

Biographical Sketch

Michael Lloyd received his B.S in Chemical Engineering in 1984 and accepted a position at Henderson State University in 1993 shortly after earning his Ph.D. in Mathematics from Kansas State University. He has presented papers at meetings of the Academy of Economics and Finance, the American Mathematical Society, the Arkansas Conference on Teaching, the Mathematical Association of America, and the Southwest Arkansas Council of Teachers of Mathematics. He has also been an AP statistics consultant since 2002.

The Dictionary as Southern Cocktail: A Conversation with Roy Blount Jr.

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Abstract

An interview conducted via email with Southern writer and public radio humorist Roy Blount Jr.

Roy Blount Jr. is one of those rare writers whose actual voice has become almost as familiar as his literary one. Most weekends, you can hear his signature blend of Georgia drawl and rapid-fire wit on the NPR news quiz “Wait, Wait, Don’t Tell Me.” He periodically recites comical poetry and inflicts musical screeching (as founder of the fictional “Society for the Singing Impaired”) on Garrison Keillor’s “A Prairie Home Companion.” The Vanderbilt graduate has performed a successful off-Broadway one-man-show, appeared on several network TV shows, and stays busy on the college lecture circuit.

Despite all this talking, Blount has somehow managed to sit down and write 21 books, in a literary voice that, as Michael Dirda recently wrote in the Washington Post, “neatly balances real learning with easy-lop-ing charm.” His penchant for pithy puns, political petards and periodic alliterative passages produces sentences that pull chuckles from readers; he piles these into paragraphs and punch lines that can make them positively puncture a gut. With such a facility for wordplay, it is no wonder that one of Blount’s many side gigs is serving as a usage adviser to *The American Heritage Dictionary*. Evidently unsatisfied with merely providing guidance to the dictionary, he has now written one of his own, *Alphabet Juice: The Energies, Gists, and Spirits of Letters, Words, and Combinations Thereof; Their Roots, Bones, Innards, Piths, Pips, and Secret Parts, ... With Examples of Their Usage Foul and Savory*, recently released in paper by Farrar, Strauss and Giroux. The book explores the provenance of an eclectic variety of words in short, invariably funny essays that average about a page or two long.

Writing for Chapter 16, an online publication of Humanities Tennessee, Michael Ray Taylor managed to catch up with Blount between radio appearances and deadlines for a conversation on the book, the South and the state of American letters.

Taylor: What prompted you to write a dictionary (or, rather, sort-of-a-dictionary)?

Blount: I have always wanted to write a book about words. When I picked up a textbook in Linguistics and found there the astonishing, to me, notion that the relation of words to their meaning is arbitrary, I had an angle. Language to me has never been an abstract proposition. After all I picked it up from blood relatives, and from various other lively characters. The letters of the alphabet, themselves, have always been lively characters to me.

Taylor: Why did you give it that 18th century subtitle?

Blount: That's a 17th century subtitle, a tribute to the subtitle of a book on manners by my (presumable) ancestor Thomas Blount, whose *Glossographia* was the first English dictionary to attempt etymology.

Taylor: What's your earliest recollection of noticing the sounds and shape and peculiarities of words?

Blount: I remember seeing the word "all" in my mother's handwriting, and realizing I could read script as well as words in print. She had been teaching me to read by reading to me, among other things, the tales of Uncle Remus, old African trickster stories in respectfully spelled dialect, which captured the sound of speech on the page: the "Power to make the Paper speak," as Daniel Defoe put it in another connection.

Taylor: Were you consciously aiming for the perfect bathroom book with *Alphabet Juice*, or was that serendipity?

Blount: No, I did not have bathroom reading specifically in mind, but I welcome it with open arms.

Taylor: You have written often—and hilariously—about being a Southerner who chooses to live in the North. Do you have any habits designed to keep close to your Southern roots?

Blount: I go South a lot. Within any given couple of years I will have been at least once to New Orleans (my favorite place), Nashville (where I went to college), the Florida panhandle (where my father's people come from), Oxford (my mother was from Mississippi), Austin (where my sister lives), Chapel Hill (where my daughter and son-in-law and grandchildren live), Chattanooga (where the Fellowship of Southern Writers meets), the Smokies, Tarpon Springs, and my home town of Decatur, Georgia. I have good friends in all those places, and also in Memphis, Charleston, Mobile and Aiken.

Taylor: You're the author of 21 books, president of the Author's Guild, and a longstanding member of several writers' organizations. How would you describe the current state of American publishing?

Blount: The current state of publishing is up in the air. I hope I don't live to see the day that it is all on the Web.

Taylor: Along the same lines, for much of your career you have been one of the more prolific magazine freelancers in the country, with many of your stories later collected into books. How has the current crisis in the magazine industry affected you and your work?

Blount: I've enjoyed writing for magazines over the years, but I don't do it much lately. Fortunately I've never had to depend on one medium for my living. When I haven't had a book to write, I've had speeches to make, and vice-versa. So far. And then there is the trickle of revenue that is public radio.

Taylor: What do you think this means for American writers and readers?

Blount: The Web is running a lot of print media out of business and replacing them with opportunities for writers not to get paid. So it's a lot harder for freelance writers to support themselves now, not that it was ever more than narrowly feasible.

Taylor: You are founding member of the Rock Bottom Remainers, the all-writer rock band which member Dave Barry has described as playing music "as well as Metallica writes novels." We haven't heard much from the band lately. Any plans for a reunion tour?

Blount: A three-city Remainers tour is planned for March. I think Denver, L.A. and somewhere in between. It's hard to get everybody together since we range geographically from Miami to San Francisco to Maine. Not to mention all out of key.

Capturing Presidents: A Conversation with Doris Kearns Goodwin

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Abstract

An interview conducted via email with popular historian Doris Kearns Goodwin.

When President Obama chose his chief Democratic rival as Secretary of State, it was widely reported that the decision had been informed by his reading of *Band of Rivals*, a Pulitzer Prize-winning biography of Abraham Lincoln, which emphasized how the 16th President led by drawing together opponents. For bestselling historian Doris Kearns Goodwin, influencing today's leaders with her knowledge of the past was nothing new. She was an assistant to