

A TALE OF TWO SOUTHS

a review by Fred Hobson

Ed Southern. *Fight Songs: A Story of Love and Sports in a Complicated South*. Blair, 2021.

FRED HOBSON is Lineberger Professor of Humanities, Emeritus at UNC Chapel Hill. His numerous books include the memoir *Off the Rim: Basketball and Other Religions in a Carolina Childhood* (University of Missouri Press, 2006; reviewed in *NCLR* 2007). His work has appeared in *The Atlantic*, *The New York Times Book Review*, *The Times Literary Review*, *The Sewanee Review*, *The Southern Review*, and other publications.

ED SOUTHERN is the Executive Director of The North Carolina Writers' Network. He has authored and edited three previous books: *The Jamestown Adventure: Accounts of the Virginia Colony 1605–1614* (John F. Blair, 2004), *Voices of the American Revolution in the Carolinas* (John F. Blair, 2009), and *Parlous Angels: Stories* (Press 53, 2009). He has also written for *storySouth*, the North Carolina 10x10 Festival, *South Writ Large*, *The Dirty Spoon*, and *NCLR*, among others. He was the 2015 recipient of the Ethel N. Fortner Writer and Community Award. He lives in Winston-Salem, NC.

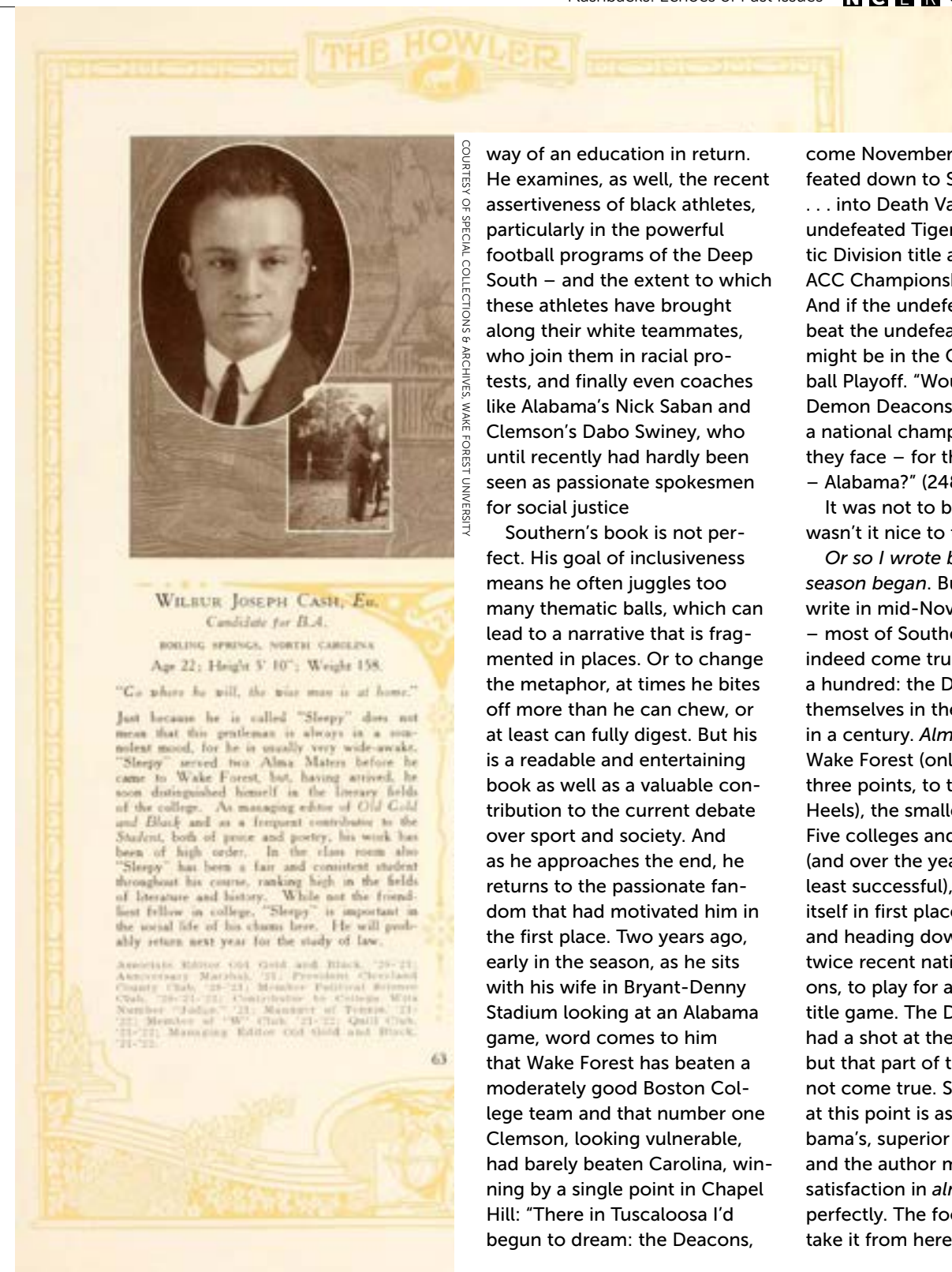
I suppose you could call Ed Southern's *Fight Songs* a holistic book. It's a narrative about football and basketball, about the joys and perils of excessive fandom, but it's also a book about Southern history, politics, regions (and their differences), race, class, culture in a broader sense, and – toward the end – Covid.

It is also a memoir and one that turns into a study of two states, North Carolina and Alabama, and two universities, Wake Forest University and the University of Alabama – two institutions, athletically speaking, rarely mentioned in the same sentence. It is in this respect that memoir comes into play. Southern is a Demon Deacon who grew up largely in Winston-Salem, who was a Deacon fan as a child and then went to Wake Forest. He happened to meet and then marry a young woman from Birmingham, a graduate of Alabama who was a rabid Crimson Tide fan. Stricken at first with Bama envy – the nation's leading football program over the past decade – he becomes in time an Alabama fan, but he is aware that his own school is the smallest, and one of the weakest, of all Power Five schools (although with a recent record of modest success). His wife graciously becomes a Deacon fan as well; being so different in every way, the two schools are in no way rivals.

But the story Southern tells is about much more than the tale of two universities; it is the

story of the differences between two states, two regions – and the culture of each. Alabama has always been conservative, North Carolina is – or was until recently – reputed to be progressive. Beyond that, Alabama lives and dies with football, North Carolina with basketball. In fact, the entire Southeastern Conference, to which Alabama belongs, is obsessed with football; the Atlantic Coast Conference, to which Wake Forest University (as well as Duke University, UNC, and NC State University) belongs, is obsessed with basketball. (Though Southern doesn't push it further, the reader might: only the northernmost part of the SEC, at least until recently, has cared much about basketball; only the southernmost part of the ACC, traditionally speaking, has been passionate about football – which, in the age of conference realignment, might prompt one to propose an ACC swap of Clemson and Florida State to the SEC for Kentucky and Vanderbilt).

But, as I've suggested, Southern's book is about much more than sports. He understands the South well, drawing on a number of Southern historians and commentators – chief among them W.J. Cash, who, he proudly points out, is an alumnus of Wake Forest. Southern is keenly aware of the larger issues in college sports – the exploitation of players who make millions for the universities that give them scholarships and who usually get little in the



ABOVE W.J. Cash's senior portrait and bio in the Wake Forest University 1922 yearbook

way of an education in return. He examines, as well, the recent assertiveness of black athletes, particularly in the powerful football programs of the Deep South – and the extent to which these athletes have brought along their white teammates, who join them in racial protests, and finally even coaches like Alabama's Nick Saban and Clemson's Dabo Swiney, who until recently had hardly been seen as passionate spokesmen for social justice

Southern's book is not perfect. His goal of inclusiveness means he often juggles too many thematic balls, which can lead to a narrative that is fragmented in places. Or to change the metaphor, at times he bites off more than he can chew, or at least can fully digest. But his is a readable and entertaining book as well as a valuable contribution to the current debate over sport and society. And as he approaches the end, he returns to the passionate fandom that had motivated him in the first place. Two years ago, early in the season, as he sits with his wife in Bryant-Denny Stadium looking at an Alabama game, word comes to him that Wake Forest has beaten a moderately good Boston College team and that number one Clemson, looking vulnerable, had barely beaten Carolina, winning by a single point in Chapel Hill: "There in Tuscaloosa I'd begun to dream: the Deacons,

come November, rolling undefeated down to South Carolina . . . into Death Valley, facing the undefeated Tigers for the Atlantic Division title and a spot in the ACC Championship game" (247). And if the undefeated Deacs beat the undefeated Tigers, they might be in the College Football Playoff. "Would the mighty Demon Deacons have a shot at a national championship? Would they face – for the first time ever – Alabama?" (248).

It was not to be, of course, But wasn't it nice to think so.

Or so I wrote before the 2021 season began. But now – as I write in mid-November of 2021 – most of Southern's dream has indeed come true. A chance in a hundred: the Deacons find themselves in their finest season in a century. *Almost* undefeated Wake Forest (only one loss, by three points, to the despised Tar Heels), the smallest of all Power Five colleges and universities (and over the years arguably the least successful), indeed finds itself in first place in the ACC and heading down to Clemson, twice recent national champions, to play for a spot in the ACC title game. The Deacs *almost* had a shot at the national title, but that part of the dream would not come true. Still, their record at this point is as good as Alabama's, superior to Clemson's, and the author must take some satisfaction in *almost* calling it perfectly. The football gods will take it from here. ■