

## GLUTTONS FOR LOCAL COLOR

a review by Zackary Vernon

Allan Gurganus. *The Uncollected Stories of Allan Gurganus*. Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2021.

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**ALLAN GURGANUS** has been featured regularly in *NCLR* – an essay by him in 2007, essays about him in 2008, 2014 (by Zackary Vernon), 2018 (online and print issues), an interview with him in 2018 (also by Vernon), and most of his books reviewed over the years. His numerous honors include the North Carolina Award for Literature, and induction into the North Carolina Literary Hall of Fame.

Allan Gurganus's stories have a splendidly antique feel about them. That's not to say they're out of fashion. Rather, Gurganus refuses to bend or pander to trends in contemporary fiction. His style is both his own and one that possesses the gravity of nineteenth-century literature; the stories are ornate, the prose at times flowing and florid. Henry James comes to mind, as does Chekhov, whom he mentions specifically in the opening story of the collection. This is, as one of his characters says, "King James" storytelling (171). Gurganus's luminous tales are told in voices that don't feel of our time, and they are stranger and more beautiful for it.

Gurganus's preoccupation with past worlds and styles is immediately apparent in this new collection of nine stories. Take, for example, the first one, "The Wish for a Good Young Country Doctor," which was published in *The New Yorker* in 2020. The story begins with a frame narrative in which a graduate student from the University of Iowa's American Studies program travels to small-town, Midwestern antique stores in search of "folk manifestations" and "outsider art" (17, 19). The importance of the material objects themselves quickly diminishes, and it becomes clear that what matters to the character is the human connections these objects evoke. He is, like Gurganus, a collector and curator of stories.

Beyond the playful metafictional elements of "The Wish for a Good Young Country Doctor," there is a serious and pressing message for our current moment. One of the stories that the student discovers concerns a mid-nineteenth-century doc-

tor who arrives in a small town during a deadly cholera epidemic. The doctor saves many lives with his scientifically informed advice and compassionate approach, believing as he does that "civilization depends on nobody going untended" (35). This, of course, resonates beyond the context of this nineteenth-century plague. Gurganus also offers commentary on more recent events – from the AIDS epidemic that he himself lived through to our current battle with COVID-19. In such crises, surely the most important thing we can accomplish is to ensure that everyone is well tended to.

Other stories have less clear ethical imperatives to offer. "The Mortician Confesses" is told from the perspective of a sheriff in Falls, NC (the fictionalized version of Gurganus's own hometown of Rocky Mount) as he investigates a funeral home worker whom he catches having sex with the body of a dead woman. It's an intensely uncomfortable story from start to finish, inviting us to try to understand not only a man who violates a corpse but also a sheriff who finds the whole ordeal titillating.

Taboos abound in Gurganus's work, and he forces readers to face them and consider whether they should remain taboo. In some instances, his characters overcome racism and homophobia, but in others, as in "The Mortician Confesses," the characters continue to dwell in a very dark place. At one point, the sheriff remarks, "When it comes right down to it, we think we know decency and what local folks will do for other locals, but we ain't got clue



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number one as to what-all lurks in any human heart, much less lower-down especially, now, do we? Ever?" (69).

Gurganus is a writer who thrusts the unexpected and unexplainable onto ordinary characters. But he's kinder to, and more accepting of, the people who populate his works than, say, Flannery O'Connor. The way to grace for him is less narrow, less about salvation in a religious sense and more about learning to empathize. And empathy can be a tricky or even dangerous business if we confront characters like those in "The Mortician Confesses." Gurganus leaves us to squirm in some of these stories, as we struggle to comprehend both the good and evil that gain purchase in his characters' hearts.

Some characters arrest my attention more than others. The protagonist in "He's at the Office" is less engaging than most. This man cannot cope with retirement from an office

supply company, so his family tricks him into thinking he is still employed by setting up a fake office, where they enable him to pretend to work until his death. Although I struggle to connect with this man, even here Gurganus manages to get me to think deeply about his tragic life. The character is so vividly presented that I feel like I know him, and in knowing him could extend a kindness to

him or to people like him.

All the stories in this collection maintain Gurganus's customary focus on the lives of local people, most often those from Falls. In "Unassisted Human Flight," a reporter investigates a middle-aged man who, at the age of eight, was picked up by a tornado and allegedly flew through the air for a quarter of a mile. Everyone in the town is obsessed with the case because they're "gluttons for local color" (92). The reporter "worship[s] unvarnished 'Non-fiction'" and is "downright anti-novelistic," saying, "Who needs make-believe – given a world constructed so weirdly as ours?" (96). In a later story, another character makes a similar point, noting that "In a town this small, fiction's unnecessary" (176; emphasis in original).

After he confirms the veracity of the child's "unassisted flight," the reporter states, "We grant ourselves so little daily hope. Meanwhile, barely notic-

ing, we've already managed wonders" (124). This theme continues in "A Fool for Christmas," a story about a mall pet shop owner who helps a teenage girl delivery her baby after her religious parents reject her. The owner asserts, "Ain't people wonderful!" (143), as he reminisces about the girl's aplomb.

Although sometimes dark and distressing, Gurganus's stories possess a sense of unadulterated curiosity. Human nature thrills and horrifies the characters in turns. Gurganus seems to be similarly enamored by human potential. To limit one's potential for any reason – fundamentalism, sexism, racism, homophobia – is rendered tragic in his stories, for to do so prevents the individual from attaining happiness and fulfillment, and collectively we then miss out on whatever may have resulted from that person's full experience and expression. To limit another's potential, in other words, is tantamount to murder by increments.

At the end of a story about an aging woman who leads historical tours of Falls, she remarks that God must have taken "early retirement," leaving us on earth with "no practical instructions" (192). Gurganus suggests that in the absence of a divine intermediary, we must look to one another for help. As one character reminds us, "It's a privilege to at least try saving one another" (209). Perhaps we should more often look to stories like these for models of how to live and how to treat one another, attempting compassion always, imperfect but incessant. ■