

## DEBUT NOVEL BY CAROLINA NEWCOMER OFFERS THRILL RIDE

a review by

Henry L. Wilson

Mason Boyles. *Bark On*.  
Driftwood Press, 2023.

**HENRY L. WILSON** is a retired English professor and native East Tennessean who taught writing and American literature for many years, including a course in Southern literature at Lebanon Valley College in Pennsylvania. He earned his PhD in English from the University of Tennessee in 1993 and continues to teach on a voluntary basis in a variety of areas, including literature, East Tennessee history, and Spanish.

**MASON BOYLES** grew up in southeastern North Carolina, where he trained and raced as a nationally competitive junior triathlete. He studied writing at UNC Chapel Hill, earned his MFA from UC Irvine, and is pursuing a PhD from Florida State University.

ABOVE AND OPPOSITE Biking at  
Kure Beach, NC



This debut novel by Mason Boyles is a dynamic tour de force of the hitherto largely unexamined triathlon community. Boyles grabs the reader from the start with his compact, often barebones, prose style (heavy on nominative phrases, short on verbs, transitions, and connective "little words"), as well as his often-frenetic narrative, with a highly episodic presentation throughout, even extending to Joycean stream-of-consciousness style at times. In short, readers encounter no shortage of forward momentum in this tumbling avalanche of a novel.

While such an approach makes sense given the subject matter, as well as reflecting the problematic state of the novel's emotionally scarred, often unreliable, narrator, the unprepared reader may find it difficult to engage with the disjointed narrative, a difficulty enhanced by the shifting perspectives and cacophonous voices that frequently take over the story line, replete with flashbacks and sporadic inner monologues that can be hard to follow.

Throughout his narrative, Boyles returns repeatedly to a rather sketchy, putatively metaphysical thread of the "Everywhen," which can be

characterized as the collapse of all time and space into a single unity. This chaotic leitmotif serves as a rickety framework for the almost picaresque perambulations and wanderings (both physical and mental) of the narrator.

The motley cast of characters arrayed across this sprawling novel include memorably named (if not always truly memorable) personages such as Robocop, Little Robocop, and Casper, as well as a lurking, shadowy character known only as Benji, who plays a crucial, if not clearly defined central role in the narrative, as both an inspiration and a potential object of emotional attachment for the narrator. Tellingly, one of the very few characters with a conventional human name is the narrator's dog Sheila.

Also lurking behind the scenes – somewhat like the Wizard of Oz threatening to pull aside the curtains – is an even more shadowy Unc (presumably the narrator's kin), whose personality and inexplicable antics might be charitably described as colorful, but more accurately labeled as deranged. Somehow, this chaotic, somewhat toxic, admixture from the narrator's "everywhen" and "everywhere" conspires

through an uncertain alchemy to produce a world-class competitor, in the person of the narrator, who despite his chaotic inner life and his tumultuous training experiences, manages to achieve qualified success (or what passes for it) in the grueling world of the triathlon.

Speaking of alchemy, one of the major recurring concerns of the novel is an obsessive desire to ascertain just the right balance of performance-enhancing drugs, ranging from over-the-counter pain relievers and steroids to the prescription cortisones often referred to simply as "percs." In fact, use (or misuse) of this last drug is so ubiquitous that the triathletes have developed their own in-house dialect variants to offhandedly refer to their routine overuse and abuse of training drugs. In keeping with the rolling, stream-of-conscious presentation and rhythm of the novel, the author refrains from indulging in any authorial commentary on the wisdom or ethics of ingesting so many chemical enhancements into one's body, preferring instead to simply describe the ubiquitous drug use without comment, thus allowing readers to form their own opinions (or judgements).

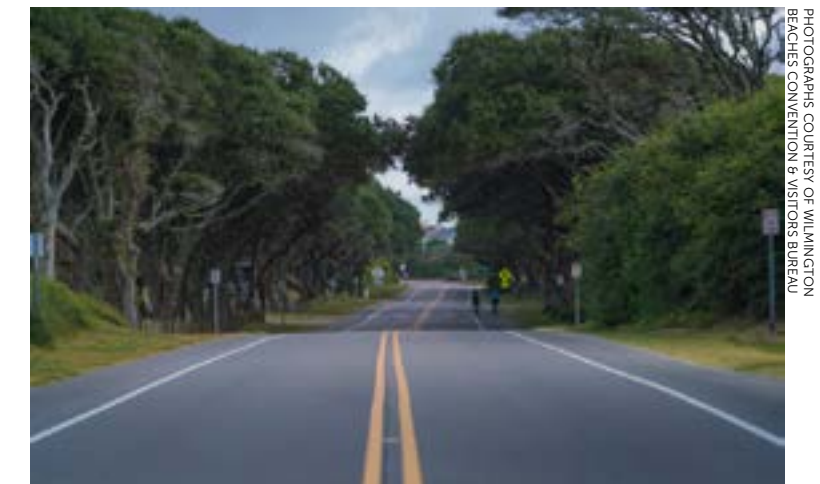
The novel begins in medias res at what to all appearances is a random time in the narrator's triathlon training, tracing his journey through the trials and tribulations of his ceaseless, obsessive efforts to extract every last ounce of energy from his body in pursuit of improving his national ranking in the sport, as well as fanatical efforts to trim fractions of seconds from his event times. Along the way, the author employs a jarring series of flashbacks into the "everywhen"

to recount the narrative from multiple perspectives, employing a wide range of tone, voices, and levels of coherence. While appropriate to the subject matter at hand and generally comprehensible, Boyles's barebones writing style and presentation intermittently leaves the unwary (or impatient) reader confused, if not totally lost at sea. I found myself several times flipping back through the text in a frustrating attempt to clarify exactly who was saying what, as well as simply what was transpiring.

In the end, Boyles must be given credit for rounding up his unwieldy, disorderly characters and finally uniting their often discordant, if not downright cacophonous, voices in climactic harmony, and thereby bringing *Bark On* to a fitting and coherent resolution. By the end of the novel, the dogged and persistent reader emerges with a keen sense of the mental and emotional workings of the fanatical triathletes who form the sinews and story line of the novel, as well as an appreciation for the dedication and drive necessary to achieve success in such a demanding sport. As to whether the arduous journey through the many twists and turns, gruesome accidents, and

sometimes unsavory actions of the cast of players has been worth the long circuitous journey to reach this ultimate resolution – well, that must be left to the individual readers.

Overall, while a daring, at times compelling literary effort, *Bark On* is not an easy read, challenging the reader's focus and stamina at every turn; therefore, I wouldn't recommend it as a relaxing summer read for whiling away the hours at the beach or in a rustic mountain cabin. Specifically, I found it hard to muster much interest in the picaresque adventures of the motley crew of characters as they alternately drive themselves to faster and faster times and higher rankings in the super-competitive triathlon subculture and submerge themselves into the despair of social awkwardness and personal ennui in their hyper-demanding sport. But if you hanker for a glimpse into the inner workings of the triathlon community, as well as a tour de force of the convoluted mental and emotional processes of one of its athletes, and you don't mind fighting your way through occasionally impenetrable Faulknerian/Joycean thickets, *Bark On* is a worthwhile read. ■



PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY OF WILMINGTON BEACHES CONVENTION & VISITORS BUREAU