

## Seeing Ourselves: North Carolina LGBTQ+ Literature

by Dwight Tanner, Guest Feature Editor

I am honored and delighted – and maybe even a little daunted – to be the guest feature editor for *NCLR*'s 2025 special feature sections on North Carolina LGBTQ+ literature. Exploring and learning more about the rich history of queer North Carolina voices, I've been repeatedly reminded of the diverse range of LGBTQ+ writing: powerful stories that can broaden perspectives, foster understanding, and provide invaluable representation, effectively allowing queer individuals the benefit of "seeing" themselves in a world that often asks them to hide.

I'm reminded of a character description in Randall Kenan's *A Visitation of Spirits*. Horace Cross – a gay, Black teenager in Kenan's fictional Tims Creek, NC – is described as "flawed as far as the community was concerned. First, he loved men; a simple, normal deviation, but a deviation this community would never accept. And second, he didn't quite know who he was." By depicting a wide range of historically overlooked identities and experiences, LGBTQ+ literature has the ability to help queer readers understand who they are, our history and varied experiences, and, perhaps most importantly in 2025, that we are not alone in our struggles and in our joys.

Working on gathering material for this special feature occasioned me to recall being a teenager in a local bookstore in Phoenix, AZ, where I came across a copy of David Sedaris's *Naked*. I had no idea who he was at the time, or that he was gay – but something about the first few pages I read made me curious, sensing, in some way or other,

a kindred spirit in the voice on the page. I scoured the back cover; no mention of his sexuality in the bio or in the description of the essays, which previewed stories about Sedaris growing up in North Carolina, a place I had never been or guessed would one day be my home. Clearly, I did not look closely at the table of contents, where I would have noticed the ninth essay, titled "I Like Guys."

I remember, quite vividly, my reading experience; the distinct style and wry humor was both hilarious and oddly comforting. My suspicions grew, particularly when Sedaris describes in various essays how, growing up, he never quite felt like he belonged, even if he didn't understand why. I finally got to that ninth essay – and, for the first time that I recall, I read about another person realizing and coming to terms with the fact that he was gay. I don't know how much I registered at the time exactly what this meant to me; but I know that I felt something, certainly less alone.

For many, encountering characters and stories that reflect their own experiences can be a transformative and affirming experience. It offers a sense of belonging and validation, counteracting the feelings of isolation that often accompany being part of a marginalized group, which is also why it remains critical that we continue to find, bolster, and celebrate a diverse range of voices, even within this multi-faceted community.

This section, the first of the year's featured content, begins with poet Amber Flora Thomas's "Afterlife." The poem explores the poignancy of quotidian intimacy, particularly the thoughts,



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memories, and impressions that can be evoked by first noticing the otherwise easily overlooked evidence of those we love.

The consideration of things and people who are often unconsidered continues in the next entry, Erick Daniel Aguilar's "Hurricane Season," selected by Rebecca McClanahan for honorable mention in the 2024 Alex Albright Creative Nonfiction Prize.

While on a plane flying to see his dying father, the author begins to tell his father's story as a Honduran immigrant working in North Carolina, first in the tobacco fields and then at a turkey processing facility. The story is punctuated, however, with Aguilar's own life experiences, particularly after he and his mother reunite with his father in Mt. Olive, reminding us of the ways that, perhaps even more so in immigrant and migrant families, both a parent's story and their children's become, in many ways, inextricable from each other.

Aguillar's essay – accompanied by the evocative artwork of Clarissa Gernat (who was also born in Honduras) – avoids easy morals and trite meanings, while importantly depicting the far-too-often overlooked lives and histories of the migrant workers and their families, whom North Carolina, and the US as a whole, rely upon.

Hurricanes and their aftermath appear throughout this timely essay, functioning as an impactful illustration of the aftereffects of storms and immigrant policies, that what happens "over there" is inextricably linked to "here," and vice versa – reminders of all that gets swept up (literally and figuratively) in such storms.

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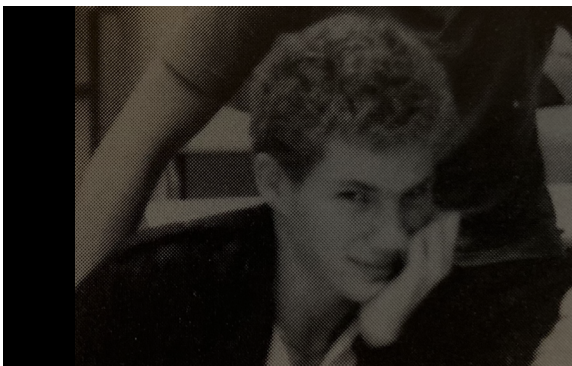
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In the first of three book reviews in this special feature section, Jennifer McGaha assesses David Sedaris's latest essay collection, *Happy-Go-Lucky*, reminding us of all of the things we love about Sedaris and his writings. These essays run the gamut of heavy topics (COVID-19 and gun violence) to the more lighthearted (flea market adventures and getting his teeth straightened late in life), often within the same essay. McGaha's review highlights how Sedaris manages to make us laugh, even in the most serious moments, while still finding ways to surprise and to make the reader think critically and anew about the various topics he dissects.

If there is a through-thread in the collection, McGaha posits, it's that of the decline and ultimate death of Sedaris's problematic father, which becomes an opportunity to also explore not only the history of his abusive treatments, but also how Sedaris and his siblings "pulled together" to both process the trauma and mourn "the father [they] never had." As McGaha argues, one of the valuable aspects of Sedaris's writing is his unapologetic and brave choice to "lay bare what most of us would never have spoken of," effectively allowing "us to see our own flawed selves" on the page.

Next, long-time *NCLR* contributor Barbara Bennett reviews Minrose Gwin's latest novel, *Beautiful Dreamers*. Bennett first outlines Gwin's story, which focuses on three "othered" characters in the Deep South in 1953. As Bennett notes, the value of Gwin's novel goes well beyond the intricacies of the fascinating characters and engaging story to also situate the narrative in the context of Civil Rights protests and the "virulent homophobic rhetoric" on the rise nationally. This historical context aids the novel in its exploration of the often tragic "consequences of being the other" in a novel about people who, nevertheless, "imagine a better world than they live in."

Finally, Olivia Cash reviews the affecting memoir *I Wouldn't Normally Do This Kind of Thing*, by Marshall Moore, which details his experiences growing up in Greenville, NC, and how he ultimately moves on and past the trauma inflicted by his parents who were unhealthily obsessed with their son's gender and masculinity. Nevertheless, the memoir also details how Moore uses his intellect and talent to escape and ultimately find himself and his community. Cash notes how Moore avoids linking his parents' abusive treatment of him to stereotypes of the South and the oft-perpetuated notion of the South itself as an "othered" aberration, and his memoir raises questions about the culpability of community at large while highlighting how the harm often inflicted upon queer children does not solely occur in a far off and particularly deviant place.

As we finalize this section for the Winter issue, I'm excited to share in the coming months the many diverse and powerful selections by and about LGBTQ+ writers in the remaining online issues and the upcoming print issue. Be sure to subscribe (or resubscribe) now to receive the summer print issue, which, among other pieces, will include three interviews with incredible North Carolina writers – Gabrielle Calvocoressi, De'Shawn Charles Winslow, and Jessica Jacobs – and essays and critical articles about a wide-range of established, emerging, and even overlooked writers, such as Randall Kenan, Carter Sickels, and Carl Wittman and Allan Troxler, respectively.

You can also look forward to the publication of new and exciting creative pieces from writers you probably recognize (such as Jim Grimsley), and authors we expect to hear more from in the future. Personally, I'm so grateful to *NCLR* for the opportunity to play a small part in sharing and learning more – both about and from – these vital North Carolina LGBTQ+ voices. ■