A LITTLE MERCY LEFT IN THE WORLD AFTER ALL

a review by Jim Coby

Matthew Griffin. *Hide*. New York: Bloomsbury, 2016.

Michael Keenan Gutierrez. *The Trench Angel*. Fredonia, NY: Leap Frog Press, 2015.

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MATTHEW GRIFFIN was born and raised in Greensboro, NC. After graduating from The Iowa Writer's Workshop, Griffin relocated to the South to teach at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette. *Hide* is his first novel. He and his husband currently reside in New Orleans. Read more about him on his website and in Jim Coby's interview with him forthcoming in the *NCLR* 2017 print issue.

MICHAEL KEENAN GUTIERREZ is a graduate of the University of Massachusetts and University of New Hampshire. He has held fellowships from the University of Houston and the New York Public Library, and his screenplay *The Granite State* was a finalist of the Austin Film Festival. He and his wife currently reside in Chapel Hill, where he teaches at UNC Chapel Hill. Read more about him on his website.

There's a well tread comment from Kurt Vonnegut's novel *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater* in which his protagonist blesses a pair of infants at their baptism with the words

> "Welcome to Earth. It's hot in the summer and cold in the winter. It's round and wet and crowded. At the outside, babies, you've got about a hundred years here. There's only one rule that I know of, babies – :
>
> "God damn it, you've got to be kind."[1]

It's a simple and affecting statement, an irreverent take on the Golden Rule as only Vonnegut could. But during increasingly turbulent and polarizing times, these words continue to ring true, that kindness and love are, above all, what make life fulfilling. Comes now a pair of eloquent and engaging books from first time North Carolinian novelists Matthew Griffin and Michael Keenan Gutierrez, each tackling the subject of love in his own unique voice.

Matthew Griffin's *Hide* revolves around the romance between Wendell, a taxidermist, and Frank, a World War II veteran, who appears outside of Wendell's business in an unnamed rural Appalachian town one day. When Frank introduces himself, Wendell, seeing Frank's "wide and earnest" smile, thinks he could "be struck down by it, the way it struck down mortals to behold Zeus in his full, blazing divinity, reduced them to ash, the painful glory of him" (21). From that moment, the pair becomes inseparable, and we observe as they navigate both their personal and public lives in a region that doesn't understand them and doesn't seem particularly interested in trying to. *Hide*'s narrative oscillates between scenes of Wendell and Frank's early, awkward courtship during the 1950s and their comfortable, if a little lonely, lives in rustic seclusion sixty years down the line. As cultural mores trouble the couple in the early narrative, the perils of aging present themselves in the couple's later life when Frank suffers a stroke that affects both his physical and mental capacities, rendering him incapable of taking care of himself. What follows is a lucid and endearing portrait of deep, genuine love in the face of seemingly insurmountable odds.

It's to Griffin's credit that he so skillfully balances the parallel narratives. During the scenes set in present day, readers might be moved toward frustration at Frank's inability to control his life with the same skills he did previously, or toward an uneasiness with the sardonic, and at times, abrasive lens through which Wendell views the world. Any irritation that we might feel toward the characters is quickly remedied, however, by Griffin's portraits of the two men in their younger, more vibrant lives. We understand that they have been irrevocably shaped by years of isolation and that, at the very root of their relationship, is an indestructible, and beautifully rendered bond.

When one thinks about Carolinians who write about gay characters, Randall Kenan and Dorothy Allison immediately spring to mind. Whereas Kenan and Allison tend to explore their characters' earlier lives through a hyper-violent lens, Griffin's novel is far more subdued. The loneliness that pervades the writings of Allison and Kenan is found in *Hide*, but violence is substituted with tender, quiet moments of questioning and fear. When the

[1] Kurt Vonnegut, *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater: or Pearls Before Swine* (New York: Holte, Rinehart, 1965) 129.

RIGHT **Matthew Griffin (right) and his husband, Raymie, at a surprise wedding ceremony given by friends at Lake Hartwell, 11 July 2015**

characters embark on a trip to the farmer's market or grocery store, they might as well be preparing for a journey to a foreign country for all of the careful planning and choreography necessary to ensure that neither runs into the other, a scandal that could provoke citizens of the community to "talk."

One of the major strengths of this novel is its pacing. Griffin evinces a skill in building tension that a crime novelist strives for. Of course, there's no mystery to unravel, no violent crime in this novel, so the tension accumulates during instances of everyday life, particularly those instances of Frank and Wendell's budding romance. For example, a scene early in the novel finds Frank visiting Wendell at the taxidermy shop. After a brief conversation, Frank nervously asks, "Can I stay?" (58). Rather than immediately providing Wendell's response, Griffin skillfully interrupts the dialogue with a paragraph of exposition. The prose equivalent of a pregnant pause lingers in the air, effectively relocating some of Frank's anxiety within the reader, until Wendell finally replies, "Only if you relax. You're making me nervous" (58). The reader feels the same.

In reviewing *Hide*, Gina Webb proclaimed, "Griffin . . . has created two characters so endearing, infuriating and real they could be your own Southern grandparents crossed with the Odd Couple."[2] I agree wholeheartedly, and I think that this emotional capacity is rooted in the novel's use of language. Griffin possesses an adroit ear for dialogue. Whether in the courtship scenes where open-ended questions birth pregnant pauses, or in the scenes of the couple's later life, when exhaustion and fifty years of cohabitation have rendered each man keenly aware of the other's ticks, Frank and Wendell's conversations are at once humorous, revealing, and occasionally quite devastating. I would wager that anyone who grew up in the South will easily identify their own grandparents when reading Wendell and Frank's playfully bickering conversations in the contemporary scenes.

As serious and occasionally devastating as *Hide* is, moments of levity are frequent and serve to relieve some of the anxiety leveled against the couple by a society that refuses to understand them. And so, we get laugh out loud moments, such as when Wendell discovers Frank crawling through an alley on his hands and knees toward the taxidermy shop "so nobody can establish a pattern" (76). These moments are touching and humorous because we have all experienced a love that would drive us to such absurd lengths; but they are also heart-wrenching, because these men are driven to these lengths.

If Matt Griffin's novel attempts to reshape our conceptions of love and community in the South during the past sixty years through ruminations on quiet dignity, then **Michael Keenan Gutierrez's** fever dream of a novel celebrates the cacophonous noise of war and labor dissonance in the post-World War I American West. Set in the fictional mining town of New Sligo, CO, ***The Trench Angel*** follows Neal Stephens, a former war photographer and current denizen of local watering holes, as he stumbles in and out of bars and museums, attempting to scrape together something resembling a respectable life. His already complicated life becomes increasingly more so when Clyde O'Leary, the town's sheriff, is shot in the head, ostensibly from the gun of someone he was attempting to blackmail. The problem is, O'Leary had dirt on pretty much everyone in New Sligo, and of those whom he didn't, he still managed to make enemies. "To O'Leary's murderer," toasts Lazy Eye Norris, the town's bartender and one of the novel's most intriguing characters, upon hearing of the sheriff's demise. "May they bronze

COURTESY OF MATTHEW GRIFFIN

[2] Gina Webb, "*Hide: A Love Letter To Gay Couple Living In '50s Era South,*" rev. of *Hide* by Matthew Griffin, *Atlanta Journal Constitution* 15 Apr. 2016: web.

PHOTOGRAPH BY MELISSA GEIL

his likeness in the town square, so the generations can admire a true god-damn hero" (25). When the dust settles, Neal and his sister, Tillie, are named suspects. What follows is a McCarthy-esque reimagining of Western tropes, as Neal navigates saloons, train yards, and labor strikes in an attempt to clear his and Tillie's names, while also quelling the discord that arises from the re-emergence of Jesse Stephens, Neal's anarchist father, whose desire to destroy financial institutions and museums through explosive pyrotechnics led him around the world, before returning to New Sligo.

As is clear from this sparse plot description, this is a complex and busy novel. It certainly cannot be said that Gutierrez in an unambitious writer. Condensing all of the narrative threads running throughout *The Trench Angel* into a single discernable statement proves quite challenging. Needless to say, the disorientation and confusion that plagues Neal is contagious, and the reader, too, will at times wonder what precisely is going on, which serves the novel quite well. In fact, given the moral ambiguity so prevalent in the novel, it only makes sense that we should see some malleability within the plot. And, as with so many aspects of Neal's life, we have to be patient and wait for all of the narrative threads to unspool before we are able to glimpse a completed picture, which, even then, is messy. As Cormac McCarthy did with his Border Trilogy and *Blood Meridian*, Gutierrez is remapping the American West as a realm where easy dichotomies are nowhere to be found. Although Seamus, the town's founder, believes he has "built his own city on the hill, where right and wrong was as clear as the rivers before coal" (237), New Sligo quickly devolves into a town of miscreants and ne'er-do-wells, through a charming cast, who thrive in life's grey areas.

Gutierrez clearly took great pleasures and pains in composing this neo-Western yarn. The pain comes through exhaustive research, which is cited at the end of the novel. A bibliography of numerous academic histories of World War I, Colorado, and the mining community demonstrate the careful planning behind Gutierrez's novel and serves to emphasize the point that an event need not have actually happened to be true. These historic details are never burdensome, however, and enhance the overall tone of the novel.

The converse to the historical aspects rests in the creation of several memorable characters. In particular Jesse Stephens, the town's resident anarchist, shines. Jesse's monologue chapters, where sentences are often punctuated with the nickname "Cowboy," a pet name of sorts for his estranged son, are a pure pleasure to read. Perhaps even more enjoyable than the dialogue, however, are Jesse's tall tales about his anarchist exploits across the world, which serve to make the narrative ever more engaging. For example, when in the middle of dynamiting a target, Jesse is instructed by his partner in crime and life, Mattie, that they "might need another [stick of dynamite]. Remember Budapest" (229), we catch a glimpse of the unspoken history that underlies their nihilist tendencies. While we never learn what happened in Budapest, we certainly wish that we did. Rarely do we see so vital and fascinating a secondary character that he stands to overshadow our protagonist, but that is precisely who Gutierrez created in Jesse Stephens.

Similar to *Hide*, Gutierrez predicated his novel on a passionate love that must be concealed. The information for which O'Leary was blackmailing Neal lies in his marriage to Lorraine, a black woman, while he was living in France. Although the couple is ultimately separated by the cruelty of war, Neal, a white man, remains steadfastly devoted to his bride, an act that, if uncovered, would land him in prison for miscegenation. Gutierrez presents brief snapshots of Neal and Lorraine's romance through short flashback chapters, glimpses of the war-torn front lines where death and hunger are the norm, and friends disappear at a moment's notice, never to be seen again.

As with Griffin's novel, Gutierrez's ultimately points toward the realization that in a place where every living thing exists under a persistent blanket of threat, love, whether between romantic partners or between family, might well be the only quality that can make life bearable. Amidst the ravages and pressures of modern existence, love, these authors suggest, is the only thing worth saving and the only thing that can save us. ■

ABOVE **Micheal Keenan Gutierrez reading from his new novel at Fly Leaf Books, Chapel Hill, NC, 27 Oct. 2015**