

## Look Away, Dixieland

A Carpetbagger's Great-Grandson Travels Highway 84 in Search of the Shack-up-on-Cinder-Blocks, Confederate-Flag-Waving, Squirrel-Hunting, Boiled-Peanuts, Deep-Drawl, Don't-Stop-the-Car-Here South

**James B. Twitchell**

Louisiana State University Press, hardcover,  
175 pages, ISBN 978-0-8071-3761-1  
*Also available as an e-book*

**O**N the same day America inaugurated its first black president, Vermont native James Twitchell set out in an RV to find the 'real' South and learn more about the bloody ambush of his great-grandfather. Marshall Harvey Twitchell was an actual carpetbagger sent to restore order in Louisiana during Reconstruction. He married a local girl, bought a plantation, and appeared to be running things pretty well until one day in August 1874 that altered the family's history forever. In 2009, the younger Twitchell starts driving from the Okefenokee Swamp along Highway 84, through Georgia, Alabama, and Mississippi to Coushatta, Louisiana, the scene of the crime.

James Twitchell is a professor at the University of Florida, so the book starts off rather academically as he painstakingly explains how and why he chose this route and what central issues he hoped to address. It starts to read more like a scholarly paper, complete with actual X and Y axes of thought, I kid you not. But stick with it. Once the trip really gets going, so does the book.

Along the way, the things he sees and the people he meets force him to examine his prejudices about the South. He begins to shape a new understanding of Dixie and its complicated place in history and culture. This is where the book really shines. His intellect and analytical skills come in handy as he digs deep for some eyebrow-raising insights. Instead of taking a side, he manages to find intriguing nuances and valid points for all involved. His meditations on race, honor, violence, and politics are thought-provoking for Southerners and non-Southerners alike. He also finds out more about his great-grandfather and what happened that day near Coushatta. As with any journey, Twitchell finds some closure, some laughs, some disappointments, and some surprises. —*L. J. Gouveia*

**IF I HAD TO ADMIT THE MOST STRIKING (AND DESTABILIZING) ASPECT OF MY TRIP SO FAR, I'D HAVE SAID IT WAS THE OPEN-FACED HELPFULNESS OF EVERYONE TO ME, A TWANGING YANKEE HANGING OUT OF AN RV WITH FLORIDA LICENSE PLATES.**



## Swamplandia!

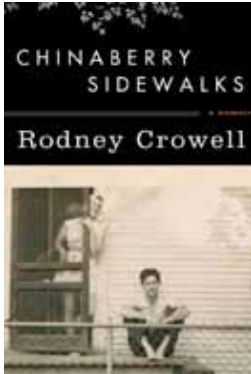
**Karen Russell**

Alfred A. Knopf, hardcover,  
336 pages, ISBN: 978-0307263995  
*Also available as an e-book*

Karen Russell's first novel, released in February, has many reviewers already saving a spot on their year's-best lists, and is gathering buzz for national awards.

Ava Bigtree is the teenaged daughter and youngest alligator wrestler of the infamous Bigtrees, a self-styled "tribe" scrambling to keep their kitschy island gator park open after the death of their biggest star and matriarch, Hilola Bigtree. Chief, the father, keeps disappearing to the mainland for "business trips." Eighteen-year-old son Kiwi leaves to work for the competition, World of Darkness, a huge new indoor water park based on *Moby Dick* and Hell. The Bigtrees' other daughter, Osceola, drifts off into the swamp, chasing the love of a ghostly boatman. The bulk of the novel is Ava's long, harrowing search for a fabled underworld portal in the swamp—literally and figuratively unknown territory—to save her sister and contact their departed mother.

Like all great novels, the story works if taken just at face value, but also resonates on other levels if the reader is so inclined. It's a coming-of-age story; it's a heroic quest; it's a story about family, and it's a metaphor for processing grief. Yet it never feels bound by any of those. It's just a great, entrancing ride. —*LJG*



## Chinaberry Sidewalks A Memoir

Rodney Crowell

Alfred A. Knopf, hardcover,  
259 pages, ISBN 978-0-307-59420-4  
Also available as an e-book

**G**RAMMY-winning singer and songwriter Rodney Crowell delivers a truly moving account of a poor, rough childhood on the outskirts of Houston in the early '50s. His father drank heavily and was often physically abusive. His mother was an epileptic Holy Roller who would sometimes drink and then repay those abuses in kind. As a small child, Rodney often had to defuse the fights. They all wound up in the emergency room at least a few times, once even on his tenth birthday. In lesser hands, this might've been a bitter tell-all screed of victimhood and reproach. But Crowell stands the misery-memoir trope on its head and instead gives us a much richer, nuanced, often funny, brutally honest but fiercely loving portrait of these two flawed people and the world they inhabited.

Wrenching details of dire poverty, a disintegrating house, a Category 4 hurricane, and bug infestations alternate with comic and near-idyllic recollections of boyhood misadventures, tent revivals, and friendships so vividly depicted, it's tempting to go Google the names to see what ever came of them. But it's difficult to put the book down that long. Anyone familiar with Crowell's songwriting knows the man can turn a compelling phrase. But he's equally adept, if not more so, at long, flowing narrative that finds humor, grace, and love in even the darkest places. With any luck, this is just his first of many books. —LJG



## Dirt Dobber Blues Cyril E. Vetter

Louisiana State University Press, hardcover,  
165 pages, ISBN 978-0-8071-3830-4  
Also available as an e-book

Author, musician, producer, and broadcaster Cyril E. Vetter fictionally eulogizes his real-life friend Charles "Butch" Hornsby, an obscure Louisiana musician and artist who died in 2004.

The quick, sparingly told chapters follow Hornsby through his early years, career, addiction, and personal turmoil. Each one is prefaced with a verse from a corresponding song on the included CD. Vetter also encloses the sheet music.

The book also contains eleven color photos of Hornsby's painted collages. *Music Bidness* is especially poignant since the original piece was destroyed in Hurricane Katrina.

Vetter recruited alt-country singer Will Kimbrough and Duke Bardwell (another Louisiana native, best known playing bass for Elvis) for most of the CD's fourteen tracks. "Rock Bottom on Romaine" is the only one salvaged from Hornsby's original Malaco sessions, which Vetter produced in the early '70s. The eponymous "Dirt Dobber Blues" invokes the point of view of a dirt dobber (mud wasp) flying into a guitar.

Although Hornsby never achieved actual artistic success, mostly due to the self-sabotage afflicting so many artists, Vetter shows us a complex man who died young yet ultimately succeeded in the important things in life: love, family, and the redemption they bring. It's a fitting reminder in this fame-obsessed age that there are worthwhile non-celebrities and other kinds of success. —LJG



## Grim Hymns Tunes and Tales from the Hills of Hell Col. J. D. Wilkes

Colonel Knowledge, softcover, 48 pages  
[www.jdwilkes.com](http://www.jdwilkes.com)

Sample: "Unusual Occurrences" available at  
[www.topshelfcomix.com/ts2.0/unusual\\_occurrences/](http://www.topshelfcomix.com/ts2.0/unusual_occurrences/)

The Legendary Shack Shakers frontman is an accomplished singer, songwriter, musician, filmmaker, writer, comic book artist, and delightfully twisted monkey. Best described as "Dixie noir," these dark, deranged pen-and-ink vignettes are loosely connected by the terrible tale of Chief Paduke, cast from Heaven "in an electric shitstorm of fury" for his blasphemy, disobedience, and pride. His fall and subsequent rise secretly influence modern lives of "sin, strife, gossip, and unneighborliness" in the Lower Tuckaseean Basin, with a brief intermission of three sheet-music songs of Southern Gothic insanity and murder in "easy 'shape note' notation," just as it says on the cover. Every page bristles with absurdly witty social commentary. And the inside back cover is appropriately a vintage comic book back page of mail-order novelties, including, of course, sea monkeys. —LJG

# GOOD\_READS



## Devil Red

Joe R. Lansdale

Alfred A. Knopf, hardcover,  
205 pages, ISBN 978-0-307-27098-6  
Also available as an e-book

**J**OE Lansdale returns to his popular Hap and Leonard series with the eighth novel to feature the oddball East Texas crimefighting duo. Hap Collins is middle-aged, white, and liberal-leaning. His best friend Leonard Pine is a gay, black, conservative Vietnam vet. Together the informal investigators solve murders, beat up bad guys, and trade wisecracks.

It starts off formulaically enough, with a murder victim's mother seeking answers she can't get from the proper authorities. Of course it turns out to be a bigger mess than Hap and Leonard initially suspected, involving a vampire cult called the Dixie Mafia and a serial killer scrawling devil's heads in blood at the crime scenes.

But the novel takes a slightly (slightly!) more serious turn as Hap grapples with the accumulated weight of all he's done over the years. He knows he had to fight and kill to right wrongs or even just to keep himself and others from being killed, but he comes to realize that violence is violence and still takes a toll over time, no matter who was right. It's some trick for a crime novel to meditate on this and still keep the bullets and one-liners flying. This crisis of conscience couldn't come at a worse time, when Hap and Leonard themselves become targets of Devil Red, the most formidable killer they've ever faced. Vanilla Ride, the luscious bad girl from their last adventure, also resurfaces, which doesn't help Hap's state of mind.

Lansdale's stuff can get pretty violent, crude, and politically incorrect, but it's sharply funny even as you're wincing. Characters trade snappy quips, and Hap's narration is full of sly asides, bemused observations, and downhome witticisms. That and vivid storytelling make this more than just another crime series. —LJG

**SHE HAD ON SHORTS THAT SHOWED WAY TOO MUCH ASS, AND ON THE ASS WAS A TATTOO THAT LOOKED LIKE SOMETHING AN ARTHRITIC CHICKEN HAD SCRATCHED IN THE DIRT WHILE DYING.**

**MY TAKE IS YOU CAN DRESS ANY WAY YOU WANT, BUT MY AMENDMENT TO THAT IS THAT YOU HAVE TO HAVE MIRRORS AT YOUR HOUSE, AND YOU HAVE TO USE THEM, AND YOU MUST NOT LIE TO YOURSELF ABOUT WHAT THEY SHOW.**



## The Book of Harold, the Illegitimate Son of God

Owen Egerton

Duncan Publishing, hardcover,  
237 pages, ISBN: 978-0-9844488-0-7  
www.daltonpublishing.com  
Also available as an e-book

In Owen Egerton's wryly comic novel, Blake Waterson is a bored, unfulfilled wage slave at a Houston computer company. Then Harold Peeks, the oddball co-worker he just fired, stands up at a corporate awards banquet and proclaims himself the Second Coming of Christ. After a few more turns of bad luck, a semi-skeptical Blake and other ragtag disciples accompany Harold on a walking pilgrimage to Austin.

Blake's flashbacks and anecdotes document the growing hysteria and confusion around the rise of Haroldism and Haroldian studies. It's often funny, especially some of Haroldism's more whimsical teachings (Waffle House is holy because breakfast is a meal of hope) and Blake's many grievances with the cheesy made-for-TV movie *Harold Be Thy Name*. Blake feels destined to become Harold's Judas, yet he is often the only one telling the truth about what happened. The book affectionately satirizes contemporary Christianity, mass media, and suburban life while taking a deeper look at the nature of faith, betrayal, happiness, and humanity. —LJG

