

Author to Author with Mindy Friddle

The Author: George Singleton

The Book: "Novel" (Harcourt)

George Singleton's writing career took off at the Pickens Flea Market. There, as part of a special report on southern writers and musicians in August 2001, a reporter and sound crew from National Public Radio (NPR) visited Singleton, and followed him around the flea market, with microphones and boom in tow, recording his witty off-the-cuff remarks. Until then, Singleton, a respected short story writer with fiction published in noted magazines and literary journals such as *The Atlantic Monthly*, *Harper's*, *Playboy*, *Zoetrope*, *The Southern Review*, *The Georgia Review*, as well as the annual anthology, "New Stories from the South," was nevertheless a well-kept secret. The radio spot sealed his reputation as "the king of the comic southern short story," and catapulted him a new orbit of fame. "After that, everything just flew," he said,

Singleton, who teaches fiction writing at the S.C. Governor's School for the Arts and Humanities, is a native of Greenwood, and a graduate of Furman University. He holds a master of fine arts degree from the University of North Carolina Greensboro. A collector of ashtrays and yardsticks, (thanks to the Pickens Flea market) Singleton lives in Dacusville with the clay artist Glenda Guion,, along with their ten dogs, one cat and a snapping turtle.

Singleton's latest book and debut novel is called, well, "Novel." Published by Harcourt, it's just hitting bookstores. Last September, his third story collection, "Why Dogs Chase Cars," about a boy growing up in the tiny backwater town of Forty-Five, South Carolina, was published to much acclaim. (The New York Times said, "Singleton's hilarious insights come early and often.") His previous books include "These People are Us" published in March 2001, followed in September 2002 by "The Half-Mammals of Dixie."

"Novel " is set in the fictional town of Gruel, S.C., where a professional snake handler named Novel (his brother's name is James; his sister's is Joyce) stumbles across a decades-old town secret. Described as "full of Southern mischief and wit," the publisher calls it "a crazed and crazy fictional whirlwind

of drinking, motel-living, art-forgery-committing, pool-playing redneck charm." Like his previous story collections, Singleton's novel is written with affection for southern people who are trying hard to make sense of modern absurdities.

In fact, in his novels and stories alike, Singleton manages to be funny, irreverent and empathetic all at the same time: A bouncer videotapes an episode of Bonanza over his wife's sonogram. A boy's reputation is ruined when he appears in a head-lice documentary. Clearly, George Singleton is an author who uses humor for cathartic effect. "Singleton's relentlessly offbeat stories are a miasma of flea markets, palm readers, bowling alleys, and alligators," exclaims Entertainment Weekly. Or, as a bookseller at Olsson's Books and Records, Washington D.C. has noted, "This is not your mother's Southern fiction."

The Atlanta Journal Constitution has already selected "Novel" as a summer read. Upcoming articles and reviews are scheduled in magazines such as Southern Living, Poets & Writers, and in newspapers from Portland, Oregon, to Seattle, to New Orleans.

Previously published by Algonquin, Singleton was wooed away to Harcourt, a bigger publishing house, with promises of bigger print runs, more money and a sizeable publicity push. His book tour, which kicks off next week, includes stops in North Carolina, Mississippi, Tennessee, Arkansas, Louisiana, Washington, California and Oregon.

"My publicist said if the book does well through the fall, they'd send me out on another tour," he said. "I said, 'Hey I've got a good idea. If this book is doing well in the fall, how about I get to stay home?'" Yet, Singleton admits the book tour is important, and he's up for it. He actually enjoys doing public readings. "But I try not to be too distracted a lot by the business of publishing," he said.

Singleton is disciplined and writes every day. "In the old days I'd write 1000 words a day. Now 600 words a day is my new goal." Singleton estimates he's written "hundreds of stories," and until a few years ago, about one in four were published. In the last four years, just about all of the stories he writes are accepted for publication. Rejection, however, is par for the course: "When a rejection comes in, I put that story back in the mail to another magazine that same day," he said. At last count, he has 110 published stories. His next story

collection, forthcoming from Harcourt, is called "Drowning in Gruel." He's already writing his next novel.

Singleton credits his writing success, in part, to being "stupid and stubborn. It's as if you're asking a woman on a date for ten years and she keeps rejecting you, and you keep asking." Never easy or rational, "writing," he explained, "is about keeping going and being hard-headed."

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.