

CIRCLING

ARKANSAS

TO HOME

On not achieving escape velocity

by JAY JENNINGS

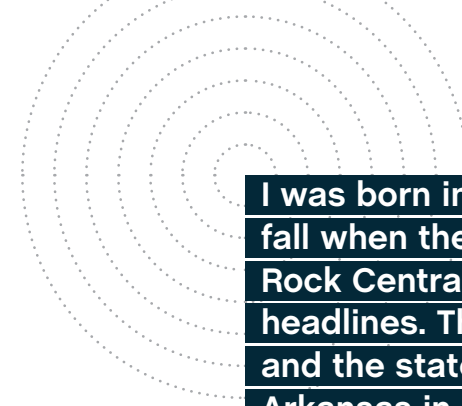


Photo by Matt White

The author (r) with his siblings
in Little Rock, ca. 1968



WHEN SUMMER ARRIVES IN ARKANSAS and tattooed arms hang from car windows and strum guitars on street corners, there's one inked image that seems to be more prominent than others. It is a simple outline of the state's borders: the ragged Mississippi River to the east, the



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straight-line parallels that define the north and south, the cartographic lean that forms the western line, and the eccentric notches that have Missouri fondling us from the northeast and Texas thrusting unnaturally into our southwest.

Those borders, of course, have been subject to dispute, negotiation, treaty, broken treaty, political influence, war, and the natural mutability of rivers. Once established, however, the lines reify the idea of being a member of a community within boundaries. And I find something moving about the desire to permanently declare your allegiance to a place so flawed in the making in a tattoo so simple. A tattoo that's merely an outline, with a big empty space in the middle, an image that says, "I share a kinship with everyone here."

I'm no historian or poet, but I have been writing and reading and thinking about Arkansas for most of my life. My family roots here are deep. On my mother's side, we have a diary of an ancestor's journey from Limestone County, Alabama, to Camden, Arkansas, in 1838. It is mostly an account book, but he did complain about Randolph, Tennessee, being "a little ugly town." No complaints after he got to Arkansas. My mother's family lived in Camden until she and her mother moved to Little Rock in 1954. She married my father that same year.

Photo courtesy of the author

On my father's side, my grandfather, a timber man, traveled from Chicago to West Helena, Arkansas, in 1912. He worked for the Chicago Mill and Lumber Company, branding his initial J into the cut end of trees he approved for processing. He fell in love with and married a woman from Clarksdale, Mississippi. After living in West Helena for a decade, they moved to Little Rock in 1925, and my grandfather started the first Chrysler-Plymouth dealership in town, which my father joined when he got out of the service in 1945.

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My own schooling was marked by legal and bureaucratic maneuvering to find integration remedies through busing, our attendance zone changing yearly so that I was enrolled at a different school every year from fifth through ninth grades. By the time I graduated from high school, I was eager to leave Arkansas. That was in 1976. To my inchoate mind, there was no *there* there (yes, I had already read Gertrude Stein, and yes, I was kind of an a-hole). The "higher" culture I aspired to, the kind you found in Stein's salon in

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Paris, was nowhere to be found in Arkansas, or so I imagined.

Over the next decade, I attended college in Tennessee, graduate school in Chicago, and taught high school in Dallas. There, at Half Price Books, I discovered a novel that would change my ideas about Arkansas literature and culture. It was by Charles Portis and called *The Dog of the South*. The cover leapt out at me because it included a map of Arkansas with a big star over Little Rock. Here was a book whose cover was telling me, like the outline tattoo, "I share a kinship with you." And a *New York Times* story about the book revealed that Portis himself lived in Little Rock.

I was twenty-six, the same age as the punctilious but directionless *Dog of the South* protagonist Ray Midge, and I was also pretty punctilious but directionless. *The Dog of the South* contained Little Rock places and people and language I knew: the auto shops on Asher Avenue; Ray's mother-in-law and wife, Norma, who call Ray a "pill"; a woman who lived behind the Game and Fish Building. There were some private Little Rock jokes, like this one, when Ray complains about some hippies he meets not having watches: "The watch factories were humming day and night in Tokyo and Geneva and Little Rock so that everyone might have a cheap

watch, but not one of these hippies had a watch." Probably, if you weren't from Little Rock, you wouldn't know that there was a big Timex factory there.

It was the funniest book I'd ever read.

When I left my Dallas teaching job and briefly moved back to Little Rock, I wrote to Mr. Portis and mentioned that I was moving to New York to pursue a career as a writer, as he had done back in the 1960s. He quite unexpectedly invited me to lunch at a bar called the Town Pump. We met a couple more times after that before I moved. Once I was in New York, we kept up a correspondence, and we'd get together when I returned to visit my parents. When I moved back to Little Rock for good in 2007 to work on my book *Carry the Rock*, about football and Central High fifty years after the integration crisis, we would frequently get together for an afternoon beer, the day-drinking prerogative of two "freelance writers," which is how he most frequently thought of himself.

In 2012, I edited *Escape Velocity*, a collection of Mr. Portis' miscellany. Despite that descriptor, some of the pieces are quite substantial, including longform travel stories, deeply reported journalism, an 8,000-word memoir, and a full-length play. More often than not, Arkansas is both setting and subject for these pieces.

Photo courtesy of the author

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Iris DeMent and Mary Steenburgen.

There is, of course a large group of Arkansans whose life experience in the state is best represented not by Portis' eccentrics but by the brutal and beautiful directness of Richard Wright's *Black Boy* and Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. Wright lived in West Helena at the same time my grandfather was walking the woods and marking trees. Angelou was born two years before my mother and grew up in Stamps, a town about sixty miles west of Camden. My book *Carry the Rock* includes a chapter about the last lynching in Little Rock, of a man named John Carter. Through that research and writing, I dimly glimpsed the experience of what being a black Arkansan was like, but Angelou and Wright and lesser-known African American writers from Arkansas like Henry Dumas, whose work I encourage you to seek out, are the places to go for that.

The author's parents, Walter and Medora Jennings, on their wedding day





A child watches as marchers, some carrying American flags, protest school integration in Little Rock, August 1959.

Arkansas' benighted history of race relations exploded into one of television's first documentary miniseries with the daily broadcast of events on the lawn outside Little Rock Central High School, where mobs harassed the nine black students who attempted to enroll there. The students were first prevented by Governor Orval Faubus from that right, then escorted in under the protection of federal troops when President Eisenhower intervened. All year, they were tormented inside the halls of the

school, and the governor's continued devotion to segregation caused all public schools in Little Rock to be closed the next year. Arkansas' troubles were estimated to have cost the state enormously. By the account of one of the state's leading businessmen, William Bowen, "the city and the state had become pariahs to investors."

The most frequent comment I heard about the events in my youth was that they were "shameful" and "embarrassing." What wasn't embarrassing was the

John T. Bledsoe/Library of Congress

coverage by the local newspaper, the *Arkansas Gazette*, which won a Pulitzer for editorials decrying the resistance to integration. Nor were the efforts of the city's leading women, who organized as the Women's Emergency Committee to successfully pressure the powers that be to accept integration and open the schools. When the schools did open again in the fall of 1959, big-city newspaper reporters returned to write about it, and a young *Gazette* columnist named Charles Portis took exception to the broad brush

with which the national press, airdropping in without having suffered through the painful upheaval, often tarred the state's citizens. He lampooned the outsiders as a collection of "wilted Dacron and damp mustaches." Nine years later, he would express himself again through the *True Grit* protagonist Mattie Ross, who declares, "People who don't like Arkansas can go the devil!"

When I moved to New York in 1986, I had the vague idea that leaving the place I was from was the way to capture the experience that had formed me, as Joyce had to settle in Paris and Italy to write about Ireland. I believed that distance was required for some perspective. And much of what I did write in New York had to do with Arkansas.

During the 1990s, Bill Clinton's ascent to the highest office in the land gave Arkansans nearly a decade of elevated self-importance. In business, that same era saw the astounding growth of northwest Arkansas, thanks to Walmart, Tyson Foods, and J.B. Hunt trucking. When I would come home to visit from New York during the Clinton administration, my mother often greeted me at the airport with a hyperbolic but still proud, "Welcome to the center of the universe."

When I conceived of writing a book about the Central High football team and the history of Little Rock race relations, I knew that I could not do the required reporting from a distance; I'd need to uproot my New York life and come back. I had no book contract. I had not written one word. All I had was a promise from Central High coach Bernie Cox that he'd allow me to follow the team through the 2007 season.

There was another reason to return as well.

In the summer of 2006, a cleaning

woman entered my brother's apartment in Dallas per her weekly schedule and found him lying in bed, a washcloth over his eyes, dead. He'd suffered a massive coronary at age fifty. My sister, who lived near him, called me in New York to tell me. Six months later, my mother died in Little Rock on New Year's Day 2007. She'd been taken to the hospital on New Year's Eve, and I got the call that night that things were not going well as I stood on my stoop in Brooklyn, watching the fireworks from Prospect Park burst over the trees and illuminate the New York sky. Some five months after that, I pulled into Little Rock in a Ryder rental truck, filled mainly with boxes of books, my two cats in stacked carriers between the seats of the cab. I moved into the same apartment building where my then eighty-five-year-old dad lived.

Despite the tragic circumstances that brought me here—the deaths of my family members, the needs of my elderly father—everything that I treasure in my life, everything that I will remember on my deathbed, occurred after I moved back to Arkansas and reconnected with this place.

I wrote my first book, *Carry the Rock: Race, Football and the Soul of an American City*, a story that I'd been preparing my whole life to tell.

I enjoyed ten more years with my dad. He died in 2016, at age ninety-five, just a few days after we enjoyed Thanksgiving dinner at the Capital Hotel in Little Rock.

I also got to spend almost every Monday afternoon from 4 to 5:30 drinking with Charles Portis and other characters at the corner of the bar of the Faded Rose. We rarely talked about writing. I learned from him—and from the others there, a collection of brilliant, kind, hilarious Arkansas eccentrics—that if you have your eyes and ears open to the language and concerns and jokes of

the people around you, you don't need to get an MFA in creative writing. You've got all the material you need right there. That friendship with Charlie Portis gave me the opportunity to unearth and preserve all of his work that had been forgotten. I believe it will endure.

Sometimes when you fail to achieve escape velocity, you don't just return aimless and lost. You complete a circle. Back in Arkansas, I found a stronger voice as a writer by breathing the air and walking the ground I'd left. I wrote about my brother's death after I sat in the stands of Little Rock's historic minor-league baseball field, which was due for demolition, and remembered the summers we'd roamed the bleachers. I wrote about my mother for the *Oxford American*, about how the seemingly mundane diary she kept as a fourteen-year-old subtly revealed her grief over the death of her father. And as I wrote my book, I asked my father about growing up in Little Rock in the 1920s. He even remembered, when he was six years old, a mob gathering outside the house of the police chief, who lived three or four houses down on his street, before they went on to lynch John Carter.

The Arkansas I returned to was different from the one I'd left in 1986, in many good ways. The state, like much of the rest of the country, now had good breweries. The continuing academic excellence of Central High acted as a firewall, in some ways, against the complete resegregation of public schools. There was a more robust literary culture. The Arkansas Literary Festival (now called the Six Bridges Book Festival) brought writers from all over the country, and I met native Arkansans who were doing work at the highest level. Among them are Kevin Brockmeier, whose books are as *sui*



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generis as Portis', and though he often teaches at the University of Iowa, will not live anywhere other than Little Rock; and Hot Springs native Trenton Lee Stewart, who created the middle-grades series *The Mysterious Benedict Society*.

And of course, there is the *Oxford American*, where I was invited to join the staff as a senior editor in 2015 by Eliza Borné, a Little Rock native with deeper roots in Arkansas than I have even, and who is the equal of any editor in New York. (She proved it when the magazine won a National Magazine Award for General Excellence in 2016.) I never imagined in 1986 when I left that I could enjoy such a fulfilling and challenging professional life here in Arkansas.

One Sunday, at Christ Episcopal Church in Little Rock, the church where my father was an altar boy and the one in which I was baptized and grew up, I was ushering and struck up a conversation with a woman who was leaving after the service. More conversations followed, as did lunches, movies, and dinners. She was a Mississippian like my grandmother. We fell in love and were married at the church where we met, where my family had been members for nearly a century. In January, our daughter was born, the sixth generation of my family to have been born in Arkansas, and in April she

was baptized at Christ Episcopal Church as well, sixty-one years after my own baptism there.

In Bentonville, Arkansas, some three hours northwest of Little Rock, an art trail dotted with sculptures and installations leads from the edge of downtown to the Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art. About halfway along the trail is a circular building, one of the artist James Turrell's Skyspaces. Inside, a round seating area reclines you at an angle, directing your eyes toward the large opening in the ceiling, framing the sky. Some of Turrell's Skyspaces have square holes; this one is round. Twice a day, some twenty minutes before dawn and again before dusk, the artist has designed a gentle light show that changes the colors inside the building, around the opening, and therefore changes the sky. It's mesmerizing. The first time I visited the Skyspace, I woke a half-hour before dawn. I was alone as I reached the structure and took a seat and waited for the sky to gradually lighten with the sunrise, charged with the light of Turrell's artistry. There I was, tilted at an angle like my state's western border, not trying any longer to achieve escape velocity, perfectly at home, gazing up through a circle at Arkansas' limitless sky. 🍷

Jay Jennings is a senior editor at the Oxford American magazine and the author of Carry the Rock: Race, Football, and the Soul of an American City.