
Lewis Nordan was fifteen the summer that Emmett Till, a fourteen-year-old black child, was lynched in Money, Mississippi, just up the road from Nordan's hometown. The events of that summer have haunted him all of his life.

WOLF WHISTLE

by Lewis Nordan

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Growing Up White in the South

an essay by Lewis Nordan

As I began the first leg of a book tour to promote my third book, *Music of the Swamp*, I made a joke to a friend that I was traveling around the country explaining how tough it was to grow up white in the South. In fact, despite the irony, that is what that book is about.

It tells about a white boy, Sugar Mecklin, who senses the tragic limitations of a society defined by racial hatred and alcoholism and geographical isolation.

An unexpected answer

So, anyway, early one morning on this book tour, I took a cab from my hotel in Atlanta to a local television station where I was scheduled to be interviewed. I found myself more anxious than usual when I learned that the show was being taped before an audience.

The guest preceding me was a popular entertainer, a handsome black recording star promoting a new album. I could hear him out there, belting out song after song, and the audience was eating out of his hand, cheering for more.

It was intimidating. A nervous, bookish, gray-bearded old cuss in spectacles—me, I mean—didn't have a chance following this guy, this singer. In fact, I was wondering whether he would hang around long enough for me to ask for his autograph.

Then, when the applause had died down, somebody—the director, the stage manager, I'm not sure who—told me to get ready, it was my turn, they were getting ready to announce me.

I heard my name called, and so, in fear, walked out onto the stage, in front of those cameras, beneath all those shocking lights, suspicious

that my message about growing up white in the South was about to fall flat.

Once I was out there, I discovered one further intimidating detail. The interviewer and every member of this large television audience were black.

My whiteness dimmed the lights. My silly message about Sugar Mecklin's white-bread tragedy seemed altogether fatuous.

In any case, as part of the talk-show format, the audience was invited to ask questions from microphones placed throughout the studio. In my giddy state, I found myself giving a completely unexpected answer to one of the questions. Unexpected to me, I mean.

A woman stood at the microphone in the audience and said, "What will your next book be about?"

I said, confidently, "It will deal with the death of Emmett Till."

What? It would deal with what? Who said that?

I added, "Emmett Till was a black child who was murdered near my hometown when I was a boy. The trial of his murderers became a landmark in the civil rights movement." Words to that effect, anyway.

The remainder of the half hour was taken up with questions and answers related to the unexpected announcement of this work-in-progress.

An anonymous white boy

A year later—in 1993—in *Wolf Whistle*, the book I described on that television show, went to press. It is the book I seem to have been preparing to write for a long time, and yet until the words came out of my mouth I had had no conscious intention of writing such a book.

There is, however, a detail in *Music of the Swamp* that might have predicted it. Two children in a boat see the feet and legs of a dead body sticking up from the water in a drift of brush beyond the Roebuck Lake spillway.

The narrator reports the body to be that of an old man who had “spells.” I knew it was not. Though I had not given a thought to any future book I might write, I knew when I wrote the chapter that this dead person was none other than Emmett Till, floating upside down at the end of a barbed wire tether that was tied at one end to a hundred-pound gin fan and at the other, around the child’s neck.

The description of the feet and legs of the body, poking up out of the water and the barbed wire and the gin fan, and even the phrase “a drift of brush,” survive in my memory from a newspaper article of thirty-six years before. Those helpless feet and legs, upside down, almost comic, have haunted me all my life.

Something else has haunted me as well, an invisibility, the anonymous white boy in the boat, checking his hooks for catfish, when he found the body of Emmett Till. Still, I wonder who he was, what became of him, how his life was changed.

The unreality of fiction

The novel that I wrote, *Wolf Whistle*, is pure invention, because when I began my memory of the events surrounding the murder and the trial was very limited. Mainly I remembered the news article about the body in the drift of brush, and that the child was killed as a result of wolf whistling at a white woman.

The big blank spots in my memory were something of a blessing during the writing of the book. With no memory of the identity of the persons actually involved, I was free to set the novel in my already-invented fictional geography and population of Arrow Catcher, Mississippi. I used some characters that I’d invented earlier and I made up new characters as they were needed.

I already knew most of the white people in my story, residents of my earlier books, and their relatives. The more I wrote, the more I invented,

including a population of vaguely magical animals. A flock of buzzards, each vulture named after a former governor of the state of Mississippi; a tamed hellhound (whatever that is!) that lives behind a bootleg whiskey store; a one-handed monkey named after the president of the Confederacy; a parrot who cannot speak but can only make a noise like a cash register; all these things, and more, drove the story into that fictional realm where my work lives most comfortably.

The point of view of the novel is comprehensive, including not only major and minor characters, black and white, male and female, dead and alive, but even the buzzards on their telephone poles and pigeons in the rafters. It is a serious story, about death and grief and broken hearts, and in which credibility is a key, but it exists on a plane, sometimes comic, even burlesque, just askew of the “real,” historical universe. That is my intention and my point: to render the natural world as itself and, at the same time, as unearthly.

The reality of Emmett Till

In one area, however, I discovered myself unwilling to allow the universe of my story to wobble on its axis, let alone to spin away from it. I found myself sticking tight to the few memories I held of Emmett Till. Other inventions came easily, but my mind would not let go of the historical Emmett.

As I worked with the material, other memories came to me. In addition to his upside down body in the brush pile, I remembered his age, fourteen, a year younger than I was when he died. I remembered that he had gone into the store, where he supposedly whistled at the white woman, to buy bubble gum. I remembered that he was from Chicago, that his father was dead, that he had been visiting a great-uncle and aunt, that the uncle’s name was Mose.

In the early drafts of the novel, I kept all the remembered details—including Emmett’s real name, Mose’s real name, and much more. Even

those private things that I made up about the family are grounded solidly in “real world” possibilities—I’m thinking especially of the love-making scene between the boy’s uncle and aunt—where there is no room for caricature or anything unearthly.

Eventually, my editor asked me about this impulse to preserve Emmett Till intact, as real. Why was invention so bountiful, so extravagant in fact, in all the rest of the novel, and so skimpy when it came to the character that represented Emmett Till?

To tell the truth, the question scared me a little. Generally my thinking does not run to the abstract—I mean, I work by instinct and intuition, from which I create geographies and characters, and in the process seldom ask myself questions of “aesthetics.”

Having been asked, though, I wondered. Was it merely reverence for the dead? Was it a streak of sentimentality? Was it some Faulknerian something-or-another, blood-guilt, that made everyone in my story, except Emmett, fair game for irony and satire and caricature?

At first I thought so, frankly. It is true that I revere the memory of Emmett Till. His death marked not only a turning point in civil rights but, in a very personal way, in my own life as well. And though I usually run away and hide from comparisons with Faulkner and his old-fashioned ideas about blood-guilt, my racial identification with the murderers of Emmett Till still troubles me.

But even as I acknowledge some culpability, I know that there is an aesthetic issue that supersedes these considerations.

This book, like every honest book, demands a moral center—and also an emotional, psychological, detail-based center—firm ground on which a reader may stand in complete confidence that it will not move. Especially this is true in a book like *Wolf Whistle*, where the ground of reality is so unstable, so likely to shift away from conventional expectations of reality.

Emmett (Bobo, in the fiction) and his family are the moral, emotional,

psychological, life-affirming core of this novel, which a reader may trust to be permanent, and around which all the rest of the world may go mad. The aesthetic need to maintain this solid ground was manifested in my early reluctance to change even the smallest details of my memory of the real event, including Emmett's name. Not until the last draft of the book did Emmett become Bobo—and he became Bobo in the novel only because that was the nickname by which, in real life, Emmett Till was known.

Just before I appeared on that television show in Atlanta last year, I chose a necktie from my suitcase and knotted it so tight around my neck that my face turned blue. My hair I plastered into place with great globs of a product called Mega Gel. (The tube advises, Extreme Hold for Design and Control.) My shoes were shined. My beard was trimmed. I shaved the tops of my ears. I plucked my nose hairs. My belt was pulled to the last hole. My breath said Scope! at long distances. Mega Gel had the idea: extreme hold for control.

Never mind the details, and don't imagine that I am asking for sympathy, but only believe that one week before this television interview, my own personal life had fallen into chaos. Everything was haywire, helter-skelter, inside out. Unlike Mega Gel, I had lost all control, and could discern no design in the scheme of things.

Looking back now I understand a few things better. All my cosmetics and my strict adherence to a self-imposed dress code were attempts to gain control of a world flying off its axis. When that anonymous woman at the microphone asked me about my next book, I reached down to the core of myself for something substantial to answer her with.

What I found there was Emmett Till. As soon as I spoke his name, I knew that I had found a buried chunk of my self's permanent foundation, the granite cornerstone of something formative and durable and true.

A few times over the years Emmett Till had surfaced, as he did briefly and anonymously in *Music of the Swamp*. And, in a way, he took me back to an even earlier, formative time, when I myself was a fatherless child, as Emmett had been, unaware of my loss and my grief. On that television program, Emmett emerged suddenly as the unshakable ground of *me*, where I could stand to watch in safety the rags and tags of my personal life flying away in the whirlwind, in confidence that they would all return or that what did not return could be lived without.

In *Wolf Whistle*, Emmett, Bobo, holds the same position as he held in my heart. He is the fixed center, in the midst of other lives that have been turned inside out. In the directionless fictional histories of the characters of *Wolf Whistle*, there are hints of what happened in my own history, and perhaps in the history of all human beings—death, heartbreak, betrayal, lost love, and lost hope.

Emmett, though, is *terra firma*. He is the reality, he is the rock. Everyone else in the book flies with the whirlwind, except, in the end, maybe the school teacher, Alice, whose life Emmett touched, as he touched mine, without either Alice or me ever meeting him.

An Interview with the Author

How did you become a writer?

I earned my Ph.D. wanting to be a Shakespeare scholar. But the truth is I wasn't any good at it. I didn't have the kind of analytical mind necessary to illuminate a text. And attempts to publish in the field were torture for me.

It was because I couldn't get an academic job, even with a doctorate, that I became a writer.

I did work part-time jobs during that time and one job was as a night watchman for a company that made fishing rods—Shakespeare of Arkansas. So at least I was still working in my field.

During that time I was part of a writing program for a year. After that I was teaching myself to write fiction, and I'd go through my pages and draw a red circle around every image. If I didn't have enough red circles, I considered the page incomplete, and I would go back and fill it up with images of things to see, taste, touch, and smell in every paragraph.

The process has become intuitive for me, and it's one I use with my students. Once we've looked at the structure of a story to determine exactly what it's about, I lead them sentence by sentence through each paragraph and ask them to reimagine every one, as I do in my own writing. I'm teaching them to paint, to draw, and also to find the right musical notes.

Your writing has been described as somewhat surreal, reminiscent of Thurber. How would you describe your vision as a writer?

In all my years of school I had never quite understood what people meant by a writer's vision. Then one day it dawned on me what my own fictional vision is. It's a magical landscape just askew of the real, historical uni-

verse. That world, that created planet, doesn't quite square with the world I live in.

I was fascinated by Thurber's cartoons as a kid, though I couldn't always figure out what they meant. I've always had a kind of cartoonish vision. My world has been one where I would see things as clearly as anyone else did, but when I reported them people would say, "That's not the way it really was. You've made their heads too big, you've made them outlandish in some ways."

Some time later, still just a kid, I read Thurber's *University Days*. The totally real and believable silliness of his people fascinated me. In some sense, every story I write is a retelling of "The Night the Bed Fell."

That outlandish quality might also be called grotesque, similar in ways to the characters of other Southern writers such as Flannery O'Connor. Why do you think Southern writing is peopled with such bizarre characters?

I think a lot of storytelling, Southern or otherwise, is about remarkable events. Death, disease and disfigurement, dwarfism and shrunken mummies, are not necessarily more common in one place than in another, but in places with a strong oral tradition these extraordinary phenomena naturally draw a lot of attention.

My theory about the grotesque in my own work, and in storytelling generally, is that it's a way of saying, "This is more remarkable than anything you've seen today; this is even more remarkable than your own crazy family!"

Another more arcane theory about Southern storytelling is that the South, defeated in the Civil War and occupied by outsiders, became separate and defensive. I wouldn't want to imply that slavery didn't also cause a psychological separateness, but I believe there's something inherent in being Southern that derives from the aftermath of the war. We still have the lingering attitude: "This is how bad it was, and this is how

we laugh at it.” I think the grotesque has an element of humor in it, and humor is a way of dealing with pain. It’s a method of managing anger.

What other works have influenced your writing?

DC Comics—I preferred ones that mythologized a world, such as *Superman* with his secret identity that kept people from knowing exactly who he was.

And the rhythms of nursery rhymes influence my writing. I hear songs and rhythms such as jump-rope chants before I ever get the words. I often have to search for the right words to fit the rhythms that are already there in my mind.

Songs and rhythms, especially of blues music, seem important to your books. How does blues music influence your writing?

My feelings about blues music are all tied up with my feelings about black people. In the ’40s and ’50s when I was growing up in the South, Blues and Rhythm and Blues were forbidden—“race music” they called it then. But for some reason, my parents let me listen to it. And I listened compulsively. I knew the words to the most obscure songs. When I was twelve, I got a harmonica, thinking because I had listened so closely to the music that I would teach myself to play it. But I couldn’t do it.

And later I would seek that music out. I remember being the only white face in the black clubs because I wanted to hear that music and be a part of it. And one time my parents took me to a club where a black piano player named Al took me aside and taught me to play an eight-beat measure. He told me that was a “boogie-woogie beat.” He said, “If you listen you’ll hear it underneath most of the songs you listen to. And you can probably hear it other places, too.” I took that metaphorically, to mean I

would hear it out in the world. And now I often find myself writing “eight to the bar.” I deliberately tried to incorporate it into the sections of *Wolf Whistle* that include the Blues musicians.

Robert Johnson seems to hold special sway over Wolf Whistle, since the Blues musicians are often playing his music. Can you tell us more about that?

The connection is a little mysterious for me, not a direct and easily articulated one. He was a hero for me when I was a kid, and I had so few heroes.

In many ways Robert Johnson has become a kind of mythological figure, the quintessential Blues musician. He was said to have bargained with the devil for his talent. He drank a lot, ran with women, and was poisoned by a jealous husband. They recently found his grave near my hometown in Mississippi and I always make a point of going there when I’m down that way. And, of course, Emmett Till was also killed near my hometown, so I’m sure there’s some connection my mind is making there.

The murder of Emmett Till had a tremendous impact on the civil rights movement. How did it affect your life?

I had never really thought there was something wrong with black and white schools, white and black water fountains, white and black bathrooms, blacks in the back of the bus, and grown people saying “Sir” to children.

Wolf Whistle is in some ways an angry book. I still have a hard time talking about my upbringing in the South without a certain anger rising up in me. I feel angry sometimes that I was limited in these ways—although it’s nobody else’s fault—that I was put in a position of treating a whole race of people like peasants, like animals. And the story I

wanted to tell was what happened to the people in a community where a murder was committed and they suddenly realized it might be their fault. This is the white story of the murder of Emmett Till.

Growing up in the South used to seem like a limitation on my writing. Now it just seems like it's what I was intended to write about. I wasn't able to write about the place when I was there. I have to speak about my characters from a distance, because that way I can do it more lovingly.

Discussion Points

1. *Wolf Whistle* is based on an actual racial incident in Mississippi. How does knowing this affect your reading of the novel?
2. The writer makes use of rather unorthodox presentations of events. We experience certain events through the “voices” of pigeons and buzzards, and see them through the magic eye in the swamp. How do these “magical” points of view affect the overall vision of the book?
3. Solon Gregg is as despicable a villain as we are likely to find in literature. Most readers, however, do find points of sympathy. Did you ever sympathize with Solon? Why or why not?
4. Lord Montberclair says, “Decent whitefolks have always needed the likes of you” when he hires Solon Gregg to kill Bobo. Why does a rich, powerful man like Montberclair need someone like Solon?
5. Later in the novel, Lady Montberclair and Alice Conroy seem likely to become friends. What draws them together? How does their bond differ from that of Lord Montberclair and Solon?
6. Bobo, who sets the events in motion in *Wolf Whistle*, is the one character whose point of view is not represented in the novel. Why is that?
7. Though Bobo is the center of events, Alice Conroy is the main character. What was your reaction to her teaching methods? What does she teach the children? What does she learn?
8. Lewis Nordan’s writing is greatly influenced by Blues music. Cite some examples of this influence. How does it affect your experience of the story?

9. *Wolf Whistle* is the story of a tragic event, yet it has very comic elements. What is your reaction to this combination of humor and tragedy?

10. In the novel, as in real life, the murderers are acquitted. Do you think the verdict would be different today? What recent events support your conclusion?