

Book **Review:** 'Stray Decorum'

by Brett Yates

I don't know whether George Singleton decided sometime after the publication of his last batch of short fiction in 2008 that he would henceforth write only stories about dogs and dog owners, or whether his stories have simply turned out that way, or whether his canine writings just happened to be the ones, among all his other recent work, that he wanted to rerelease in book-format.

Whichever the case may be, the result is "Stray Decorum," a collection of 11 tales whose unifying motif is Man's Best Friend. All the stories take place in South Carolina – except one, set in western North Carolina – and usually in some church – and trailer-strewn backwater, where Singleton's wry, overeducated narrators could probably use a pal.

The author, who grew up in Greenwood, SC, and earned his MFA at UNC-Greensboro, is well-known for his oddball sense of humor: try to imagine Flannery O'Connor as a stand-up comedian, and you'll come close. Filtered through an affectionate absurdism, his economically depressed, culturally stagnant home-turf becomes a carnival of Southern-fried eccentricity.

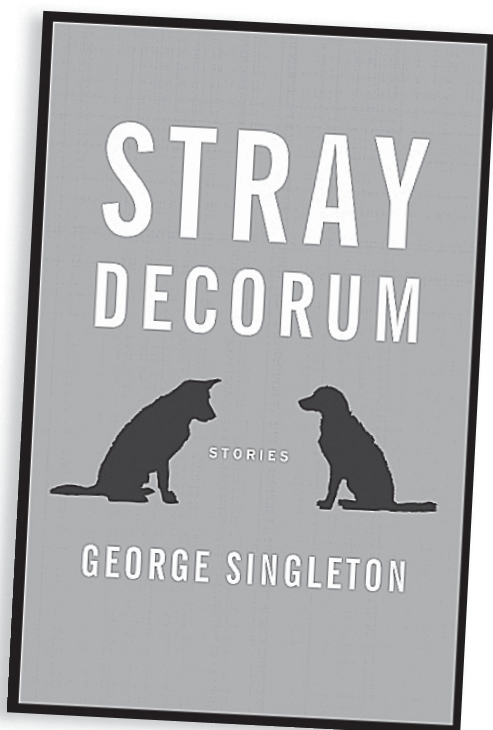
In "How Are We Going to Lose This One?," a man plans to interrupt his ex-fiancée's honeymoon in the Blue Ridge Mountains by dressing up in a bear suit. In "The First to Look Away," a father, eager to increase the value of his real estate by creating a moat around his home, pretends that his property is a "ruby and sapphire farm" and enlists his son's schoolmates to dig for gemstones there on a class trip. In "Where Strangers Claim the Tarnished," a grad student walks into a dive bar and walks out with a beer-drinking monkey in tow.

Singleton has created a rich comic landscape – out of a place so barren that, according to rumor, "the guy who invented Microsoft Windows Vista is hiding out here somewhere, trying to escape lynching" – and his characters' manifold quirks, which in summary might sound merely "colorful," are deeply imagined. Still, his stories may read better as stand-alones in literary journals: with one wacky premise following another, a straight read-through is simultaneously a bit disorienting and a bit repetitious.

Many of Singleton's stories are written in the first person, and even those that aren't share a tone imparted by his central protagonist, a liberal Southerner whose only method of coping is irony: a sympathetic but ultimately detached perspective that amplifies, to the point of comedy, the craziness of his neighbors and of his own continuing presence among them. He constantly makes literary references and jokes about Republicans, showing the reader that he's "one of us," not "one of them" – yet his own life has fallen apart: his wife has left him, and he either flounders at the fringes of academia or works a job that he hates. There lurks an anxiety that, slipping further, he will become "them," or has already – an anxiety that veers, at times, toward acceptance: like stray dogs, we're all a little lost and a little messed-up, but basically good at heart.

There is, however, a palpable element of performance in all this – a heavy, deliberate comic reinvention of life in the boondocks, which, in "Stray Decorum," is never boring or peaceful but always brilliantly bizarre. It's hard to find solid ground here, and it's easy to suspect that maybe the real purpose of Singleton's Bible Belt reportage is simply to reassure us that, in an era of homogeneity, there still are some genuine American weirdos out in the hinterlands. But then again, maybe there aren't – because, despite the remarkable craft that has gone into creating them, none of these people quite seem real.

Brett Yates moved to North Carolina from Vermont in 2011. He lives in Durham and works in Chapel Hill.



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