

Chapter and verse

Edgerton mixes old-time religion with hilarity in his latest novel

BY JAY MACDONALD

Here's a classic tale: the well-meaning but gullible innocent, seduced by corruptors into a morally murky enterprise, must question everything he holds true in order to redeem himself. In Clyde Edgerton's ninth comic novel, *The Bible Salesman*, 20-year-old Henry Dampier hitches a ride from a smooth Clark Gable look-alike named Preston Clearwater, point man for a car-theft ring working the backwoods of North Carolina following World War II. Clearwater cons Henry into becoming his accomplice by convincing the boy he's actually an undercover FBI agent moving vehicles in America's great chess game against communism. When Henry eventually wises up, it's a safe bet there will be blood.

The provenance of Edgerton's latest novel is worth exploring, if only to gain a glimpse of how this idiosyncratic humorist, longtime professor of creative writing at the University of North Carolina-Wilmington and lead singer of the Rank Strangers routinely produces magic from mayhem. With Walker Percy long gone and T.R. Pearson AWOL, few writers today mine the rich Southern idiom like Edgerton. Who else can so seamlessly weave scripture-quoting housecats into a rural Tar Heel narrative and make it fly? Or explore existential themes of uncertainty and impermanence through the lens of a "Jesus Saves!" bumper-sticker salesman whose handiwork washes away with the Carolina rain?

Trouble, or at least literary mischief, sauntered Edgerton's way when two Southern dark humorists, William Gay (*Twilight*) and Tom Franklin (*Hell at the Breech*), approached him to write a short story in tribute to Flannery O'Connor for a *Southern Review* anthology. Edgerton responded with "The Great Speckled Bird," a story that throws together two archetypes from O'Connor's work: the Bible salesman from "Good Country People" and the misfit from "A Good Man Is Hard to Find."

Intrigued by the resulting interplay between these two borrowed characters, Edgerton decided to expand the short story into a novel. A really long novel. "In my early draft, I took Henry from 1930 to 2000. It was a life story of this character," he recalls. "As I started to work, I realized I was going to be unable to finish

a book that big, so I decided to stop at 1950."

Even as Edgerton was tailoring back his tale, he imbued in young Henry his own lifelong quest to understand the confounding and sometimes contradictory nature of Scripture.

"The first 18 years of my life, I was a fundamentalist Christian who believed that every word in the Bible was inspired by a knowing, present God. I gradually began to doubt that, and did not have the insight that it

was possible to throw out the baby with the bath water; that Christianity was a little more complicated than a belief in the literal interpretation of every word in the Bible," he says.

Edgerton, who admits he tends to follow his interests first and then worry about how to fit them into his fiction, became particularly intrigued by two translations of the 23rd Psalm.

"One of the inspirations for writing this book was stumbling on that last line of the 23rd Psalm, in which the Greek translation, which was from Hebrew, said 'and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.' OK, that indicates a life after death. The Hebrew Bible on the other hand, the source of that Scripture, says 'I shall dwell in the house of the Lord down to old age.' There's an astounding difference; the difference between those two passages is infinity!"

Such biblical puzzles have Henry stuck literally on page one of the Old Testament, trying to figure out two conflicting versions of the Book of Genesis. His earnest efforts throughout the novel to talk through and resolve these Bible brainteasers with anyone who will listen, be it Clearwater, his cousin Carson or his girlfriend Marleen, ultimately help him recognize the jam he's in and make the split-second decision necessary to save himself.

So what's with the Scripture-spieling housecats? Edgerton issues the chuckle of a lad caught skipping Sunday school.

"Wow. I'll tell you what's up with cats. I did a lot of reading of different translations of the Bible and biblical commentary and scholarship, the differences between Jewish traditions and Christian traditions and the melding of the two, so I had a lot of notes and information. I ended up having no way to use that information because I didn't have any theologians as characters to discuss it. In my case, the only way I could get it in was through these damn cats," he explains.

"Near the end, maybe two or three drafts from the last draft, those cats talked for pages and pages, Old Testament and New Testament, Christianity and Jewish arguments. My editor didn't understand any of it and advised me to cut it, which I did. I think the book is better as a consequence. I knew I couldn't solve the centuries of disputes between Jews and Christians in one novel."

Unlike most of his previous novels, from *Raney* (1985) to *Lunch at the Picadilly* (2003), *The Bible Salesman* reveals little about the man behind the mischief, theological felines notwithstanding.

Edgerton chalks that up to having started with Ms. O'Connor's archetypes in developing his characters. "Henry and Clearwater and the situations were more made-up than any novel I've ever written," he says.

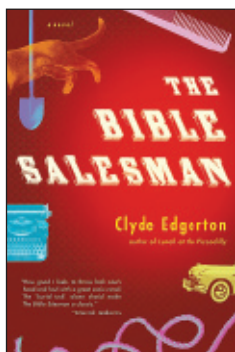
Edgerton hopes to continue that trend in his next project, an exploration of '60s music and race relations that centers on "seven white boys who try to do James Brown's *Live at the Apollo* album from the first note to the last note verbatim."

"I wouldn't mind a different direction," Edgerton admits. "I just kind of follow my nose. In my first eight books, I used a lot of stuff from my life and people I've known; it's all been a translation from real life to fiction. My guess is, starting with this book it will be more whole cloth than before. I find myself counting on and wanting to just make up more stuff." ♡
Jay MacDonald writes from the Bible belt in Austin, Texas.



CLYDE EDGERTON

Inspired by a Flannery O'Connor tribute, Edgerton sets off on a rollicking road trip through the post-war South.



The Bible Salesman

By Clyde Edgerton

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FICTION

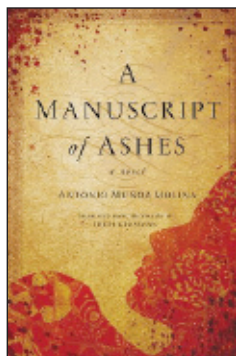
Diary holds the key to a mystery

BY HARVEY FREEDENBERG

Although he's an esteemed author in his native Spain and received critical praise here for his 2001 novel *Sepharad*, Antonio Muñoz Molina remains largely unknown in the U.S. The publication of *A Manuscript of Ashes* (Harcourt, \$25, 320 pages, ISBN 9780151014101), his prize-winning first novel originally published in 1986, in a translation by the eminent Edith Grossman, is likely to introduce Muñoz Molina to a broader American audience.

In the winter of 1969, a young student named Minaya travels to the home of his uncle Manuel in the small town of Mágina. Minaya, who was imprisoned briefly during the waning years of the Franco regime, is there to research his doctoral dissertation on the life of Jacinto Solana, a poet and political activist of the 1930s and '40s.

Minaya's scholarly task quickly takes on a new and darker cast. He finds himself drawn inexorably into the story of a tragedy that occurred at his uncle's home in the early morning hours of May 22, 1937, when Mariana Ríos, a former model who had been introduced to Manuel by his friend Solana and who had wed Manuel the previous day, dies from a gunshot wound to the head. Thirty-two years later, her killer's identity remains unknown.



Shortly after Minaya arrives in Mágina, he discovers a diary-like manuscript entitled "Beatus Ille," written by Solana in early 1947, after he was released from an eight-year imprisonment and returned to the town. Through that manuscript and with the help of Inés, a beautiful young housekeeper who becomes Minaya's lover, the young man tries to piece together the mystery of Mariana's death. In the process he unravels the story of a love triangle acted out against the political turmoil of the Franco era, leading him to a startling discovery that upends his, and our, perceptions of all that has gone before.

Muñoz Molina's novel is a dense, at times devilishly complex tale that yields its secrets slowly, all the way up to its astonishing final pages. It's a challenging metafictional work that demands close reading, but one that in the end will gratify those willing to make that commitment. ♡

Harvey Freedenberg writes from Harrisburg, Pennsylvania.