay for us to make fun of our own down here, but once an outsider shows up and makes fun of us, it's time to band together. I learned this in college at Furman. I met one-too-many northern prep school kids who said, "Man, the South's so backwards, man. Man, like, up in New York, like, everything's so much better." I always thought, "Who invited you down here? And how come you're failing all of your classes?"

Q. This is your fourth story collection and fifth book. That's really impressive. Is every book a different experience-- from inspiration, to draft, to published work? Are some aspects of writing, publishing, and book touring getting easier --or more difficult?

A. I waited a long time for that first book--twenty years, I guess. I'd had stories published all over the place, but kind of sat around waiting for someone to find me. Books two through now have been about the same. I've had to learn how to say "No" when asked, for instance, "Will you come up to Long Island and talk to our book club?" I'm getting more accustomed to book tours.

Q. How is life with Harcourt, your current publisher? And how is working with a "big" house different from your experience with Algonquin, a smaller publisher?

A. Harcourt takes care of me just fine. Algonquin was great, too. I'm lucky at Harcourt because my editor, Andre Bernard, is also the publisher. So it's like a giant vote of confidence. He doesn't have so many writers under his wing these days. The biggest advantage, I suppose, is that I don't have to drum up business, so to speak. The publicist arranges everything, then tells me where to go. Sometimes when I point out that it makes no sense to hit Oxford, Mississippi, then Memphis, then Jackson, then New Orleans, then Nashville, she really tells me where to go.

Q. This time last year you were embarking on your tour for *Novel*, and now you are off to promote both *Drowning in Gruel* and the paperback edition of *Novel*. You're hopping all over the place—the south as well as the northwest and west coast. That's a lot of book touring, You've developed such a following among independent booksellers-- it must be gratifying-- like visiting old friends. Not a lot of writers have that kind of network. How did it happen?

A. I guess I'm kind of like the neighbor's male mutt that keeps showing up at the doorstep when your poodle's in heat. I have made a bunch of friends who work the bookstores. And I think my getting requested to visit their stores might have to do with the fact that I don't show up wearing an ascot, whining. Well, not wearing an ascot...

Q. More than a hundred of your stories have been published nationally in magazines and anthologies. That's incredible. For the fledgling (and experienced) writers out there: how long, on average, does it take for you to write a story? What's your process of submission? Do you have five or more stories out at once?

A. I used to write about two a month. Boy, that's slowed down. I write about one a month now. I send the story to, say, *The Atlantic*, or *The New Yorker*, or *Harper's*, or *Oxford American*. When they turn it down, I send it to *The Georgia Review*, or *Shenandoah*, et cetera. Personally, I give the magazine three months on a Yes or No. When it's been around the block a few times, I send it to no more than three places at once. Here's the problem with sending out multiple submissions: If two places take a story, the writer has to choose which magazine. The one NOT chosen will never look at the writer's work for a long, long time.

Also, when I get a rejection I pretty much get the story back in the mail pronto. Otherwise I'll start doubting the story, and so on. Different editors have different tastes.

Q. One of my favorite quotes from Mark Twain: "I didn't have time to write a short letter, so I wrote a long one instead." The same might be said of writing fiction. Short stories aren't just chunks of novels, but a much different kind of writing—less elastic than the novel—yet fully-realized, self-contained, concise. Now that you've published a novel and short stories, what's your take on the different forms?

A. I still love the short story better. But I've kind of gotten into writing linked stories. What I'm working on now is about a dozen stories and a novella, the stories about a guy named Stet Looper working on a low residency master's degree in southern culture studies. He tells all of his tales in first person, and he travels around meeting up with odd characters. Then the novella's a third-person story that, I hope, the reader will understand to be Stet Looper's final thesis. Maybe because I call the novella "Thesis," it'll be a hint.

Q. Besides the South-- where you have a large following-- what other areas in the country are you finding readers?

A. Portland's been good to me, and Seattle, yes. There are some college English course students in Minnesota making fun of me as we speak. San Francisco, of all places. But I don't really know. I imagine readers will either love or hate the books, with not much in between.

Q. What's next? Are you planning to keep up your pace of a book every year or two? Where do you see yourself five years from now?

A. I think that *Work Shirts for Madmen* either comes out in June of 2007 or November 2007. The copyediting on that novel starts in June. I'm still spinning wheels on the Stet Looper stories, though they're starting to get accepted at magazines. Five years from now?--I'll be 53. That's about middle age, right? That sounds about the right time to run for governor.

That's a joke. That's a tragicomic joke.

Mindy Friddle is the author of the novel "The Garden Angel" (St. Martin's Press/Picador.) Visit her website, www.mindyfriddle.com, for more information on writing and publishing.