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## An Interview With Lewis Nordan

TR Editors

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## An Interview With Lewis Nordan

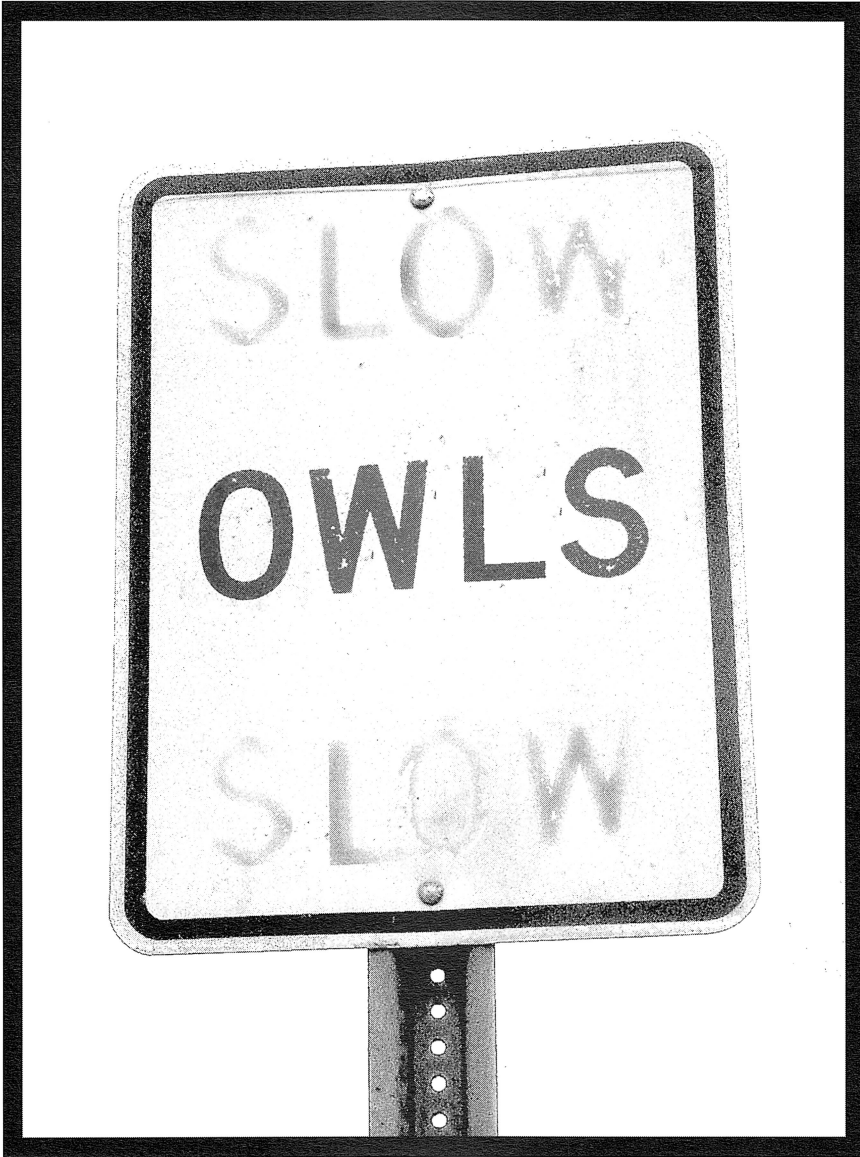
*All of us here at the Yalobusha Review, as well as many of the writers that come through here, are crazy about your work. In fact, it seems that anyone who has read your work has become a huge fan. With that in mind, we are always baffled by the fact that you are not more widely known by “non-writers.” Do you think there are aspects of your work that speak first and foremost to other “writers”? Or is it something else? In other words, we’d like to know why in the world you aren’t more famous than you already are.*

There are nice compliments woven through your question. Thank you. The truth is, though, I can’t afford to ask myself the question. I can acknowledge the truth behind the question—that I don’t sell as many books as I’d like—but the minute I start focusing on the whys and wherefores of fame or fortune, the sooner I am apt to lose this precious gift I have been given. I won’t be falsely modest and pretend I don’t love this gift or that it is trivial. I know the value of my work and to spend even an hour trying to figure out why some others don’t value it as I do is to risk losing it altogether. This is not mere superstition, I think, but another was of saying thank you to whatever gods there may be for blessing me with what I have been given. When I first started to write I prayed this prayer: “make me a great writer.” I am glad I prayed for that and not for a wide audience.

*Was there a certain point in your career that you felt as if you had hit your stride? If not that, a certain moment in which you turned an important corner, or perhaps began to see the whole thing differently?*

When I wrote *Wolf Whistle*, I knew I had been to the mountain. That book poured out of me in six weeks. Every day was exhausting and fun. When I sat down each morning I had no idea what I would write about, and then every day I felt transported. I understood what it all meant then.

*Although nearly all of your fiction takes place in the South, you have been living up North for some time now. Is this just a matter of practicality, or is there*



*Katherine Fields*

*Yalobusha Review*

*something behind this? What advantages do you find in writing about the South from way up there in Pennsylvania?*

I moved to Pittsburgh in 1983 because I got a wonderful job here. I knew nothing about the place, but immediately I knew I had found a home. I love the place. So it was both a matter of practical need for a job and a heartfelt connection that brought me here and kept me here. Incidental to those things I somehow became more “southern” than ever while living here. I’m not sure why or how this is true, only that I feel more clearly in touch with my southern roots and memories than anywhere else I’ve ever lived. This has been a surprising and wonderful boon to my work.

*Much of your fiction seems to have a strong autobiographical flair to it. However, you recently published a memoir entitled Boy With Loaded Gun. How would you describe those different urges: writing autobiographical fiction versus autobiographical fact? In other words, what was it about your life, not found in the pages of your fictions, that you felt the need to express in memoir? What does the memoir genre allow you to do that your fiction did not?*

Something about the voice of my fiction leads people to imagine that those things that happened to my characters happened to me. The truth is, my fiction is autobiographical only in the broadest sense. I was a little southern boy at one time, I had a step-dad who was a house painter, etc. but I did none of the things my characters did. I heard about them or read them in newspapers or made them up. The memoir is much closer to what happened to me, though even there I have taken some liberties, as a teller of tall tales is likely to do.

*Some of your most powerful works such as Wolf Whistle and Music of the Swamp deal in some way with the murder of Emmett Till. Has there been any response to your work since the recent re-opening of this case? How did the news of this affect you?*

It’s easy to mistake my work on the novel with my personal feelings about the incident. To me they seem quite separate. I’m happy to see this dark chapter of our history back in the light, but I have not been consulted by anyone, as is appropriate. My work is a work of the imagination, and to mistake it for sociological is, though easy to do, not really relevant to my connection with it.

*All of the editors here at the Yalobusha Review hold a special regard for Music of the Swamp. We feel very much that this book changed our lives. Now that*

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*we've got your ear, we'd like to know at what point during the writing of this book did the "OWLS" section materialize for you? Had you planned all along for the book to turn on its ear at the end, or did it come to you closer to the end of the work?*

I wish I could take more credit for the way the book works, but honestly I was not the one who saw how the structure of the book came together. My editor, Shannon Ravenel, took a group of stories that I sent her and understood that they were a book, with a structure and a real ending. I wrote the stories and I take credit for that, but without a good editor I never would have seen how they fit together.

*Working at the University of Pittsburgh, you've no doubt become well acquainted with the relationship between academia and creative writing. We are all in an MFA program right now with dreams of publishing and teaching success. Are we fools? How do you think the "writer" in America has changed since the proliferation of MFA programs? What advice would you give to those planning to mix writing and academia?*

My experience with writing school is that I could not have become a writer without my involvement with the University of Arkansas writing program. It gave me hard criticism and comforting support and taught me to read like a writer. Not everyone who tries to write, whether he or she attends writing school or not, will publish a book. But my advice to someone with the urge to write is to do whatever you can to give yourself a chance. A writing school is a good start.

*That being said, what is that makes you feel the best about the writing process? Is it the thought, the product, the publication? When all is said and done, what moments are you most proud of or surprised by? What is the heart of the thing?*

Yikes. This is a question that asks to choose your favorite child. Every step of the process is different and worthy of love on its own. I love that moment when I find the first sentence. I love those times when I make myself laugh or cry. When Hydro died in *Sharpshooter Blues* I didn't expect it at all. I was devastated and came downstairs. My wife immediately knew something was wrong. She held me and asked what was happened. I said, "Hydro died." She said, "Oh baby."

*Finally, we would like to thank you so much for your time and effort. This has been a real thrill for us. And so the last question we would like to pose to you is this: If the editors of the Yalobusha Review were to all get OWLS tattoos, would*

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*you come down here and get one with us? If not, could we maybe get a picture with you and our new tattoos? Hell, we figured we might as well give it a shot.*

Hmm. I like it. I think I like this idea.