

***Maneuvers*, by Sybil Pittman Estess. Inleaf Press, 2010. 39 pages. \$12.50 paper.**

and

***The Cream Pitcher: Mississippi Stories*, by Ted Lynn Estess. Inleaf Press, 2010. 132 pages. \$12.50 paper.**

Memoirs today come in a variety of sizes and sorts. *The Cream Pitcher* and *Maneuvers*, produced respectively by a husband and wife, are two distinctive examples of ways to write a memoir. *Maneuvers* consists of poetry with a couple of prose pieces. *The Cream Pitcher* is a collection of family stories told from the vantage point of more than a century of family history on the same land.

Sybil Pittman Estess and Ted L. Estess met as students at Baylor University in the early 1960s and have traveled parallel and shared paths since. Both are from small Mississippi towns—Sybil (born in Hattiesburg) from Poplarville and Ted (born in Jackson) from Tylertown. Sybil earned a master's degree at the University of Kentucky and Ted earned a divinity degree from a seminary in Louisville. Both went to Syracuse University and received doctorates in Humanities. Ted's teaching and administrative career has included Lemoyne College and the University of Houston, where he was founding Dean of the Honors College and is now Dean Emeritus. Sybil has taught at a variety of schools in Houston and surrounding areas and has devoted herself to cultivating her extensive record of published poetry and other literary endeavors, most recently, a well-recognized text on writing: *In a Field of Words*, co-written with Janet McCann (Prentice-Hall 2002).

Sybil's other poetry collections include *Seeing the Desert Green* (1987), *Blue, Canded in January Sun* (2006), and *Labyrinth* (2007). She co-edited *Elizabeth Bishop and Her Art* (1983). Ted's other monographs include *Elie Wiesel* (1980) and *Be Well: Reflections on Graduating from College* (2008).

Sybil describes her early fascination with words in the title essay at the end of her book. Born in 1942, she says she has vivid memories of World War II prior to its 1945 end, and she liked waving at the troop trains passing through Hattiesburg. When little Sybil asked her mother where the soldiers were going, the response was "Maneuvers." Sybil muses whether this strange word, whose meaning she did not comprehend, began her life-long fascination with words. She suggests that her early fascination with language, experienced through being read to, and through her education and chosen profession, she has come to her "grown-up focus on the poet's task of clarity and vision" (38).

The first poem in this collection, "Trains," picks up the theme articulated in "Maneuvers" with a description of riding the Sunset Limited from New Orleans to Los Angeles and the childhood fascinations of those trips to visit her mother's relatives. The reader is not immediately aware of the memoir dynamic of this collection of poems because they are not arranged chronologically. But, when one has completed reading the work and takes the time to reflect on the content, the reader realizes that the pieces here constitute a memoir.

"Snow Ice Cream" describes the Mississippi child's delight in this occasional winter treat that her mother made. "Earned Money" and "In my Alice Blue Gown" describe her life as a teen-ager. The latter describes the poet's confrontation with the nature of racial injustices of the 1950s.

Another poem describes events of a mature life lived globally, with a variety

of washing-by-hand experiences: "The Laundry Lover." Still another describes the serendipity of an extensive walking path along a creek during a six-weeks stay in a motel for Ted's medical care: "Denver's Cherry Creek." The final poem in this collection, "Girl on a Swing (Déjà vu in Torquay)," concerns a mature woman as she finds a garden swing in Devon, southern England. The narrator once again remembers childhood verses—Robert Louis Stevenson's—that she recited as a child while swinging now with her own tiny son.

Sybil's poetry has always come out of her life experiences. How appropriate, then, for her to recognize in "Maneuvers" the life centeredness of the poet's task, and to end this collection with the words, "Much of life is a poem, waiting."

Ted's collection of stories is set in Walthall and Pike Counties, Mississippi. The stories are focused in and around a farm house purchased in 1903 by his grandfather, George Washington Estess, who, with his wife, reared seven sons and one daughter in that house and on that land. The house dates to the last decade of the 19th century, had plumbing and electricity installed in the 1930s, as soon as it was available in that location, and is a typical rural Mississippi "homestead" that has been added to as the owner's family and needs have grown. There's a front porch that once faced a red clay road, paved today. From that porch, at least four generations of Estesses have watched the traffic pass, and have waved congenially to people passing by. (Although the farm house sits on the edge of Pike County, Walthall County, where Ted was actually raised and his father was the county agricultural agent, is known locally as "the cream pitcher" of the entire state of Mississippi, because of its dairy-based economy—hence the title of the volume.)

Ted's father, Ansel, and his six brothers and one sister, people these stories. Ted's descriptions of his father's life in these counties and in Tylertown, is a loving tribute to his parents and to his only brother, Roy, who died by accident in June, 2010. But the stories spread widely among the relatives, townspeople, and people of the counties and are as much about life in the 20th century in a small southern town and its rural surroundings as about the Estess family at large.

Sprinkled among the sagas and tales is a deceptive wisdom that could be missed if one is not cued to the narrator, and the narrator is always Ted. Whether he is quipping about his Dad's country cousin Kenneth, whose telephone Ted has to walk a quarter mile to use when he is at the farm house, or the long-standing pain of the family over the death of the oldest of the seven Estess sons, Lynn, for whom Ted is namesake, the picture is of a close-knit family who know and love each other, "warts and all." Ted's stories are for the larger Estess family, because they were often entertainment at the annual family gatherings, or at weddings or funerals. Only a few of that 20th century generation remain to tell and hear these family stories, so Ted has written and collected them for his son, Barrett, and his fifteen cousins, none of whom have much experience living in a small Mississippi town, and for anyone who dares to hear and find meaning in the universality of the human condition in the tales.

The narrator's ear is fine-tuned to the sounds and cadences of local speech patterns. In one short sequence he distinguishes between the common articulations of "prayer meeting" and "dentist"—clear enunciations demanded by his mother, LaVerne, against the commonly slurred "preyer meet-in" or "dennis" (75). Laced through the eleven titled pieces are numerous vignettes; some of them hang together sequentially, and others have the character of conversations

where one family member starts a story and just as he or she finishes, another story generates.

"Watching the Pine Trees Grow" is poignant for the sensitivity Ted demonstrates to the declining years of his father's life. As a positive legacy for his two sons, Ansel Estess had forested with pines much of the acreage of this family farm, and there is now a nicely growing pine forest across the road from the house. Sitting on the porch and watching the pines grow was once Ted's occupation when he used to visit the farm several times a year. In this series of stories are also several vignettes surrounding Ansel's annual anxieties about whether his garden will grow to his desired productivity, never presuming, but hoping for bountifulness in the face of nature's whims.

The father's own awareness of his advancing age and his removing the grapevines from his garden because his sons would not be able to tend them, however, is a gift of insight into the wisdom of one generation caring for its posterity. When asked why he cut down the grapevines, which he had enjoyed for several years and from which he had been able to make some wine from a Mississippi State University improved mucadine, Ansel's response was, "it was time" ("A Mississippi Laertes").

After an interruption with another family story, Ted, as narrator, muses about how his father knew it was time. In that brief musing, he notes that last year Ansel had taken the ax to an apple tree, the year before that same ax removed three plum trees. Preparing the land for those who will inherit it so that they can care for it is a part of the stewardship Ted's father assumed when he purchased this farm from his mother in 1952. This wisdom of the father is even further enriched with the telling of the experience of Ansel taking Ted and his brother Roy to make sure that both sons know where the stakes are from the survey of the land nearly forty years earlier in which the three had participated ("The Blue Hole"). Integral to the story of the Blue Hole is Ansel's memory of a special spring when, at hog killing time, he had washed hog's intestines for chittlins in the clear waters of the Blue Hole. Ted is not sentimental about life that used to be in that place, but he recognizes the value of place and memory. Ted's brother, his only sibling, sealed the moment with the promise that when the timber was cut, the Blue Hole would be preserved.

Ellen Douglas, another "Mississippi writer," reveals the dynamic of how personal histories influence a novelist in *Truth: Four Stories I am Finally Old Enough to Tell* (Algonquin Books: Chapel Hill NC 1998). The narrator uses these four stories, telling them completely and illustrates how she had used portions of the stories in previous writing. Ted's version of this phenomenon is a coming-of-age story (his own) about a past local lynching told from the perspectives of his father and his uncle. Ted's 1959 first hearing of the story of "Poody Cat" from his progenitors is prompted by a story in the *Jackson Daily News* of the murder of Mack Charles Parker. As father and son wondered about the evil of the world, Ansel recalled the 20s Poody Cat's tale. But Ted reflects on his later meeting of Sybil Pittman (his future spouse) from Poplarville, who, as a college student, shared with him that she had been at her school prom the night that Parker was murdered in Poplarville. (Sybil's "My Alice Blue Gown" describes one of her memories of this event. Both Ted and Sybil now claim that the facts of both of these violent happenings is one of the occurrences that catapulted them away from Mississippi for their education and their grown up lives.)

One of the gifts of the raconteur is the ability to see the ironies of life

and to be able to describe those ironies accurately, but without being maudlin. Ted accomplishes this with his final story, "Making Arrangements." Ted's mother is in the hospital in Tylertown and Ted is visiting. He decides that he should make some arrangements with the local mortuary, not leaving until death claims his mother, the details that must be attended, although anticipating the arrival of his brother, Roy to assist him. Roy never comes, and Ted must act alone to purchase a future casket for his mother. The narrator captures the voice of the local mortician, the humor of the man's candor describing the need for a vault to keep the coffin from floating away when the creek rises with the spring rains. Three years later, Ted was with LaVerne when she died while he was playing the piano for her in the dayroom of "Seasons of Discovery," the geriatric-care wing of the same local hospital. He makes the call to the mortician whose words of reality and comfort are "Don't you worry about nothin', Mr. Estess. You wait right there. We gonna take good care of yo' momma."

There's nothing in these stories that describes Ted Estess' life as scholar and administrator, creator of a dynamic academic program, the Honors College, University of Houston and its director and dean for over thirty years. For that kind of memoir you will have to request his curriculum vitae. But, in Ellen Douglas' word, there is much truth that Ted is now old enough at age 68 to tell, and he has been willing to share that truth with an audience that includes a large extended family as well as an even larger group of readers who will with amusement, extend to him a universal understanding, empathy, and nostalgia.

Sybil Pittman Estess and Ted Lynn Estess are products of similar environments. Both capture the essences of those past experiences of life in their poetry and prose. Each is distinctly gifted, and these two collections complement each other as Ted and Sybil have complemented each other for nearly half a century. Sybil's economy of words in her poetry allows readers to own experiences with her, supplementing her adventures with their own. Ted's sometimes rambling approach to the stories he is telling will cause some critics to think he needed a stronger editor. But, when one is telling stories, especially about family, one telling begets another before the first is finished. And, these are, first and foremost, a southern family's sagas that Ted is now old enough to tell. —Jonathan A. Lindsey

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All of Your Messages Have Been Erased, by Vivian Shipley. Louisiana Literature Press, 2010. 128 pages. \$14.95 paper.

What a journey Vivian Shipley takes us on in this her thirteenth book! Poet of both heart and conscience, she spans centuries as well as continents, speaking for people as different as Paula Hitler, Mary Shelley and Kentucky coal miners. Accordingly, her poems are complex, dense, primarily narrative but often with breathtakingly lyrical moments.

This volume in four sections opens with "Nature, Red in Tooth and Claw," weaving the memory of a Buddhist Cambodian woman in a Siem Reap Market

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