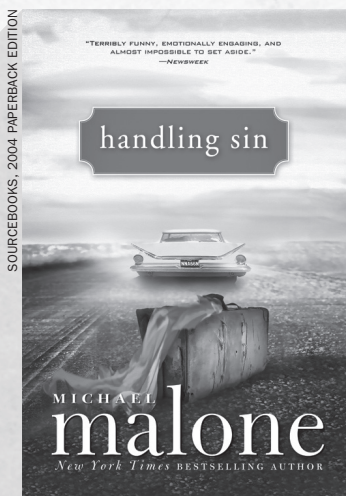
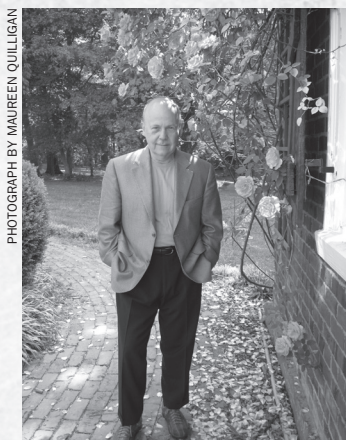


A Hero's Erran(t)d:

THE GROTESQUE, MODERN PARODY, AND SOUTHERN IDENTITY IN MICHAEL MALONE'S *HANDLING SIN*

by Jordan Stone

with illustrations by Rich Powell



ABOVE Michael Malone

Raleigh Hayes, the protagonist of Michael Malone's 1983 novel, *Handling Sin*, lives surrounded by what he perceives as madness propagated by grotesque characters, many of them members of his family. A supremely rational, collected, and seemingly isolated being, Raleigh processes life through an ironic voice, a practice both fed and thwarted by events that force him to set forth on a quest that satirizes not the present day but the failure to meaningfully affect it. Malone structures a narrative that criticizes through inversion the tradition of the *isolato* by showing Raleigh proving his heroism through acts that reintegrate him into humanity. Occuring between the Ides of March and Easter Sunday and ranging from the middle of North Carolina to Charleston, on to Atlanta and culminating in New Orleans, this "holy adventure" transposes the *carnivalesque* ritual and the folk grotesque onto Southern soil.¹ This narrative of laughter sees madness not as the shortcoming of one individual, but as a means to escape what Mikhail M. Bakhtin calls "the false truth of this world" in order to perceive society through radical eyes. Malone embraces and displays the folk grotesque as Bakhtin articulates it in *Rabelais and His World*: the "principle of laughter and the carnival spirit on which [the] grotesque is based destroys . . . all pretense of an extratemporal meaning and unconditional value of necessity." Bakhtin argues that, by being an "all-annihilating time," carnival and its grotesque "liberate man from all forms of inhuman necessity," which "frees human consciousness, thought and imagination for new potentialities."² The carnival spirit destroys and rejuvenates, in this case propelling Raleigh out of a Southern middle-class complacency that confuses individual and social dynamism for chaos.

Handling Sin presents this folk grotesque narrative of carnival through a modern parody of the mock epic and the picaresque tale, exemplifying Linda Hutcheon's theory that modern parodic discourse does not directly mock any certain text. Rather, the modern parody operates with a broader scope and in the more generous "form of imitation . . . characterized by ironic inversion" and "repetition with critical distance." Using this lens, I want to suggest that Malone employs "ironic inversion," at a "critical distance" to transform and reinvigorate both the Southern grotesque and "hero" figure.³ Ironically enough, Malone's "ironic inversion" operates in

¹ Michael Malone, *Handling Sin* (Boston: Little, Brown., 1983) 26; subsequently cited parenthetically.

² Mikhail M. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1984) 49; subsequently cited parenthetically.

³ Linda Hutcheon, "Modern Parody and Bakhtin," *Rethinking Bakhtin: Extensions and Challenges*, ed. Gary Saul Morson and Caryl Emerson (Evanston, IL: Northwestern UP, 1989) 87-88.