

The Night Train

by Clyde Edgerton

About the Book

In 1963, at the age of 17, Dwayne Hallston discovers James Brown and wants to perform just like him. His band, the Amazing Rumlbers, studies and rehearses Brown's *Live at the Apollo* album in the storage room of his father's shop in their small North Carolina town. Meanwhile, Dwayne's forbidden black friend Larry--aspiring to play piano like Thelonius Monk--apprentices to a jazz musician called the Bleeder. His mother hopes music will allow him to escape the South.

A dancing chicken and a mutual passion for music help Dwayne and Larry as they try to achieve their dreams and maintain their friendship, even while their world says both are impossible. In *THE NIGHT TRAIN*, Edgerton's trademark humor reminds us of our divided national history and the way music has helped bring us together.

Praise for the Book

"Like all of Clyde Edgerton's work. *The Night Train* has plenty of laugh-out-loud moments, but what I love most about this novel is its hard-earned hopefulness that if music can change, perhaps hearts can as well."

—**Ron Rash, author of *Serena***

"The Night Train is classic Edgerton, with crackling wit and lines that make you laugh out loud—but also classic is the great, generous heart at its center that leaves the reader filled with hope and compassion."

—**Jim McCorkle, author of *Serena***

"I read Clyde Edgerton's new book with much delight and envy. He is at his subtle and clever best in *The Night Train*. Every page rings with the music of these characters' voices, stories, and songs. The novel tackles 1963 with complete abandon. As always, Edgerton's message is not there until you discover you agree with it. A beautiful novel."

—**Percival Everett, author of *I Am Not Sidney Poitier***

Courtesy of Little, Brown and Company

About the Author

Title: Clyde Edgerton

Known As: Basket, Raney; Edgerton, Clyde Carlyle; Edgerton, Clyde
American Novelist (1944 -)

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PERSONAL INFORMATION:

Born May 20, 1944, in Durham, NC; son of Ernest Carlyle (in insurance sales) and Susan Truma (a homemaker) Edgerton; married, June 21, 1975 (marriage ended); married Kristina Jones, December 22, 2001; children: Catherine, Nathan. Education: University of North Carolina--Chapel Hill, B.A., 1966, M.A.T., 1972, Ph.D., 1977. Military/Wartime Service: U.S. Air Force, 1966-71, pilot for reconnaissance and forward air control missions in Southeast Asia; received Distinguished Flying Cross. Addresses: Office: Creative Writing Program, University of North Carolina--Wilmington, 601 College Rd., Wilmington, NC 28403. Agent: Liz Darhansoff, 1220 Park Ave., New York, NY 10128. E-mail: cedgerton@earthlink.net.

CAREER:

Southern High School, Durham, NC, English teacher, 1972-73; English Teaching Institute, Chapel Hill, NC, codirector, 1976; Campbell University, Buies Creek, NC, assistant professor, 1977-82, associate professor of education and psychology, 1982-85; St. Andrews Presbyterian College, Laurinburg, NC, associate professor of English and education, 1985-89; full-time writer, 1989-98; University of North Carolina--Wilmington, distinguished visiting professor, 1998-2002, professor of creative writing, 2002--. North Carolina Central University, visiting lecturer, 1977; Agnes Scott College, visiting writer in residence, 1991; Duke University, visiting professor, 1992; Millsaps College, Eudora Welty Visiting Professor and Eudora Welty cochair of southern studies, 1996; lecturer at conferences and workshops. Guest on television and radio programs, including *Today*, *Sunday Weekend Edition*, National Public Radio, *Morning Edition*, and *Good Evening with Noah Adams*. Member of the Rank Strangers Band.

AWARDS:

Publishers Weekly named *The Floatplane Notebooks* one of the best books of 1988; Guggenheim fellow, 1989; Lyndhurst fellow, 1991; honorary doctorate, University of North Carolina--Asheville, 1993; D.H.L., St. Andrews Presbyterian College, 1994; Ragan-Rubin Award, 1995; award from Fellowship of Southern Writers, 1997; five "notable book" citations from *New York Times*; North Carolina Award for Literature, 1997.

WORKS:

WRITINGS:

NOVELS

- *Raney*, Algonquin Books (Chapel Hill, NC), 1985.
- *Walking across Egypt*, Algonquin Books (Chapel Hill, NC), 1987, reprinted, Ballantine Books (New York, NY), 2004.
- *The Floatplane Notebooks*, Algonquin Books (Chapel Hill, NC), 1988, reprinted, Ballantine Books (New York, NY), 2004.
- *Killer Diller*, Algonquin Books (Chapel Hill, NC), 1991.
- *In Memory of Junior*, Algonquin Books (Chapel Hill, NC), 1992.
- *Redeye: A Western*, Algonquin Books (Chapel Hill, NC), 1995.
- *Where Trouble Sleeps*, Algonquin Books (Chapel Hill, NC), 1997.
- *Lunch at the Piccadilly*, Algonquin Books (Chapel Hill, NC), 2003.
- *The Bible Salesman*, Little, Brown (New York, NY), 2008.

OTHER

- *Understanding the Floatplane* (chapbook), Mud Puppy Press (Chapel Hill, NC), 1987.
- *Cold Black Peas* (chapbook), Mud Puppy Press (Chapel Hill, NC), 1990.
- (Contributor of essay) *North Carolina* (nonfiction), photography by George Humphries, Graphic Arts Center Publishing Company (Portland, OR), 2003.
- *Solo: My Adventures in the Air*, Algonquin Books (Chapel Hill, NC), 2005.

Contributor to *Family Portraits: Remembrances by Twenty Distinguished Writers*, edited by Carolyn Anthony, Doubleday (New York, NY), 1989; work represented in other anthologies, including *Weymouth: An Anthology of Poetry*, edited by Sam Ragan, St. Andrews Press (Laurinburg, NC), 1987; *New Stories from the South: The Year's Best, 1990*, edited by Shannon Ravenel, Algonquin Books (Chapel Hill, NC), 1990; *Best American Short Stories*, 1997; and *New Stories from the South: The Year's Best, 2000*. Contributor of short stories, essays, and reviews to periodicals, including *Chattahoochee Review*, *Descant*, *Daily Tar Heel*, *Atlanta Journal and Constitution*, *Just Pulp*, *Leader*, *Lyricist*, *Mid- Atlantic Country*, *Old Hickory Review*, and *New York Times*; some periodical articles appeared under the pseudonym Raney Basket. Work available on sound recordings, including *Walking across Egypt: Songs and Readings from the Books "Raney" and "Walking across Egypt,"* music performed by Edgerton and other members of the Tarwater Band, Flying Fish Records, 1987; *Clyde Edgerton Reads "The Floatplane Notebooks,"* Random House Audiobooks, 1989; and *The "Killer Diller" Tapes.*

MEDIA ADAPTATIONS:

Walking across Egypt was adapted by John Justice for a play of the same title, first produced in 1989; it was also adapted for the screen as *Leading with Her Heart*, 1999. *Raney* was adapted by

John Justice for a play of the same title, first produced in Fayetteville, NC, in 1990; it was also adapted as a screenplay, 1997. *Killer Diller* was adapted for the screen as *Rockin' the House*, 2003. *Lunch at the Piccadilly* and *Killer Diller* were also adapted for the stage.

Sidelights

Writer Clyde Edgerton's books, set in the small towns of North Carolina, have been hailed for vivid characters that are drawn with insight, compassion, and humor. A product of North Carolina himself, Edgerton draws inspiration from such respected southern writers as Eudora Welty and Flannery O'Connor. Edgerton didn't grow up expecting to be a writer. Only years later did he realize that his childhood, immersed in the storytelling traditions of the rural South, had been a fine preparation for the job.

As a student at the University of North Carolina in the 1960s, Edgerton wrote only a few unfinished short stories and a smattering of poems, including a verse condemning those who opposed America's entry into the Vietnam war. He was more interested in flying, and after graduation he joined the U.S. Air Force and piloted reconnaissance and forward air control flights over Vietnam as the conflict there continued. Though Edgerton's missions generally kept him high above the combat raging on the ground, his wartime experiences were enough to leave him a changed man, haunted by concerns that he would need years to express. In 1975, Edgerton married Susan Ketchin, with whom he shared an interest in teaching and bluegrass music. He became a professor of education at Campbell University, a Baptist-affiliated school in the small town of Buies Creek, North Carolina. The couple expected a quiet, conventional life.

But writing gradually unsettled their plans. It began innocuously at Christmas, 1977, when Edgerton became curious about a soft spot in his kitchen floor, entered the crawlspace under his house, and found an old well. He became inspired to write a short story about a boy named Meredith who breaks through a kitchen floor and drops into the well beneath. As he polished the story a few months later, Edgerton experienced a literary conversion of sorts while watching Eudora Welty read one of her short stories on public television. The story, "Why I Live at the P.O.," shows an absurd quarrel in a small-town southern family that ends when one of the grown children stomps off to live in the back room of the post office. By the day after the broadcast--May 15, 1978--Edgerton had decided that writing was his true vocation.

He began by writing more short stories. Between 1979 and 1983, he sent out his stories and got back 202 rejections. Eventually six of his stories were accepted, half of them by friends. The stories had an unexpected dividend, though; two of them featured a character that Edgerton liked well enough to use as the basis of a novel. She was Raney Bell Shepherd: a small-town Free Will Baptist, narrow-minded, unapologetic, fiercely loyal to her family, but somehow loveable because of her bouncy personality and common-sense approach to life. Raney, Edgerton realized, was a strong character--strong enough to be the narrator of her own book--because she was a voice from his childhood, where women were the principal storytellers. The book, naturally, was also called *Raney*.

Edgerton spent two years writing and rewriting *Raney* and gathering rejections from New York publishers. Finally his wife suggested that he send the manuscript to Louis Rubin, a former professor of hers at the University of North Carolina. Rubin liked the novel so much that he offered to publish it as part of his new venture, Algonquin Books. He sent the manuscript on to Algonquin editor Shannon Ravenel, who also edited the renowned annual *Best American Short Stories*. The two spent several months reworking *Raney*, which sold more than 200,000 copies after it was published by Algonquin in 1985.

Raney depicts the title character's tumultuous first two years of married life. The marriage is a Southern cultural mismatch. Raney's husband, Charles Shepherd, is a slightly stuffy librarian from Atlanta who has settled in Raney's small town to enjoy tranquility and bluegrass music. Love of music, in fact, seems to be the only thing the couple has in common. Charles is irked by Raney's strong family ties, and Raney is shocked that Charles considers a black man to be his best friend. The couple proceeds to clash about everything from sex to religion to the importance of the world outside Bethel, North Carolina, and Raney finally leaves home. She soon returns, however--a bit more tolerant and mature--and even engages Charles in some after-hours lovemaking in the back of her father's general store.

Reviewers discovered Edgerton's first novel with delight. In the *Sewanee Review*, editor George Core observed: "*Raney's* effectiveness stems from its wonderfully sustained tone, the sound of Raney Bell's voice as she narrates [her] deliciously funny story." The book, Core told readers of the *Washington Post*, was something that humorist James Thurber "might have written had he lived in North Carolina rather than Connecticut." "What really distinguishes this novel," wrote Chuck Moss in the *Detroit News*, "is its warmth and amused tolerance. This could easily be a wicked satire, slashing at ignorant Crackers or the primly liberal bourgeoisie. Instead, Edgerton draws all his people with sympathy, acceptance and comic affection. His is a free country, even if what you're doing plainly doesn't make sense at all and never did."

Edgerton's toughest audience seems to have been his own bosses at Campbell University, where he was still an associate professor of education. *Raney* was published in January of 1985, shortly before it was time to renew the author's contract to teach. Instead of the contract, Edgerton received an invitation to a meeting with the administration. At first he thought his bosses might offer him tenure; instead, they wanted to discuss *Raney*. Edgerton told *CA* that the administration complained that the book "showed alcohol used as a 'catalyst.'" They challenged Edgerton to explain how *Raney* would further the mission of the university--and he refused to answer. After several tense weeks the author finally received a contract offer, but it was missing the customary raise. Contending that his academic freedom had been violated, Edgerton made a fruitless appeal to his bosses for an impartial hearing, then quit his job. He went to another church-related school in North Carolina, St. Andrews Presbyterian College, where he resumed his teaching career and received unqualified support for his writing.

Edgerton's next novel, *Walking across Egypt*, was inspired by some family storytelling. One day Edgerton's mother, while entertaining him and his aunts, admitted that she had sat down in a seatless rocking chair the day before and remained stuck for fifteen minutes. He thought this would make a great story, and the woman in the rocking chair became Mattie Rigsbee, a feisty,

warmhearted, devoutly Christian widow who may or may not resemble Edgerton's mother. (His mother did pose for the photograph on the cover of the hardback edition.) Mattie endures despite her age and her loneliness, waiting for someone she can love and cook for. Since she has no grandchildren, she finds one on her own: Wesley Benfield, a hapless juvenile delinquent in need of some good parenting. "*Walking across Egypt* is a book that teeters on the very edge of terminal cuteness," wrote Carolyn See in the *Los Angeles Times*, "but the longer you read it, the dearer it gets. Mattie is so brave (and resigned) in her loneliness that you have to like her." "I can't think of anything I've read quite like [this book]," said Donald McCaig in the *Washington Post*. "Not many writers have dealt, fondly, with the life of an ordinary Christian believer." He concluded: "Clyde Edgerton's book is brilliant, brief and kind."

So far Edgerton's books had shown a certain pattern: strong women as central characters. But Edgerton was already experimenting by the time he wrote his second novel. His third novel--*The Floatplane Notebooks*--was his first effort to confront his concerns about the Vietnam war. The novel is a glimpse into the saga of the Copeland family, descendants of slave owners who spend the 1950s and 1960s as ordinary members of the American middle class until one of their own is horribly maimed during the Vietnam War. Using a far broader canvas than in his earlier works, Edgerton tells his story through the eyes of many different characters. In an unusual move, the history of the Copelands is recited by an old wisteria vine that has grown next to the family graveyard since slave owning days. The twentieth century arrives with Albert Copeland, father of the family, who fills endless notebooks with observations about his experimental water-launched "floatplane." The youngest generation of Copelands includes Thatcher, a plain but reliable construction worker, and Bliss, his wife; Noralee, a hippie with black friends; Mark, a ladies' man who becomes a glamorous Air Force pilot in the Vietnam War; and Meredith, whose high-spirited youth comes to an end when he becomes a foot soldier in that same war and emerges so badly wounded that he cannot walk or speak.

Albert and his bizarre floatplane, observers suggest, represent the capacity of the Copeland clan to survive their many changes of fortune. Albert spends decades trying to perfect his ungainly craft, lying to himself about its shortcomings in order to find an excuse to go on. After years of trying to describe the impact of Vietnam by writing philosophical discussions or lengthy accounts of combat, Edgerton found his symbol of haphazard human endurance when he met an inventor during a fishing trip who had constructed a red floatplane.

With its panoramic sweep and tragic climax, *The Floatplane Notebooks* clearly marked a new direction for Edgerton as a writer. Reviewers differed sharply about the success of the effort. "*The Floatplane Notebooks* shows laudable ambitions but fulfills few of them very satisfactorily," wrote Maude McDaniel in *Chicago Tribune Books*. "Maybe the ambitions are part of the problem. Both [of Edgerton's] earlier books were modest in intent, but *Floatplane* takes on a whole family ... and presents their story in fifty-two increments. ... The characters are believable, but the episodic style focuses on them only in passing--as though one were looking out the window of a train." By contrast, Frank Levering, reviewing the book for the *Los Angeles Times*, hailed what he called a new "depth of feeling" and "hard edge" in Edgerton's work: "The last third of the book, in which Meredith and Mark go off to war, ... is among the wisest, most heartfelt writing to emerge from the South in our generation," Levering stated. "Meredith

Copeland's first-person account of his Vietnam experience, homecoming and physical paralysis in North Carolina is breathtakingly stark, full and real," added Levering. "Unlike the clumsy, earthbound craft of its title," wrote novelist Barbara Kingsolver in the *New York Times Book Review*, *The Floatplane Notebooks* "easily lifts itself and soars."

Edgerton returned to the small-town human comedy of his earlier works with his next novel, *Killer Diller*. The book came about after he moved with his family to Durham, North Carolina, and realized that his neighbors included a diet center and a halfway house for soon-to-be-released convicts. *Killer Diller* centers on Wesley Benfield of *Walking across Egypt*, who at the age of twenty-four is trying to leave his criminal past behind by living in the Back on Track Again center for reformed criminals. The center is one of several well-publicized ventures of the Baptist-affiliated Ballard University; another is Nutrition House, home of Wesley's new love-heavyweight dieter Phoebe Trent. Over the course of the novel, Wesley makes many comical efforts to reconcile his carnal desire for Phoebe with his desire to become a good Christian. "Edgerton's handling of [the couple's] erratic love affair," wrote Michael Upchurch in the *Washington Post*, "is ruefully funny."

The meaning of being a good Christian, reviewers suggested, is one of the serious issues explored by *Killer Diller*'s comic plot. Wesley may seem ludicrously self-serving as he uses spicy scenes from the Bible to justify his sexual passion, but far more sinister are Ted and Ned Sears, who as Ballard's chief administrators spend their time steadily enlarging the school's Christian financial empire. "Edgerton has no mercy for the Sears twins," wrote Upchurch, "whose reluctance to run a halfway house is overcome not by a sense of Christian duty but by the favorable media attention and federal grants the project will bring." Wesley, by comparison, seems a model of Christian charity: he visits every Sunday with Mattie Rigsbee, now the frustrated resident of a nursing home, and he uses one of Ballard's outreach programs to become the protector of a retarded teenage boy. At the end of the novel, observed a writer for *Kirkus Reviews*, Wesley may be "just outside the law" but he's "well on the path to true goodness." "There's an affecting story, authenticity of voice and moral complexity here," wrote *New York Times Book Review* contributor Lisa Koger, who felt the novel had "a broader, more accomplished feel than either *Walking across Egypt* or *Raney*." "*Killer Diller* is Edgerton's fourth novel," wrote Upchurch, "and it may be his best."

With *Redeye: A Western*, Edgerton turns to the American West of the 1890s for the setting of his story. The novel tells the story of a Colorado rancher who discovers Indian cliff dwellings on his property and who, despite his best efforts, succumbs to the inevitable barrage of tourists, archaeologists, and curiosity-seekers by writing and selling a souvenir booklet to the site. "Artfully using a kaleidoscopic sequence of first-person vignettes and shifting the narrative voice, ... Edgerton larks along from one outrageous incident to another," according to a reviewer for *Publishers Weekly*. Mae Miller, writing in *America*, found that "Edgerton's genius lies in his depiction of essential human truths."

Where Trouble Sleeps is set in the North Carolina of 1950 and tells the story of a stranger coming to a small town and the resulting havoc his visit causes. "Once more," wrote Wade Hall in the *Lexington Herald-Leader*, Edgerton "creates a wonderful gallery of comic characters."

Laurie Parker, on the *BookPage* Web site, praised Edgerton's characters, who are "all too human, ... and we love them for it." She concluded that *Where Trouble Sleeps* is "one of Edgerton's finest, funniest and warmest novels yet."

Like *Where Trouble Sleeps*, *The Bible Salesman* is also set in North Carolina in 1950. The novel opens with twenty-year-old bible salesman Henry Dampier hitching a ride from a smooth-talking car thief named Preston Clearwater. Preston eventually cons Henry into helping him steal cars by convincing him that he is actually an undercover FBI agent. Edgerton does not "cast them into typical good versus evil roles," as *News & Observer* reviewer Jeff Polish put it. Henry certainly has his flaws--one of which is that he acquires his stock of Bibles by posing as a preacher and ordering free Bibles from Yankee missionary societies, deftly removing the presentation page before he sells them.

Sprinkled between the chapters relaying the pair's crime spree are sections that flash back to Henry's life growing up in rural North Carolina. Henry was raised by his Aunt Dorie and Uncle Jack after his father was killed in an accident and his mother abandoned him and his sister. "As much as the crime story takes center stage here, it's in these extended flashbacks to Dampier's history that Edgerton shows some of his best writing: quick, nostalgic glimpses of a lost era, told mainly from a child's wide-eyed perspective--but infused with a master storyteller's understanding of the adult world as well," commented Art Taylor in his review of the book for *Metro*. On the other hand, a *Publishers Weekly* reviewer felt that these flashbacks interfered with the flow of the main story: "Too many flashbacks ... slow him down on the way to the novel's suspenseful climax and moving epilogue."

Overall, reviewers had high praise for the seasoned author's ninth novel. "The provenance of Edgerton's latest novel is worth exploring, if only to gain a glimpse of how this idiosyncratic humorist, longtime professor of creative writing at the University of North Carolina-Wilmington and lead singer of the Rank Strangers routinely produces magic from mayhem. With Walker Percy long gone and T.R. Pearson AWOL, few writers today mine the rich Southern idiom like Edgerton," contended *BookPage* Web site reviewer Jay MacDonald. "Edgerton is a master of not only describing small-town life, but also making the reader long for it as well. The rich, vivid descriptions of the small-town landscape, the homes within it, and the images of biscuits baking and sausage gravy cooking over a stovetop are what make Edgerton's writing so special," observed Polish. "Into this slim volume, Edgerton manages to pack murder, romance, suspense, and humor, a feat that demonstrates his talent as a writer and establishes broad audience appeal. Whatever one's literary taste, this novel is bound to spark thoughtful discussion and plenty of laughter," mused Mike Frechette in a review of the book for the Web site *Mostly Fiction*. *Star-News* reviewer Ben Steelman was also impressed with Edgerton's book, calling it "his funniest in years."

On top of authoring numerous novels, Edgerton also has delved into the world of nonfiction. In 2005, *Solo: My Adventures in the Air* was published. This memoir relates his love for flying and how he fulfilled it as a combat pilot in Vietnam. Edgerton was first introduced to planes when he was only four years old and his mother took him to the local airport to look at the planes, and before he was out of high school, Edgerton was determined to become a jet fighter pilot. In

college he became an ROTC cadet, and he went on to get his pilot's license his senior year. By the summer of 1966, he started pilot training for the Air Force, and he eventually ended up flying combat missions in Vietnam.

A *Publishers Weekly* contributor was not that impressed with the effort and felt that "Edgerton presents his flying life dryly and clinically, and includes a great deal of aeronautical detail," while Frieda Murray, reviewing the book for *Booklist*, noted: "Edgerton's vivid but laconic style should captivate Vietnam and aviation mavens and general readers alike."

In an interview for the Web site *Word Nerd*, Edgerton was asked how he felt about being labeled a southern writer; he replied, "I write out of my experience, observation, and imagination, and thus my surface subject matter is often by definition 'southern.' The label doesn't bother me one way or the other."

FURTHER READINGS:

FURTHER READINGS ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

BOOKS

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- Edgerton, Clyde, *Solo: My Adventures in the Air*, Algonquin Books (Chapel Hill, NC), 2005.

PERIODICALS

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- *Booklist*, September 1, 2005, Frieda Murray, review of *Solo*, p. 34; August 1, 2008, Thomas Gaughan, review of *The Bible Salesman*, p. 33.
- *BookPage*, September, 1997, Laurie Parker, review of *Where Trouble Sleeps*.
- *California Bookwatch*, January 1, 2007, review of *Solo*.
- *Christian Century*, October 21, 2008, Gail R. O'Day, review of *The Bible Salesman*, p. 26; December 16, 2008, review of *The Bible Salesman*, p. 26.
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- *Kirkus Reviews*, December 15, 1990, review of *Killer Diller*, p. 1693; June 1, 2005, review of *Solo*, p. 621; July 1, 2008, review of *The Bible Salesman*.
- *Lexington Herald-Leader*, September 21, 1997, Wade Hall, review of *Where Trouble Sleeps*.
- *Library Journal*, August 1, 2008, Robin Nesbitt, review of *The Bible Salesman*, p. 66.
- *Los Angeles Times*, March 30, 1987, Carolyn See, review of *Walking across Egypt*; November 6, 1988, Frank Levering, review of *The Floatplane Notebooks*, p. 3.
- *MBR Bookwatch*, January 1, 2006, review of *Solo*.
- *Metro*, August, 2008, Art Taylor, review of *The Bible Salesman*.
- *News & Observer* (Raleigh, NC), August 10, 2008, Jeff Polish, review of *The Bible Salesman*.

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ONLINE

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Author Interview

'Night Train' Pulls Through Segregated South

by NPR Staff

July 30, 2011

In Clyde Edgerton's new novel, *The Night Train*, the main characters are friends, but no one knows it.

The two boys, Larry Lime Nolan and Dwayne Hallston, work side by side at Dwayne's father's furniture store. They both love the music that's taken hold of the country in 1963, the time the novel is set. But in their hometown of Starke, N.C., Dwayne, who is white, and Larry, who is black, have to keep their friendship concealed like some family embarrassment.

As Edgerton tells NPR's Scott Simon, the novel, his 10th over a long career, is informed by his own experience growing up in North Carolina in the 1960s.

"About that time, I was 19 and I joined a band," Edgerton says, just like the character Dwayne in the novel. "Also, I had a friend named Larry Lime — not exactly a friend but he was an acquaintance. I would see him at the store near my home."

In one scene in the book, Dwayne and Larry are playing basketball. Dwayne's father tells him that the two boys playing together "just don't look right." Edgerton says "that's a scene very much out of my life. My father did ask me, when I was playing basketball in my backyard, if I would ask Larry Lime to leave. And you know, it's funny how memory works — I can't remember exactly what happened after then, but it was interesting as a storyteller to be able to take that scene and re-create it and make something new out of it."

The characters in Edgerton's book bond over a love for music. Dwayne reveres James Brown and plays in a teen band called the Amazing Rumlbers; Larry plays piano and aspires to be like Thelonious Monk. Larry hopes music will lead him out of the South. Music is important in the book because, Edgerton says, the late 1950s and early 1960s were "just an amazing time. ... Music was a large part of my life. And it is, again, a bit cliché, but it's a way people come together."

In the novel, Dwayne and Larry hatch a plan for Dwayne's Amazing Rumlbers to reproduce James Brown's *Live at the Apollo* album note-for-note, step for step, with some instruction from Larry. The last track on that album is called "The Night Train."

"I had no idea what to call this novel and I ended up with *The Night Train* because of the song," Edgerton says. But after writing the book, Edgerton says, he thought about how to "deepen the meaning of the title a little bit." That led him to write into the book a train that runs through the fictional town of Starke. In the book, Dwayne and Larry live on opposite sides of the train track and both hear the night train pass through.

Edgerton did a lot of reflecting when writing the book. He discovered things as a novelist that he didn't realize growing up in North Carolina in the 1960s. "The whole question of segregation and race," he says, "and of course, when you're 12 [or] 14 in a culture in which segregation is the norm, you're in many ways like the cliched 'fish in the water.'"

"In revisiting this scene," Edgerton adds, "I was able to think about the invisible effects of segregation on one relationship."

One point of view Edgerton constructs is that of the villain, a bigoted man named Flash Acres. Although he seems to be a typical villain in the 1960's American South, Edgerton says, Flash's character is actually more complex.

"There's a part of me which rebels against the classic mean Southern racist, who is nothing more than that," Edgerton says. "And so I had a chance with Flash to round him out a bit."

Flash shows his humanity by caring for his elderly, infirmed mother. That, too, reflects Edgerton's real-life experience.

"I know very little if any shame in looking for what to write about, and my mother's illness, which happened around 1999 and 2000 — and she died in 2001 — was something I'd never translated into fiction. She wasn't at all like Flash's mother, to me anyway, but certainly it was one of the most memorable times of my life. So I had an opportunity to bring some of my experiences into a fictional context."

In addition to being a writer, Edgerton is a professor at the University of North Carolina, Wilmington. He thinks about his students' understanding of the historic events of 1963: the

march on Washington, D.C., the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech, and the assassination of President John F. Kennedy.

"In writing about that time, I had to go back and read a lot and I did realize as you just mention what a pivotal time that was. Now in my community in Wilmington," Edgerton says, "I go to second-grade classes and I watch black and white children play together as if there's no such thing as race. And then, of course, I watch them in high school and I think about kids who are teenagers and who are black and who are white and their chances at friendship and how it might be different than 1963."

"In some cases, I think it's not," he continues. "But you hope that young people will read history and realize what happened and why it happened and think about it and see how that might influence and affect their lives with their neighbors."

Retrieved November 29, 2011 from <http://www.npr.org/2011/07/30/138796063/night-train-pulls-through-segregated-south>

Discussion Questions

Fiction Discussion Questions From ReadingGroupGuides.com

1. For the person who chose this book: What made you want to read it? What made you suggest it to the group for discussion? Did it live up to your expectations? Why or why not? Are you sorry/glad that you suggested it to the group (ask again after the discussion)?
2. Did you think the characters and their problems/decisions/relationships were believable or realistic? If not, was the author trying to make them realistic, and why did he or she fail? Did the male/female author draw realistic male and female characters? Which character could you relate to best and why? Talk about the secondary characters. Were they important to the story? Did any stand out for you?
3. How was the book structured? Did the author use any structural or narrative devices like flashbacks or multiple voices in telling the story? How did this affect the story and your appreciation of the book? Do you think the author did a good job with it? Whose voice was the story told in (from whose point of view is the story told)? How do you think it might have been different if another character was telling the story?
4. Talk about the author's use of language/writing style. Have each member read their favorite couple of passages out loud. (You might want to warn them ahead of time that they'll be doing this so they'll be prepared.) Was the language appropriate to the story? Was it more poetic or vernacular? Did it stand in the way of your appreciation of the story, or enhance your enjoyment of the book? If poetic, did the characters speak in vernacular language, or in the poetic language of the author? Was the dialogue realistic sounding? Was there a rhythm to the authors style, or anything else that might be considered unique about it?
5. Was the author fairly descriptive? Was he or she better at describing the concrete or the abstract? Was the author clear about what he or she was trying to say, or were you confused by some of what you read? How did this affect your reading of the book?
6. Talk about the plot. What was more important, the characters or the plot? Was the plot moved forward by decisions of the characters, or were the characters at the mercy of the plot? Was the action believable? What events in the story stand out for you as memorable? Was the story chronological? Was there foreshadowing and suspense or did the author give things away at the beginning of the book? Was this effective? How did it affect your enjoyment of the book?

7. What were some of the major themes of the book? Are they relevant in your life? Did the author effectively develop these themes? If so, how? If not, why not? Was there redemption in the book? For any of the characters? Is this important to you when reading a book? Did you think the story was funny, sad, touching, disturbing, moving? Why or why not?
8. Compare this book to others your group has read. Is it similar to any of them? Did you like it more or less than other books you've read? What do you think will be your lasting impression of the book? What will be your most vivid memories of it a year from now? Or will it just leave a vague impression, and what will that be? Or will you not think of it at all in a year's time?
9. Talk about the location. Was it important to the story? Was the author's description of the landscape/community a good one? Talk about the time period of the story (if appropriate). Was it important to the story? Did the author convey the era well? Did the author provide enough background information for you to understand the events in the story? Why or why not for all of the above? Was pertinent information lumped altogether, or integrated into the story? How did this affect your appreciation of the book?
10. Finally, what else struck you about the book as good or bad? What did you like or dislike about it that we haven't discussed already? Were you glad you read this book? Would you recommend it to a friend? Did this book make you want to read more work by this author?

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