

Williamsburg Christmas

by Libbey Hodges Oliver and Mary Miley Theobald with photography by Erik Kvalsvik (Abrams, \$24.95)

More than 100 color photographs enhance this beautiful, yet useful, holiday treat about the re-created colonial city and its holiday decorations.

Land of the fruited wreath and apple fan, Williamsburg has long delighted visitors with its seasonal adornments. This insightful book gives background on the natural decorations and offers descriptions of contemporary homes sporting the Williamsburg holiday look, including how-tos and sources.

"Ever since the first official Colonial Williamsburg Christmas in 1935, visitors have thronged to the colonial capital to admire the decorations—taking notes, making sketches, posing questions, snapping photographs—in order to bring a little home with them," the text reads. Now, holiday decorators can rely on this treasure for details.

**The Hand-Carved Crèche and Other Christmas Stories**

by James Kilgo
(Hill Street Press, \$15.95)

Tales from the author's days as a youngster in Darlington, South Carolina, and as an adult in other parts of the South, reflect a cleverly worded axiom he outlines at the book's beginning: "The [stories] I'm about to tell here come from my own experience and they are true; most of them are even factual."

We know just what he means. Memories, especially those of emotionally packed holidays, tend toward the vivid.



And, fortunately for us, James Kilgo's powers of recall, strengthened by family conversation years later, yield scenarios rich with meaning about promises kept.

Even if his memories aren't ours, they still resonate with the ones we keep in our hearts.

He recalls the time his father, away in the service, made it home for Christmas Day, with the help of loving friends and family. He learns the true cost of a Lionel train, years after the beloved gift was bestowed. A coming-of-age pivotal moment manifests during his recollection of

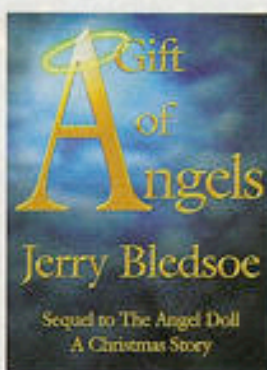
a church Christmas pageant. These memories are tied together when the author explains the significance of the crèche from the book's title.

A Gift of Angels

by Jerry Bledsoe with illustrations by Tim Rickard (Down Home Press, Asheboro, North Carolina, \$16.95)

Readers may recall the author's best-selling book *The Angel Doll*, which told of a childhood friend's pursuit of a special doll for his dying sister. This new book continues the tale years later, with the narrator now trying to find his friend, whose family moved away shortly after the girl's death.

Is the friend the donor of angel dolls anonymously given to hospitalized children? Did the missing chum ever read *The Angel Doll* written



in tribute to their childhood? Even if the buddy is found, can a friendship be rekindled? Surprises, some bitter, some sweet, await the reader.

Even those who have not read the first story will find this brief but poignant sequel a heart-warming lesson on friendship and the enduring power of love.

When Angels Sing: A Christmas Story

by Turk Pipkin (Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, \$14.95)

Like any Christmas story worth its angel wings, this tale will make you cry and laugh at the same time.

For Michael Walker, the season's hoopla represents painful memories of a tragic loss. Details from the terrible event escape him, but nagging guilt jabs him with each twinkle of the lights.

So it's a miracle of sorts when he chooses a Wonderland Avenue address for his family's new home just before Christmas. Soon his new neighbors invite him to join in their light extravaganza, but Michael's old feelings just grow stronger.

That is, until he faces another tragedy. Readers will feel as triumphant as Michael when he works through this new dilemma—as well as ghosts of Christmas past.

Texas author Turk Pipkin seems more than familiar with the miraculous. He penned this story for his daughter, then shared it with family and friends. By chance, someone in the publishing world read it and guided the story through to publication.

Sometimes, Santa does indeed exist. Nancy Dorman-Hickson
(For more reviews see southernliving.com.)





read of the month

EMPIRES IN THE FOREST: JAMESTOWN AND THE BEGINNING OF AMERICA

BY AVERY CHENOWETH AND ROBERT LLEWELLYN (UNIVERSITY OF VIRGINIA PRESS, \$49.95)

America's birth comes to life in this vivid and cinematic depiction of Jamestown. A gem for any history buff, the book illuminates the stories of Pocahontas, John Smith,

and the first permanent English settlement of Jamestown through poetic words and amber-lit images.

Avery Chenoweth gives readers an eloquent and entertaining text without skimping on fact or history. From the three English ships docking on the natives' land to Pocahontas's arrival in alien England with husband John Rolfe, Chenoweth captures this fragile chapter of our country's birth.

Enlisting descendants of the Powhatan to portray native people and shooting scenes at the historic Jamestown settlement, photographer Robert Llewellyn illustrates the book with a haunting authenticity that makes it hard to look away. The rich words and texture of the images make readers feel as if they, too, are part of the fabric of this history.

—JENNIFER DIENST

FLIES ON THE BUTTER

BY DENISE HILDRETH (WESTBOW PRESS, \$14.99)

Washington, D.C., lobbyist Rose Fletcher dreads the destination more than the long drive when she heads home to Mullins, South Carolina. She loves most of her family, but an angry rift between her and her mother still festers. In fact, that long-ago hurt dictates the woman Rose has become—powerful, in control, and emotionless. She strives for perfection in all things.



Alas, something's gone wrong with her "perfect" life. Her marriage is in jeopardy, and the bill she's lobbied hard for is in doubt. Worse, Rose is beginning to understand her moral lapses and imperfections.

She's forced to consider her choices, especially when encounter after encounter with strangers leads all of them to feel as if they need to pray for her. As she travels back to the past and toward her less-than-perfect future, the journey turns into nothing less than a spiritual odyssey of inner reckoning.

—NANCY DORMAN-HICKSON

DON'T MAKE ME STOP NOW

BY MICHAEL PARKER (ALGONQUIN BOOKS OF CHAPEL HILL, \$12.95)

Love isn't so sweet. In fact, love can go sour or downright bitter in this author's ironically funny short stories, where characters are at once despicable and endearing.

In "Hidden Meanings," Michael Parker uses the voice of a young female college student speaking to her English professor about love and loss through a paper. This story touches the hearts and funny bones of readers, particularly anyone who's ever been a teacher. The author changes gears in "Off Island" to relay the poignant tale of a man with nothing left to love but his island home.

In "Results for Novice Males," Parker ends the book with a character literally riding off alone into the sunset, realizing that every man must ultimately fend for himself. Many characters mess up, hit rock bottom, and then rise to face reality. It's in these raw moments that Parker captures the essence of true love.



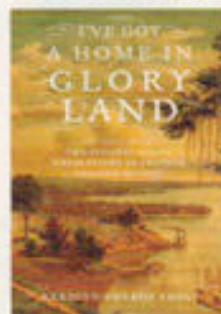
—KELLY MARGARET SMITH

I'VE GOT A HOME IN GLORY LAND

BY KAROLYN SMARDZ FROST (FARRAR, STRAUS, AND GIROUX, \$30)

Home is wherever you are free.

In this book, subtitled *A Lost Tale of The Underground Railroad*, the author re-creates the story of



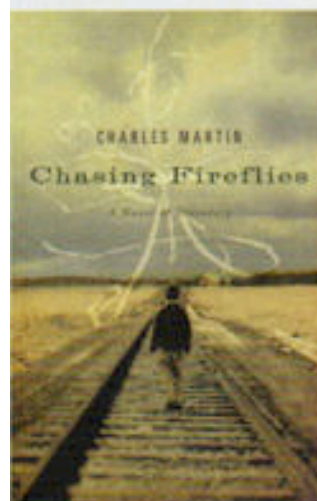
fugitive slaves Thornton and Lucie Blackburn as they leave behind their Kentucky chains and pass through parts of the Underground Railroad in search of Michigan's unbound soil.

A masterful cross between the factual and the imaginative, the tale presents both creative assumptions and historically recorded accounts about the Blackburns' daring escape and the twisting events that follow.

In their quest for freedom, the Blackburns face one ultimate plight: Instead of being captured, they must capture liberty for themselves.

—ALLISON BARNE

read of the month



CHASING FIREFLIES

BY CHARLES MARTIN (THOMAS NELSON, \$22.99)

The painful world of abandonment and its aftermath are at the center of this story. A badly abused young boy is found near a horrific car wreck that kills an unidentified woman. Unable to speak, the child interests a local reporter, Chase Walker, whose own unknown background continues to rule his life. The same foster couple that took in Chase now steps in for Sketch, the nickname given to the mute child who draws. With fond remembrance, Chase watches as his Uncle Willie McFarland builds the wounded child's confidence using quiet lessons of honesty and love.

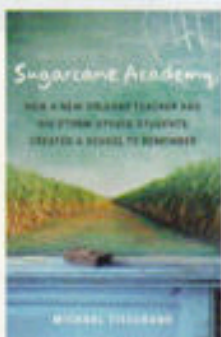
How can people think this gentle guardian had anything to do with the town's missing bearer bonds? Willie spent time in prison while his brother Jack grew more respected. Also, if Jack is so wonderful, why did Tommye, his daughter, flee home? She's back in town now, escalating Chase's need for answers—not only to the mysterious mute boy but his own murky background.

—NANCY DORMAN-HICKSON

SUGARCANE ACADEMY: How a New Orleans Teacher and His Storm-Struck Students Created a School To Remember

BY MICHAEL TISSERAND (HARCOURT, \$13)

Nearly two years after Hurricane Katrina, stories that saturate the heart are still emerging from the ghostly floodwaters.



Journalist Michael Tisserand tells how he and other displaced families sought solace.

As time passed without news of when schools would reopen, Tisserand and other parents recruited one of their children's former teachers to begin a new school. Sugarcane Academy was established among the sugarcane fields of New Iberia, Louisiana.

As chaos and uncertainty reigned in the wake of the storm, these families created a mini universe where their children rediscovered comfort and a sense of normalcy. This book delivers insightful anecdotes on the incredible misfortune Katrina wrought. But it also embodies the spirit of the people who rose from the floodwaters and dared to plant seeds of hope in a sugarcane field.

—ASHLEY MAYER

THE SOUTHERN COTTAGE: From the Blue Ridge Mountains To the Florida Keys

BY SUSAN SULLY (RIZZOLI, \$39.95)

Eleven beach cottages and seven mountain getaways fill the pages of this new book by Susan Sully. The author's own photography brings each cottage to vivid life as well. Decor leans toward the simple and sometimes primitively elegant in these sun-swept pages.

One beachside cottage contains a small table that holds a child's shoe, its sole studded with small seashells. Another stunning beach cottage (circa 1900) at Nags Head, North Carolina, wears its paint-free shingles proudly. Palm Cottage, on Georgia's Tybee Island, boasts purple steps, a char-*treuse* door, and a burst of flowers in the window boxes.



The mountain getaways show off their porches, such as the one on the 1939 log cabin in the Blue Ridge foothills of Virginia. Its brightly colored cushions and Goodwill furniture sing out a solid welcome.

—WANDA MCKINNEY

CHEMISTRY AND OTHER STORIES

BY RON RASH (PICADOR, \$13)

Empathy links us. Even if you haven't lived through an experience, you can often understand it in the way that it's talked about.



This North Carolina author explores modern-day Appalachia in a familiar manner. The book includes a string of tales with themes of love and murder that bear titles as poetic as "Blackberries in June" and as succinct as "Honesty."

If you call Appalachia home, Ron Rash's stories will resonate with you. Even if you don't, the author still makes you feel these stories deep within.

FOR MORE INFO

Read more book reviews online: southernliving.com/august2007

read of the month

A MIRACLE OF CATFISH

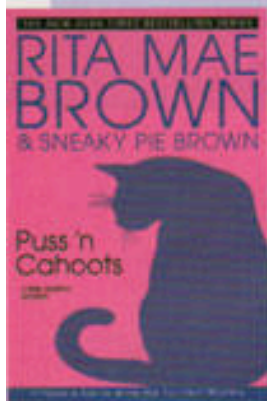
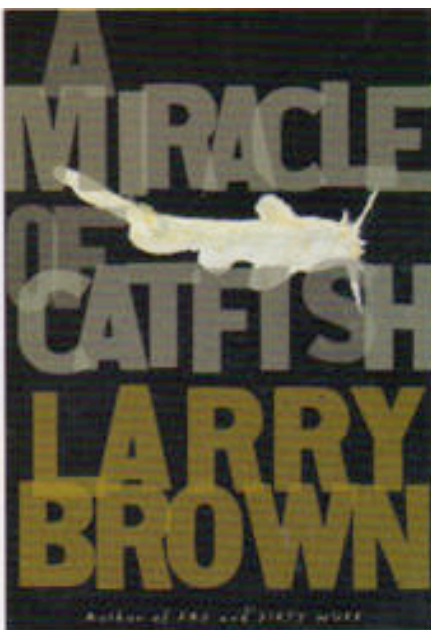
BY LARRY BROWN (ALGONQUIN BOOKS OF CHAPEL HILL, \$26.95)

This nearly completed novel represents the final work of the self-taught Mississippi author who died in late 2004 at age 53. A former firefighter who flunked English, Larry Brown gained legions of fans and enormous respect for his brutally honest yet sympathetic depiction of the "rough South." That was the same title given to a documentary film about him and his work in 2002.

In this novel, Brown masterfully depicts complex characters that draw us bone-marrow deep into their plights. Three in particular will stay with me. Heartbreakingly hopeful in the beginning and then cunningly cynical by story's end, Jimmy, 9, lives in a trailer with his family, including his daddy. Given no name, this no-account father is a beer-guzzling, ego-absorbed whiner, able to rationalize even the most heinous of his despicable behaviors. Then there is former Klansman Cortez Sharp, a farmer who wields the pleasure of hard work and the prospect of a fishing pond like a shield against his guilt over a long-ago act.

Shannon Ravenel, Larry Brown's Algonquin editor, carefully whittled the 710-page manuscript. She chose to leave the ending unwritten but included the author's notes about his plans for the final segment. "For me, and I hope for you, it doesn't really matter that *A Miracle of Catfish* wasn't quite completed," the editor writes. "His characters—those real people—live on, just as he intended." Indeed, the miracles Brown brought to life reside in me now for all time.

—NANCY DORMAN-HICKSON



PUSS 'N CAHOOTS

BY RITA MAE BROWN & SNEAKY PIE BROWN (BANTAM BOOKS, \$25)

That famous mystery-writing cat is at it again, and this time, the crafty feline is off to the shows—horse shows, that is.

When Mary "Harry"

Haristeen and her animal investigators travel to a famous saddlebred horse show, they encounter a plethora of foul play. Their host, Joan Hamilton, is robbed the first day they arrive, and the stolen object is a cherished family treasure: a valuable good-luck brooch.

Things get worse when a famous actress's prized mare is stolen, and a well-liked groom is found dead in an act of murder. Who will save the show and solve the crimes? Mrs. Murphy, Pewter, and Tee Tucker, of course, the star characters of best-selling Virginia author Rita Mae Brown's 14 previous mysteries.

—ASHLEY MAYER

KATRINAVILLE CHRONICLES: IMAGES AND OBSERVATIONS FROM A NEW ORLEANS PHOTOGRAPHER

BY DAVID G. SPIELMAN (LOUISIANA STATE UNIVERSITY PRESS, \$34.95)

People around the world mourn the horrific damage Hurricane Katrina wreaked on New Orleans in 2005. But what did the media omit? In this book, a photographer uses incredible images and candidly written words to reveal the everyday struggles of survivors in a city turned upside down.

David G. Spielman remained behind in New Orleans to care for St. Clare's Monastery after the Sisters evacuated to another monastery in Texas. With the help of a generator, his camera, and his laptop, Spielman e-mailed friends a log of his drastically changed life in the Big Easy. A compilation of these e-mails forms the core of the book, making it an easy read.

From the time Katrina hit until 120 days afterward, Spielman depicts a reality only a New Orleans citizen could. Whether he's writing of his diet of peanut butter sandwiches or his frustration with local politicians, he touches the true human side of an event that affected so many.

—SUZANNE POWELL MILLS

