

Woolf's simile recalls her essay's famous thesis that a writer's material needs must be met in order to allow time for imagination and the work of writing. But Woolf's comparison also suggests other connections: a work's connection with the world – the “life” it dramatizes. Michael Malone's *The Last Noel* and Isabel Zuber's *Salt*, though quite different, are novels that demonstrate the importance of those ties.



Courtesy of Michael Malone

Michael Malone signing his book after a reading last Christmas at historical Burwell School in Hillsborough.

Michael Malone's *The Last Noel* is his ninth book. A review of his body of work reveals his facility with a variety of genres: mystery novels, short stories, nonfiction, and plays; he has even lent his talents to the daytime drama *One Life to Live*, for which he won an Emmy in 1994. By and large, his works are highly entertaining, sometimes farcical, always peopled with interesting characters. In the successful North Carolina-based “Justin and Cuddy” mysteries (*Uncivil Seasons* [1983], *Time's Witness* [1989], and *First Lady* [2001]), as in well as in his critically acclaimed short story collection *Red Clay, Blue Cadillac: Twelve Southern Women* (2002), his characterizations are often wry, tongue in cheek, and his narrators tend toward the humorous and sardonic. *The Last Noel's* tone, however, is somewhat more serious, and the rollicking tone of those earlier works is muted here.

“attached to life at all four corners”

a review by Kristina L. Knotts

Malone, Michael. *The Last Noel*. Napierville, Ill: Sourcebooks, 2002. \$19.95 cloth, \$14.00 paper

Zuber, Isabel. *Salt*. New York: Picador, 2002. \$25.00 cloth, \$14.00 paper

In *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf writes that “fiction is like a spider's web, attached ever so lightly perhaps, but still attached to life at all four corners” (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1929, 43).

Malone returns to fictional Hillston, North Carolina, as the setting for *The Last Noel*. Unlike earlier works, the novel is a romance but recalls familiar themes from past fiction: male-female relationships, black-white relationships, class distinctions, and cultural change. Though many contemporary Southern works have focused on interracial female friendships, few have depicted male-female interracial friendships and romances. Friendship and love between a white girl, Noni Tilden, and a black boy, Kaye King, are at the heart of this Malone novel.

Significantly, since both Noni and Kaye were born on Christmas day (Noni in North Carolina, Kaye in Philadelphia), all of the novel's twelve chapters take place around the Christmas holiday. The first chapter of the novel begins in 1963, the year the two seven-year-olds first meet when, early on Christmas morning, Kaye enters Noni's bedroom window to invite her to go sledding. Malone uses this first encounter to encapsulate their different but complementary personalities: Kaye's adventurousness and Noni's conventionality. Also contrasted is the dramatic schism of their material lives: Noni's parents' careless affluence with Kaye's mother's serious political commitment and ensuing struggle with depression. After this start at the height of the Civil Rights movement, *The Last Noel* follows the two protagonists until 1996, though the novel concludes in 2003.

Although she is never "seen" in the novel, Kaye's mother, Deborah, a former Civil Rights activist who raises her son until her depression prevents her, is one of the novel's most interesting figures, particularly her attempts to educate her son on the history of African Americans' struggle for equality and her desire that he become a strong, compassionate man.

Likewise, Kaye emerges as the more compelling of the two main characters because of his unique relationship with his mother and his grandparents, Amma and Tatlock Fairley, who raise him. His intellect, his work ethic, and his integrity make him a heroic figure in the novel, particularly considering the barriers he has faced in terms of race and his mother's illness.

The Last Noel is imbued with a little of what Jane Tompkins might call "sentimental power," at least in regard to Malone's idealized treatment of Noni, who figures as the most loving and compassionate character and whose care for others supercedes her own needs. She stands in stark contrast to the other characters, particularly her cold, critical mother and her avaricious brother Wade, both of whom are petty, narcissistic racists. Noni's downfall is her adherence to culturally scripted gender, class, and racial expectations; and her allegiance to these, despite her better judgment, brings her misery. Malone shows the gradual wearing down of Noni's independence, especially as she enters adolescence and loses her natural assertiveness; even her body language conveys her capitulation: "there was a slight bow to her back, a curving in toward others as she listened or spoke" (146). These qualities add to the emotional appeal of *The Last Noel*, but, in contrast to Harriet Beecher Stowe's revolutionary zeal in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (to which Tompkins was referring with the phrase "sentimental power"), *The Last Noel* offers no call to overthrow conventional mores, nor does it promise to. It *does*, however, offer heroes and heroines (and villains) for the new South. Ultimately, the untenable love story between Kaye and Noni demonstrates the tragedy of divisions created by class and race.

The Last Noel does not have the pacing or the whip-smart dialogue of other Malone works, but the author does accomplish some interesting things here, mainly his success in showing a meaningful, tender relationship between two caring adults of different races against a backdrop of over thirty years of American social change.