

# FOOD WRITING WITHOUT THE “FOOD WRITER”

This special issue features writers from a University of Georgia program in narrative media writing.

BY ROSALIND BENTLEY

ZORA NEALE HURSTON'S FAVORITE meal to cook was shrimp and okra, probably fried. Though she personified the Harlem Renaissance, Hurston was a Florida woman. Born in Alabama, she grew up in the Sunshine State. A committed vegetable gardener, she depended on the bounty around her. When her money was especially low, and that was often, she made cornbread and served it with buttermilk to guests.

A native Floridian, I know all of this because I am fortunate enough to know Valerie Boyd, one of Hurston's biographers (that's us, with her on the right). Boyd and I met sixteen years ago outside *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution's* downtown headquarters, after I had finished a grueling round of interviews for a job at the paper. At the time, she was the AJC's arts editor.

I complimented her then-new book *Wrapped in Rainbows: The Life of Zora*

*Neale Hurston*. She was warm and welcomed a conversation. Eager to impress, I pointed out Hurston's words were actually, “I have stood on the peaky mountain *wrappen* in rainbows, with a harp and a sword in my hands.”

Boyd's eyes widened.

*There go my job chances*, I thought, kicking myself for being such a know-it-all.

“Oh! So you're really a Zora-head,” she said. Her smile was genuine and we talked until either her ride showed up or mine, I can't remember which.

Not long after, she left the paper and became the Charlayne Hunter-Gault Distinguished Writer in Residence at the University of Georgia's Grady College of Journalism and Mass Communication. We kept in touch. Eleven years later, Boyd realized a long-held dream and welcomed the first class of UGA's new low-residency master's of fine arts

program in Narrative Nonfiction Writing. I was a member of the first cohort. Among our mentors was John T. Edge, director of the Southern Foodways Alliance.

The program is the only one of its kind run out of a journalism school. We tell true stories using narrative techniques. And while probably not intended, the two-year program is decidedly Southern. Which makes it a perfect fit for the sorts of stories in *Gravy*. It was John T.'s suggestion that this issue be written by graduates, mentors, and current students of the program.

Some might say, “Well, isn't that convenient.” Perhaps so. But as guest editor of this issue, I believe food coverage doesn't always require a “food writer” to tell these stories. An outsider can elucidate and illuminate. I was once an outsider, too. If I'm honest, most days I feel more food-adjacent than at its center. But, as you'll see here, that stance has value.

MFA graduate Martin Padgett has written about the automotive industry for a good bit of his career, but for this issue he explores the roots of Atlanta's queer food scene. His upcoming book, *Midnight at the Oasis: A Decade of Drag, Drugs, and Disco at the Sweet Gum Head*, will be published by W.W. Norton in 2021.

Another graduate, Mark Joyella, looks at soul food's ability, or its lack thereof, to start difficult conversations about enslaved people who spent their lives in bondage in New England.

His classmate, Tracy Coley, took on the tradition of chicken mull. It led her

on a hunt for a recipe used in a North Georgia county for generations.

There are some familiar and experienced food world voices in this issue as well. Lolis Eric Elie, an MFA program mentor, writes about introducing his young son to the foods of his own culture. And graduate André Gallant, who now teaches at Grady College, describes a special meal he made in response to immigration raids in Athens.

All of these stories stem from Boyd's decision to create a space for true narratives. When I spoke with her recently, she told me about Hurston's buttermilk and cornbread, her okra and shrimp. She also talked about why these stories matter.

“Depending on the moment in our lives, our relationship with food can be complicated and multilayered,” Boyd said. “And

that's part of what I admire about the Southern Foodways Alliance. I think it tries to negotiate those complications and bring them to discussion.”

That is the SFA's work: telling the story of the changing American South through the foods we eat.

Hurston's reporting trips, to Florida turpentine camps or her childhood home of Eatonville, fueled her work. She told us the story of her South. The writers you read here tell of their Souths.

So, bake a pan of cornbread if you want, and sit down and enjoy their work. Whether you crumble your bread into a glass of buttermilk or devour the slice on its own as you read is entirely up to you. 🍞



Photograph courtesy of Rosalind Bentley

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