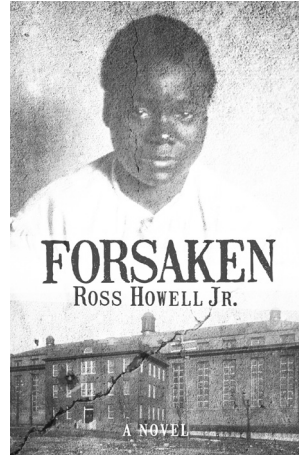


BOOK REVIEWS

Forsaken

by Ross Howell Jr.
NewSouth Books, 2016
304 pages
\$27.95

Reviewed by Norma Calway-Fagen



Ross Howell Jr.'s debut novel, *Forsaken*, is based on the real-life story of Virginia Christian, an African-American teenager executed at age seventeen for the murder of her white employer. Virginia's constitution prohibited the execution of minors, but the State, despite evidence to the contrary, insisted Virginia was an adult. Murder of a white person by an African American in Jim Crow Virginia posed a major threat to the social order, and therefore, a statement needed to be made. Whites called for a lynching, and a few black leaders called for a speedy trial, knowing that their community's actual lives and livelihoods depended upon the goodwill of whites and the domestic work within white households. Within a week, Christian was arrested, arraigned, and convicted by an all-white jury.

I am in a writer's group with two African-American women. We often have discussions about whether a white person can write an African-American character or experience. One person is adamant that it can't be done well and two of us entertain the possibility with certain caveats concerning imagination, experience, and writing ability. Howell avoids this issue to some extent by telling the story from the point of view of a white newspaper reporter. Charles Mears did cover the case, interview Christian, "Virgie" informally, after her conviction, and write two letters to the governor to try to save her life. In real life, Christian requested an interview to tell her side of the story. In *Forsaken*, however, Howell depicts Mears as the initiator and as a character who goes to great lengths to comfort and assist Christian.

Unfortunately, this is a familiar theme, the noble white person who rushes in to save a person of color.

More central to my writer's group discussion is Howell's inability to bring Christian to life or to portray the African-American experience of the time. *Forsaken*, and its story of racism in the justice system, is certainly relevant today. The news is peppered with police shootings of unarmed black men; the incarceration rate of young black men far exceed that of young white males; lengthier and harsher sentences are often handed to African Americans. The question is whether Howell's writing is strong enough to transcend his white heritage. "What's going on, people being shot, or killed or profiled, we grew up with that," actor Mahershala Ali has said. "When you have a black voice at the helm maybe you see other things layered in there." Unfortunately, *Forsaken* lacks the layers and nuances that would bring the black experience of Jim Crow fully alive.

In some ways, this is a novel with two main stories. The second story concerns the reporter's developing romance with thirteen-year-old Harriet, the daughter of the murdered woman. There are no surprises here, except the reader learns that Harriet's uncle sexually abused her. Harriett tells Mears of the abuse just a few days after she meets him. This aspect of the story and Harriet's emotional response to the abuse does not ring true. It is unclear why Howell chose to introduce incest into the story unless he was trying to make a statement regarding the differences between what wealthy white people get away by contrast to African Americans.

What Howell does do well is to weave into his narrative actual court records, newspaper stories, and personal accounts that give weight to his telling of events. His research places this novel firmly within the historical fiction genre. In addition, he does a good job of creating a sense of time and place. We get a feel for Hampton Roads, Virginia, as Mears sits on the iron steps of his rented room and watches "miller moths" swarm "the gaslight," or when he spots down the street "a sleek chestnut mare hooked to a buggy" as she "nibbled a patch of new grass at the edge of a yard." We can taste the Southern foods of the time when Mears enjoys a "hoecake" cooked on the hearth and seasoned

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with hot peppers, or a biscuit with ham that has brown sugar and peppercorns sprinkled on it before it is fried.

At a time when African Americans are often recipients of a different brand of justice, a novel like this one is important. It becomes even more relevant when we watch some of our national politicians feed the hate machine. *Forsaken* is a novel that holds our attention as well as one that tells an important story.

Skull Fragments: Noir Stories

by Tim L. Williams

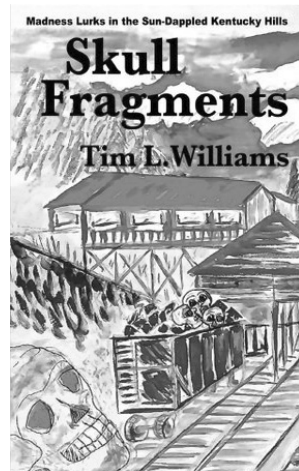
New Pulp Press, November 2014

372 pages

\$14.95 (paper), \$4.99 (Kindle)

Reviewed by Jacque E. Day

When American authors explore the darker facets of human nature in their own neighborhoods, the wondrous result is that their identities can become fused with a geographic region. H.P. Lovecraft's fictitious Arkham, Massachusetts is so fully realized that the writers who have carried on the Cthulhu mythos do well to keep it sufficiently reanimated. New England is so infused into the DNA of Shirley Jackson's "The Lottery" that it could have taken place on the common of the Vermont village where I live. Paul Tremblay, a relative newcomer, has brought a twenty-first-century reality-TV-era brand of horror to Boston's North Shore. And Stephen King has written his way all over Maine during his prolific career, with the occasional foray into places like Colorado and southwestern Pennsylvania, which may seem random until you look at the history. In the early 1980s King made *Creepshow* with George Romero in the outskirts of Pittsburgh, which happens to be where I grew up. More than a decade before *Creepshow*, Romero clearly saw the possibilities



for horror in that particular pocket of industrial-crumbling PA when he made *Night of the Living Dead* in my backyard. When King returns to western Pennsylvania, I like to suspect he is doing so in homage to Romero. Or maybe the region just scared the living hell out of him the way it did me.

With *Skull Fragments*, Tim L. Williams is on his way to carving out his own identity-of-region in the darker reaches of fiction: western Kentucky. A fitting choice, considering that to many who live east of I-65, Kentucky ends at Bowling Green and anything beyond is a no-man's land. Western Kentucky is *his* backyard. It is also rife with possibilities for exploration of the dark underbelly of human nature. To that potential, he leaves no stone unturned, no matter what might crawl out from underneath.

When you open this book, prepare to be surprised. You will feel empathy for and even familiarity with these people you meet, many who do horrific things. Take the opening paragraph of "Where That Morning Sun Goes Down:"

Four days after we murder Tiny Gardner, Donny Ray decides he wants pancakes. It's closing in on three in the morning, still as black as a slag heap, so we head for the Huddle House out by the Western Kentucky Parkway and Donny Ray pulls a thin, twisty joint from behind his ear before I can get out of the car.

Williams accomplishes a lot in this short opener. We meet the two primary characters: Donny Ray and the narrator, Frankie, in a setting familiar to most everyone in Kentucky, a Huddle House. We get an immediate sense of where they are geographically and most important, who they are. But the opener is a grabber independent of regional familiarity, which is merely a bonus. A skilled practitioner of popular fiction—you don't win the International Thriller Writers Award twice if you can't keep those pages turning—Williams is in control, not only of his sentences but also plot devices that transform readers into true believers. He does the hard work of instantly humanizing the people he writes about, a strength throughout the book. By the time we meet

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many of the people in *Skull Fragments*, it is clear that their life-defining choices are behind them. Yet Williams still manages to give them choices—often between bad and worse, and the choices bear heavy consequences. But it’s a gift for the character, a chance to exercise some free will and preserve a shred of dignity. A chance to remain human. In the final pages of “Where That Morning Sun Goes Down,” Donny Ray has cooked up another murderous rampage and has dragged Frankie into it. But when Donny Ray stops to take a leak, he presents Frankie with a choice:

I close my eyes and take a deep breath, trying to hold onto this moment as long as I can. But what comes next always happens no matter what you do, so I let out my breath in a rush and open my eyes and aim the gun at the back of his head.

Don’t worry. I won’t spoil the ending.

Skull Fragments isn’t for the faint of heart. There is murder—a lot of it. There is necrophilia, exploitation of children, prostitution. The final story, titled “Tick,” is a particularly chilling examination into the genesis of a killer. It begins:

Yeah, I know what people say, what they need to believe. But get this straight. I didn’t get in the wrong line when God was bestowing souls on all the soon-to-be-borns. I wasn’t engineered in a mad scientist’s lab or promised to the Dark Lord Satan at conception. I came into the world just like every other glorified ape on the planet—shat out in blood and urine between my mother’s thighs.

Keep that in mind.

When you pick up this book, keep this in mind: be ready to meet a cast of characters who look like the people you see every day, who might look like you. Be ready to relate to them, even as they do unspeakable things. If you’ve never been to western Kentucky, get ready to know it intimately. If you do know the region, be ready to see it in a new darkness. Be ready for a self-examination in the process as Tim L. Williams walks you right up to that thin line, the line that a good person crosses to turn bad.

The Benedictines

by Rachel May

Braddock Avenue Books, 2016

115 pages

\$16.00 (paper)

Reviewed by Jacob Donaldson

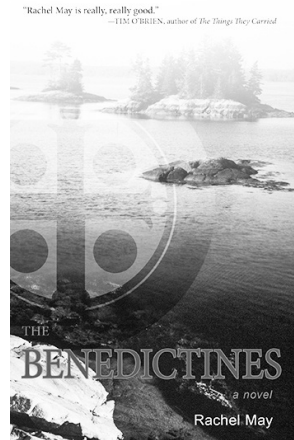
In *The Benedictines*, Rachel May has created a vivid world in Piper's Harbor, Maine. The novel's protagonist, a "visiting artist" named Ms. James, has moved to Piper's Harbor to find love and instead finds herself in constant struggle with the

Benedictine monks who run the monastery and oversee the academic instructions at the school. The monks have "rules to follow:" Faith in God, Perseverance, Respect for Authority, Personal Accountability. Their robes flow as they walk through the small town. Each monk is described uniquely. Brother Timothy, for example, who acts as the monks' fire marshal and can be seen riding his bike in his robes, is round with thin legs.

"The Rules of Saint Benedict," to which May refers early on, seem to indicate that the monks are anchorites (hermits). They "have passed beyond the first fervor of monastic life... they are now trained to fight against the devil." Ms. James wants to agree with the students who question school rules, but she knows she cannot. She knows she is supposed to say that the rules have their purpose. Hence the novel's conflict.

The Benedictines is a story of love. It's a story of a woman finding herself, entangled with a cast of characters, from a gay colleague to a trouble-making female student. Much like recent comedic movies such as *The Bridesmaids*, the novella is funny and at some points extremely sexual to the extent of "locker-room talk."

Ms. James' personality is the driving force of the comedy. She is sexual like any person, and at one point she even goes through her contact list for a booty call. Ms. James feels relatable, especially in a situation where she is expected to take the Catholic line when students



disagree with how Catholicism “makes you feel so guilty about it (sex).” Needless to say, May succeeds in overturning the stereotype of female teachers as quiet and innocent. She showcases a modern woman who celebrates the vast complexities of simply being.

Much like her character Ms. James, May bends the rules when it suits her story. She explodes dialogue out of the usual shackles of quotations and sets it free on the page. By not using quotations, May creates a world in which the reader is part of the conversation instead of an observer. She takes this approach to reveal to the reader the importance of her characters’ inner thoughts as well as their speech. Chapters break out of the typical storytelling style into school memos, letters from the headmaster, and the rules of Saint Benedict.

Like Wadsworth, the famous poet in the novel, May waxes poetic about Maine. She evokes the crisp air that scrapes against your skin in the winter and warms it in the summer. Some might say that the setting becomes a character. I’d say May uses the setting not as an additional character, but as an imagistic backdrop. For example, Piper’s Harbor is overrun by skunks at night. Some passages of *The Benedictines* even read like prose poetry: “At the bay, the water freezes as it leaps onto the rocks.” These scenes are delicately laid out for readers and lead them through the story like movie tag lines.

On a number of levels, readers might be tempted to compare *The Benedictines* to Elizabeth Gilbert’s *Eat, Pray, Love*. However, May does a much better job than Gilbert of breaking down the gender barrier that a male reader might experience. May’s protagonist is funny and feels more “real” in her humanity, and that is what makes for a good connection. Her comedy allows for a male readers to laugh; they know that what they are reading is not simply a “chick flick.” I can testify to this: an average man will find himself reading *The Benedictines* late at night with a small flashlight, wife sleeping in bed next to him.

Tilted: The Post-Brain Surgery Journals

by Louise Krug

99: The Press, 2016

99 Pages

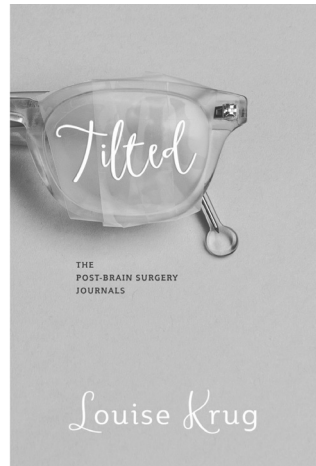
\$16.00 (paper)

Reviewed by Taylor Emery

Everyone understands “tilted” means slanted, sloped, off the normal, vertical axis. *Tilted* describes Louise Krug’s life after two surgeries for cavernous angioma, a rare disease which causes bleeding in the brain. Reminiscent of Lucy Grealy’s *Autobiography of a Face* and Ann Patchett’s *Truth and Beauty*, Krug’s second memoir, *Tilted: The Post-Brain Surgery Journals* offers insight into a world where one individual’s expected life is skewed.

The book’s cover, which features an ordinary pair of contemporary glasses with clear frames, proves enigmatic until readers finish the essays and understand how the image exemplifies Louise’s manipulation of her unique situation. Under the word “titled,” scotch tape partially covers the left lens. The clearness of the tape makes it almost invisible. Once the tape is noticed, however, it can’t be unseen, and questions then arise as to why someone would put scotch tape over the lens, making sight more difficult. For vision-impaired individuals, tape on the lens would inhibit sight, but these are Krug’s glasses. The tape helps eliminate her double vision.

Krug discards the memoirist’s usual first-person narrator. “I tell my stories in the third person because it comes easier for me,” she says. At first, the third-person narration appears to be limited omniscient. With subsequent readings, it becomes apparent that it is actually just third-person limited. Krug simply wants the audience to understand the divots of her own new life’s journey, along with the currents of consequences that she, a determined woman, must navigate, living this completely unexpected life she’s been given. “Instead of soaking



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up Southern California sun, dating a Frenchman, and pursuing a career in tabloid journalism, I moved back to Kansas, went to graduate school, married a Missouri guy, and had two children,” Krug writes in her introduction. This short explanation allows Krug’s dry wit to surface. As she informs us, “No one was as obsessed with Louise as Louise.” Ironically, through the telling of her story, she allows people to enter her damaged brain and thought processes and to understand that in some aspects, she’s still the same person she was before the surgeries. Even though her smile tilts when she is able to form one, and she physically tilts, her writing provides arrow-straight explanations of adjustments made during the five-year period after her surgeries, whether they involve driving, getting pregnant, seeing a therapist, teaching, exercising, or other everyday activities.

One of Krug’s biggest adjustments is in how she perceives people seeing her. When she marries Nick, she maintains she doesn’t want wedding photographs, but confesses “she found herself both wanting and not wanting the same thing... And she wondered what was worse: to have no pictures of her dreamed-of day or to have images of that dream with her self-conscious pose, her slightly paralyzed face, her posture less elegantly poised and more rigidly balanced.” Not until a few years later when she observes Olive, her newly-born daughter, does Louise realize her abnormalities aren’t always the focus of people’s attention:

Olive saw Louise’s naked face, the large pores on her cheeks, the blackheads on her small upturned nose, and her chapped, red lips. [She] saw the way the moving side of Louise’s mouth pulled over the paralyzed side when Louise spoke... [Olive] saw Louise’s smudged glasses with the dark-green frames. It made Louise uncomfortable, that stare, but she was also impressed by its intensity. This baby was going to watch all she pleased. Louise did not like being looked at, but she was beginning to see she would have to get used to it.

“What She Saw” is the shortest essay of the collection, but it speaks volumes about Krug’s slow evolution. The change is so quiet and subtle that readers could almost miss how normal her life has become despite its tilting.

One of the most apparent acceptances of her life occurs when she and Nick start exercising. Riding her bike, “Louise moved forward, pedaling toward something new. In this way, she was changing.” Nick runs, and Krug comments:

“It sucks that you can run and I can’t...”

“Yes, it totally does,” Nick said, and that was the simplest, truest thing they had ever said to each other...Sometimes the acknowledging of the situation made all the difference.

Krug’s book acknowledges her disease, surgeries, and life in the most uncomplicated and compelling way—she’s alive to tell it.

Far Enough: A Western in Fragments

by Joe Wilkins

Black Lawrence Press, 2015

44 Pages

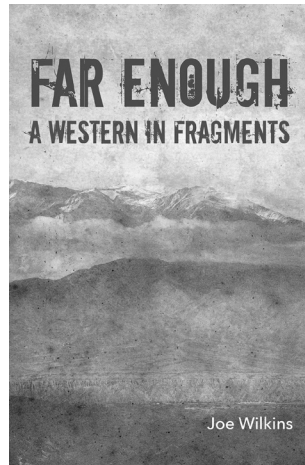
\$8.95 (paper)

Reviewed by Lucas French

Far Enough: A Western in Fragments, a new book of fiction by Joe Wilkins, compels in its simplicity. True to its title, it features thirty-nine, one-page vignettes of cattle ranch life. Based in Montana, Wilkins’ characters work hard for subsistence, love, and another drink at the Ryegate Bar. A gut-punching quality unifies the vignettes.

Reading Wilkins is as fun as it was to read Louis L’Amour as a kid, and takes a lot less effort than reading Cormac McCarthy as an adult. Here’s the end of the first vignette titled “Winter-born:”

...Willie told his friends he felt rope grind down hard on bone. He said his horse reared back, the calf’s tongue lolled out—and my goddamn thumb popped clean off.



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Far Enough: A Western in Fragments fits the criteria of the Western genre in as many ways as an old John Wayne fan might say that it doesn't. The featured landscape is there, the Iron Cage aspect of a rancher unwilling to leave his surroundings is there, but Wilkins' story evades the possibility of being thumbed down as a Western in the cliché shoot-'em-up sense the genre might bring to mind. There aren't any fantastical elements of six-shooter standoffs, or cowboys trying to escape town with more riches than they can carry. There are, however, characters struggling in a more contemporary time to either hold on to what they know to be true and good, or escape by embracing what they know is bad.

The risk taken in only allowing each chapter/vignette to be one page is one Wilkins conquers with professional precision. His scenes are crisp. Every single character wants something, even if that something is simply a Pepsi and television shows to help him forget his physical limitations. Willie wants anything other than what he has, Wade wants what he's always known, Jackie wants an escape, and everyone, even the cows, want rain. Wilkins cuts through the fluff to get to the meat of all of this, leaving behind nothing worth chewing on in the process. The time from one vignette to the next may encompass years, but it is the scene you are presented with that says enough to speak for that length of time. As dry as the climate and terrain may be, the dust never has time to settle. Each encounter the characters have has specific purpose. Panties in the moonlight in one breath, a beer on the house the next, Wilkins' vignettes keep you reaching for more in a way that the lull segments in a conventional novel does not.

An interesting thing about this book is its hint of ecocriticism. Although the symbolic element of climate change isn't overbearing in any way, it is present. A drought poses a problem for anyone, but for a Montana cattle farmer it is a problem intensified. What Wilkins does is give the story a dose of climate change reality without pounding his reader over the head with a political agenda. The reader can come away with a degree of empathy for the characters Wilkins writes about without feeling like it took a sappy infomercial to do so. The characters

are depicted so well that Wilkins almost needs a disclaimer stating they aren't portrayals of actual people, which makes the lack of rain threatening to run a lifelong rancher off of his land that much more harrowing because it is relatable.

Like Willie's thumb, *Far Enough: A Western in Fragments* pops. When you finish the book altogether, you'll want to flip to the front and start reading again. The time it takes to read it is minimal, but the dividends paid in doing so are exponential. The book truly represents an enjoyable change of pace from the usual novel or short story. What Wilkins writes is a modern, realistic Western you wish you would've known about well before you found a copy of it in your hand.