

**Telling God's Sanction:  
Storytelling in the Narrative Journalism,  
Memoirs, and Creative Nonfiction of  
Rick Bragg**

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**by**

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**ABSTRACT**

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**By Jennifer Nicole Sias**

Self-described paid-storyteller and Pulitzer-Prize-winning-narrative-journalist, Rick Bragg has used the storytelling techniques he learned from his people to write two best-selling memoirs that redefine the boundaries of the genres of memoir and creative nonfiction. His speakerly texts combine the voices of the working class of the Alabama foothills of Appalachia, his own voice as a member of this culture, and his narrative journalistic voice. In his works, Bragg has managed not only to carve a place for the voice of the working class, but also to celebrate and preserve the oral culture, history, and beautiful language of his people, the working class.

## **Dedication**

**To two women who, like Rick Bragg's mother,  
have made sacrifices for the people they love:**

**Shirley Lumpkin, my mentor and friend,  
and Shirley Sias, my mother**

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## **Rick Bragg - Chapter One**

He was destined to work with his hands. He might have made his living like his older brother, Sam, in the cotton mill of Jacksonville, Alabama. He might have continued the back-breaking, hand labor of clearing the land as he did as a teenager for his uncle, Ed. Or, like his younger brother, Mark, he might have learned to be a carpenter, albeit a sober one. Ironically, Rick Bragg has made a living with his hands. Thanks to being fortunate, being in the right places at the right times, and using the gift of storytelling he inherited from his people, Rick Bragg has made his living with his hands in an unlikely occupation: writing the stories of the less fortunate, the people who do not usually make it to the front pages of national newspapers, people who do not even rate a few lines in regional newspapers, unless, of course, they appear in the police blotter or the free obituaries, people like his own.

This thesis will examine the writing of Rick Bragg by analyzing his journalistic writing and how he evolved into memoir writing. Although Bragg's journalistic writing style is unique and won him a Pulitzer, he did not invent the narrative style that he uses in his newspaper pieces. Long before him, writers like Truman Capote and later Tom Wolfe engaged in a new style which became known as New Journalism. Tastes changed over the years and hard-nosed editors often refused to allow their reporters to use this style. Still, there is a hunger for the narrative style among newspaper readers, which helps to explain

the success of Bragg and others, whose style is referred to as narrative journalism, creative nonfiction, literary nonfiction, literary journalism or literature of fact. Because he was reared in a family and community rich with storytellers, this style seems natural for Bragg, who wanted to write a longer piece and put some of the stories of his childhood down on paper so people wouldn't forget. Before analysis of Bragg's journalistic and memoir writing and the influences of storytelling can begin, one must get acquainted with this award-winning writer from Possum Trot, Alabama to understand the writer, his motivations and his captivating writing style.

A Pulitzer-prize winning journalist, Rick Bragg got his start at his high school newspaper, where he became sports editor during his junior year. He has said that he took journalism at Jacksonville High school because it was supposed to be easy and afforded him a press badge, giving him the freedom to roam the halls, shoot basketball in the school gym, and wander to nearby Jacksonville State University and flirt with college women, and he joined the school newspaper because "words didn't cost anything" (*All Over But the Shoutin'* 100). Mainly, he liked seeing his name in print because that made him feel important. Bragg writes: "I had no way of knowing, then, that it [journalism] would be my salvation" (*All Over But the Shoutin'* 116).

At the end of the summer after his high school graduation, Bragg was nearly broke, having spent most of his money on "cars and girls and drive-in cheeseburgers" (*All Over But the Shoutin'* 121). Fortunately, he was able to

scrape together enough to pay the tuition for one class at Jacksonville State University. He decided to take feature writing and describes enrolling for that class as “the first step, the first act, in a series of moves and machinations – most of them involving dumb, blind luck – that would give me what I was searching for” (*All Over But the Shoutin’* 121). He also volunteered to write for *The Chanticleer*, Jacksonville State University’s school newspaper. Once again, Bragg found himself writing about sports as he covered the Fighting Gamecocks.

Thanks to the exposure of writing for *The Chanticleer*, Bragg received a call from the editor of the *Jacksonville News* who offered him money to do what he loved: write about sports. Although the job only paid \$50 a week, he would be given something far more important – a byline accompanied by his picture. Bragg recalls: “I would be an instant somebody” (*All Over But the Shoutin’* 122). He was thrilled to have his own desk, an Underwood typewriter that would not type a Q and the chance to wear a clip-on tie. Later, he learned that his job originally had been offered to and turned down by another writer at *The Chanticleer*. Bragg explains: “He already had a steady job at the Kentucky Fried Chicken” (*All Over But the Shoutin’* 122). In that quotation, Bragg reveals his wry humor and sense of irony, which would later fuel his writing.

Although Bragg would later spend a good deal of his career writing about murder and misery, at the Jacksonville News he mostly wrote about structured violence: football. “People have said it is what we do now instead of dueling. That is untrue. It is not so refined a violence as that. It is what we do instead of

rioting," Bragg offers (*All Over But the Shoutin'* 134). He spent Friday nights watching and writing about high school football games and Saturdays covering college games. He wrote about linemen who recovered fumbles and sometimes misspelled their names. He wrote about Coach Bear Bryant, a hero and the most popular man in Alabama. While some in the world of journalism and the literary establishment do not think highly of sports writing, Bragg is grateful for the doors it opened for him. He writes:

I would never have been a writer if not for it. I never, ever would have gotten into a journalism school, what with me having a C average and all. I am sure I would never have gotten a job. Some newspapers see sports as the toy factory, not serious journalism, so it can be trusted to those who did not go to Harvard, or even to the dentist regularly. All I know is, it was my way in, and looking back I realize that I never realized how lucky and blessed I was" (*All Over But the Shoutin'* 137).

In this reflection, Bragg emphasizes how fortunate he has been while at the same time he recognizes how those in prestigious positions may have little respect for him and his path to success.

At age 19, Bragg continued writing about sports for the *Talladega Daily Home* and by 20, he was writing for the *Anniston Star*, where he reported for his first day of work wearing a white pair of pants, a white shirt and a white clip-on tie. "I looked like I was selling ice cream," Bragg recalls (*All Over But the*

*Shoutin'* 138). Once again he wrote about sports, covering high school wrestling matches and country club golf and even racing, which he loved. At the Talladega International Motor Speedway, Bragg got his first taste of writing about death, which was always just a twitch away for drivers at those high speeds. Experiencing a sort of revelation, Bragg writes: "I was slowly beginning to realize that the only thing that was worth writing about was living and dying and the trembling membrane in between" (*All Over But the Shoutin'* 139). Bragg has said that he was drawn to stories of death and people in misery because stories about people in trouble, of the struggles of people at risk make other stories seem trivial. "They were the most important stories in the newspaper. I wanted to write them, only them," he notes (*All Over But the Shoutin'* 139). In writing about death and people in misery, Bragg found his calling and a way to force his readers to consider issues of class and the plight of the poor and underprivileged.

In his early twenties, Bragg moved to the state desk of the *Anniston Star*, where he worked in a newsroom alongside graduates from Harvard, Yale and Columbia. About this time, the chip on Bragg's shoulder emerges or at least is unveiled as he openly notes the envy he felt for some of these Ivy Leaguers and the contempt some of them had for him and his people. He describes them as being on safari in the South and doing "their tour of duty in the heart of darkness" (140). He now admits that these Yankees were okay by and large, and that he actually may have learned a little working with them: "The

experience of working shoulder to shoulder with so many educated and privileged young people was good for me, I am sure, but the chip I had carried on my shoulder for a lifetime grew in those years to about the size of a concrete block" (*All Over But the Shoutin'*141).

It also did not help that the metro editor at his paper at the time stoked his attitude by telling him that he was not sophisticated enough to be the city reporter, a job offered to Bragg by the paper's managing editor. Bragg took it despite the metro editor's insult because by this time he had a house payment, mounting bills and a wife (*All Over But the Shoutin'*141-142). Just a few years later, Bragg was offered a job at Alabama's largest newspaper, the *Birmingham News*, at nearly twice the salary he earned at the *Anniston Star*. This new position gave Bragg the opportunity to work again with Randy Henderson, a former editor of the *Anniston Star* who now gave Bragg the chance to do "big stories" (*All Over But the Shoutin'*146). For more than three years at the *Birmingham News*, Bragg found himself working among graduates of Alabama and Auburn journalism schools, not Harvard and Yale, and although he says it was not as heavy, "that chip on my shoulder was still there," (*All Over But the Shoutin'*159). Bragg may have found himself fitting in a little more comfortably among these reporters, but he remained cognizant of class and in his place in it.

Bragg had the opportunity to write those big stories, important ones, ones that made a difference, such as one he wrote with business writer, Dean Barber, on the slow deaths of coal mining towns, another he wrote with reporter Mike

Oliver about Alabama's "shameful funding of social programs," and another one that ended up clearing an Alabama preacher who had been wrongly convicted of murdering his wife (*All Over But the Shoutin'* 158-159). Bragg recalls: ". . . the fact is, I learned to do the big story in Birmingham. The big story is one that anchors Page One, the one that can make careers. I wrote them and they put them in the paper, and you cannot ask for more than that in this business" (*All Over But the Shoutin'* 158).

Bragg was ready to move on at this time, but he ended up making a temporary, unexpected return to the *Anniston Star* so that he could be close to his mother, who was ill. He realized that his mother's poor health was due to worry over Bragg's youngest brother, Mark, a heavy drinker who was more often than not in trouble with the law, and although Rick tried then and many times thereafter, he could not "fix" the problem or convince Mark to stay out of trouble. Rick was 29 years old by this time and did not want to put his career on hold much longer, so he moved on to a job at *The St. Petersburg Times*, which was twice as big as the other newspapers he had worked for and had an admirable reputation – "consistently, year after year, one of the top ten newspapers in America" (*All Over But the Shoutin'* 174). Bragg knew it was a good fit when he spotted a bust of Elvis in the managing editor's office and when Paul Tash, the editor who hired him, told him: "it takes all manner and texture of people to make a good newspaper, and he would be glad to say he was hiring a reporter from Possum Trot, Alabama" (*All Over But the Shoutin'* 174).

Although other reporters complained about the pace of life in this retirement mecca, Bragg considered St. Petersburg and his little apartment on the Clearwater Bay the most peaceful place he had ever lived. He has said that his editors there occasionally hurt his feelings by sending him to do what Bragg considered unimportant, frivolous stories, such as the time they sent him to interview a chicken that was nearly murdered by a local serial killer, a bobcat. An award-winning reporter by now, Bragg interviewed Mopsy-the-chicken's owners and decided to get even with some melodramatic writing. His lead began: "Mopsy has looked into the face of death, and it is whiskered" (*All Over But the Shoutin' 176*). Contrary to the effect he expected his writing to have, his story impressed his editors, who soon after promoted him to the state desk covering southwest Florida and the Everglades. Bragg found a moral in this experience: "Do not, on purpose, write a bunch of overwritten crap if it looks so much like the overwritten crap you usually write that the editors think you have merely reached new heights in your craft" (*All Over But the Shoutin' 176*).

His first assignment there most likely would have been a nightmare for most reporters, but for Bragg, it was a dream come true – being sent to cover an alligator hunt. What happened to Bragg during the alligator hunt was a nightmare for him – when he tried to jump from one boat to another to lend a hand, he fell between the two and into the alligator-infested canal of the Okeechobee. Fortunately, rather than being snapped up by one of the angry alligators they had been stabbing at for hours, Bragg was only snapped by a

photographer named Walles as he became a part of the story he was sent to report.

By now, Bragg had moved to a small island named Anna Maria and was given the time and opportunity to cover a variety of stories, stories he considered important, from one about poachers in the Everglades to a story about a brutal attack that turned into a murder case seventeen years after the event when the brain-damaged victim died. He investigated and wrote about the elderly as criminal targets, Florida panthers dying slowly in the Everglades, and mercury poisoning in the swamps and wetlands. Then as now, Bragg believed that to tell a story believably, one needs to be in the best possible place to observe and understand it, even if that means putting oneself right in the middle of it, in the midst of life-threatening danger. He knew he had put himself right in the middle of danger while he gathered facts about poachers in the Everglades. Bragg writes: "I needed to talk face to face with at least one of them, to give the story teeth . . . The men I saw were not rustic heroes, just criminals, stealing from nature" (*All Over But the Shoutin'* 181). The alligator poachers saw this inquiring reporter as a threat, someone who could cause them to be fined or jailed. As one poacher reached for his .22 rifle, Bragg knew he was risking his life for "five or six paragraphs" (*All Over But the Shoutin'* 181-82).

Bragg wasn't always risking his life to cover stories for *The St. Petersburg Times*; he was having the time of his life at a newspaper that he has described as his second home while he worked for Rob Hooker, an editor who "defended

his reporters and had a light hand when he edited a story" (*All Over But the Shoutin'* 182). At this newspaper, Bragg realized that the writing mattered, not where one was educated, and this paper nurtured him. Bragg writes:

I have said a few times that I try to lend dignity and feeling to the people I write about, but that is untrue. All you do is uncover the dignity, the feeling, that is already there. I learned to do that there . . . Almost all the time, you just paint a picture with words and let people make up their own minds and emotions, but this time I wanted to force them to feel. [Bragg refers to a story he wrote in 1990 about conjoined twins.] We are taught in this business to leave our emotions out of a story, to view things with pure and perfect objectivity, but that was impossible on this story. I learned that objectivity is pure crap, if the pain is so strong it bleeds onto the yellowed newsprint years, or even decades later" (*All Over But the Shoutin'* 182-83).

Bragg found that his style of narrative journalism not only had the power to make his readers feel for the subject, but it also could be moving and even painful for him because that style forces the writer to write with understanding and feeling.

Although Bragg found his reporting situation ideal, a temptation that he could not refuse materialized – reporting for the paper from Miami, which he describes as a "reporter's nirvana" because it was full of compelling stories just

waiting to be written. While Bragg did not speak Spanish or Creole and gained his only understanding of the place's "complicated geopolitical situation" by reading books, he notes that "the editors decided they would rather have a reporter who could write good stories for their newspaper than someone who could sound good at a dinner party and shift languages like a Lexus changes gears" (*All Over But the Shoutin'* 184). In this quotation, we again see Bragg's wry sense of humor and his mindfulness of the issue of class.

Miami was the right place for Bragg at this time in his life. He was young and full of adventure and willing to take some risks to write a good story. In *All Over But the Shoutin'* Bragg tells a story that he rarely shared prior to writing the memoir. He explains: ". . . it is personal in a way that leaps well beyond grief love, hate. It involves fear, and that is nothing to be proud of" (*All Over But the Shoutin'* 185). On a hot Miami night in June of 1991, some African-American residents were outraged by the overturned conviction of a Hispanic Miami police officer in the manslaughter of two African-American men. Many saw this as just another injustice in a string of killings of African Americans by white officers or acquittals of the officers' murders over the past decade. Bragg describes the June 25, 1991 court reversal of Miami officer William Lozano's previous conviction as "a match scraped across the backs of black people here" (*All Over But the Shoutin'* 186). For two nights after the court reversal, the city was tense, but the peace held – until another Miami police officer shot another African American man. Bragg and his friend, Sean Rowe, an investigative

reporter for *New Times* in Miami, knew they had to get close to the riot to be able to tell the story. As they drove, they found pockets of safety and pockets of violence; both were unpredictable. Unfortunately, they drove right in the middle of a pocket of life-threatening danger. They drove down Third Avenue Northwest in Overtown in front of a small housing project. Men, women and children quietly lined both sides of the street, and before they knew it, Rowe and Bragg found themselves under siege as rocks, bottles and curses were flung at them. One rock smashed through the car's side window and hit Bragg's jaw. He managed to mumble to Rowe: "Whatever happens, keep moving, just keep moving" (*All Over But the Shoutin'*188). The next thing they saw spelled almost certain doom – a long black, junker car was rolled out between the buildings to block the road. Fortunately, Rowe was able to whip their car onto the sidewalk, missing trees, parked cars and people, and they made it to a pocket of safety.

As with the story of the alligator hunt, someone tried to make Bragg a part of the story as a television reporter tried to interview him. Bragg refused: "There were other people there who had been through the same thing and they were black. In the dark, in their anger, people had thrown rocks at anything that moved" (*All Over But the Shoutin'*189). While some may have developed animosity for African Americans after this experience, it would appear that Bragg's sensitivity and understanding deepened as he recalls the anger and hopelessness of an eighteen-year-old African American man named Tony Fox, who explained that he saw rioting as a way to get even and to get people to

listen. In many of their neighborhoods, African Americans owned nothing; they rented hot, bug-infested houses which lay nearly in sight of condos of Hispanics who came to Miami and prospered. Bragg writes: "In their eyes, they had been subjugated by the old Crackers, and now they were subjugated again by people who were not even born there" (*All Over But the Shoutin'* 190). This is the kind of understanding that permeates Bragg's writing and shows the as a storyteller, he has the ability, in a sense, to enter into their, his subject's, perspective.

In Miami, Bragg found that the stories he wrote required him to become better acquainted with misery and murder. He knew he was a long way from Possum Trot when in the span of one month Miami witnessed the murder of a homeless man by a sixth grader over a slice of pizza, another homeless man burned alive after being drenched with gasoline and set on fire, the shooting of an Eckerd pharmacist by another right in the store, and the murders of "assorted tourists" (*All Over But the Shoutin'* 192). Meanwhile, the fact that hungry people stood in line for food in Miami's Bicentennial Park, sheltered by skyscrapers "partially financed with cocaine money," was not lost on Bragg, whose own mother often skipped meals so he and his brothers could have a bite or two more. This young man from Possum Trot had to wrap his mind around the fact that this was a city in which the affluent in their gated communities coexisted with barcoded corpses in the city morgue. Nevertheless, Bragg says he did not allow his growing awareness of life's miseries to "sour my love of Miami," and he

most definitely did not tell his mama about these observations and experiences.

Bragg explains:

I told her I was in mad, never-ending love with this place, with the café con leche that was like melted Hershey bars, with the music, with the excitement. But I made sure that I made it sound like it couldn't hurt me, unless I died of joy. The truth was that I was elbow-deep in some of the darkest stories of my life (*All Over But the Shoutin'* 193).

Obviously, Bragg did not want his mother to worry about him and the dangerous positions and even emotional danger he consciously placed himself in because he felt a duty to protect her.

When Bragg wanted to write a story about the homeless, he went straight to the source, spending days with homeless men and women in their alternative culture under an Interstate overpass. There he learned all about the homeless' unique laws and punishments that all operated without a court. There he learned that the homeless dreaded night because any crackhead might sneak in one's "condominium," a refrigerator box for the enterprising, and slit one's throat for pocket change. There he met a woman who offered her body as fair trade for a ride in a car. Bragg learned: "Walking the shantytown, even in the daylight, was like walking through some Baptist Bible Camp's film show on hell . . . they lived somewhere outside the basic decencies of America" (*All Over But the Shoutin'* 194-95).

Bragg has noted that as painful as it is to observe misery on such a scale, in a sense it is easy to write about it because it is less personal than the stories about misery and injustice on an individual level, such as the one he wrote about a little boy known as Dirty Red, who lived in a housing project outside of Fort Lauderdale. At first nicknamed by his mother because of the red tint of his skin and his propensity to go out to play in the dirt right after a bath, Dirty Red painfully learned how his community could use his name to inflict baseless guilt, spite and other connotations, dirty ones. In his housing project, a seven-year-old girl was sexually abused by her mother's boyfriend, who forced her to lay the blame on Dirty Red. Before Dirty Red's mother could do a thing, she saw the top of the six-year-old's head in the back of a police car that drove away and delivered the little boy to a police station where he was fingerprinted, photographed for a mug shot and terrified. All the while, the little boy shook his head no (*All Over But the Shoutin'* 196).

Later, the Broward deputies learned the truth, but they never came back to the project to clear Dirty Red, to let everyone know that he indeed was innocent, or even to apologize for a mistake that was doomed to scar a little boy. Bragg writes: "The people in the project treated him like a pervert. They made him an outcast. Most of the children wouldn't play with him, and chanted 'Dirty Red, Dirty Red, Dirty Red,' whenever he walked by. Grown men slapped him when he came close" (*All Over But the Shoutin'* 196). His mother tried to spread the word of his innocence, but no one believed her; they just believed what they

saw the day the police car took Dirty Red away. She knew that the only way people might accept the truth was if it was written down, and that is just what Rick Bragg did; he told the real story of Dirty Red and what really happened to the little girl. Bragg sent Dirty Red's mother a bundle of papers containing the story, which she took door to door in their housing project. Bragg recalls:

"Seeing it written down, they began to believe . . . I didn't get into this business to change the world; I just wanted to tell stories. But now and then, you can make people care, make people notice that something ain't quite right, nudge them gently, with the words, to get off their ass and fix it" (*All Over But the Shoutin'* 198). Bragg had learned that reporting and storytelling gave him the power to force others to face some uncomfortable truths, and by writing about those whose position in life made them powerless, he transformed the bit of power he had gained to them.

For the most part, Bragg's newspaper gave him the leeway to find his own stories, including the one about Dirty Red, for more than two years. His paper did send him to cover Operation Desert Storm, which forced him to get a passport and would mark the first time he traveled outside the United States. On his next assignment outside the U.S. he learned more about human misery than he could have imagined, more than he ever wanted to know. Bragg begged his newspaper's foreign desk for the chance to go to Haiti in October 1991. Although he admits that "I was no kind of foreign correspondent," Bragg pleaded for the chance to cover Haiti's emerging story. He recalls: "A whole

country, ruled forever by despots and murderers and low-rent sons of bitches, had been promised something better, and seen it yanked away. I wanted to come here because I had read about it my whole life, not just as a place of misery, but magic" (*All Over But the Shoutin'*203). The kind of magic Bragg would become aware of in Haiti was voodoo, voodoo in the midst of poverty and cruelty.

Bragg knew that Haiti's poor thought they had found their savior in Jean-Bertrand Aristide, a priest who once was the target of military president Gen. Henri Namphy, whose "thugs" killed 12 people and wounded 70 at Aristide's St. Jean Bosco Church. Elected president of Haiti on December 17, 1990, Aristide's rule was short-lived. He did not have the support of the military and went into exile after soldiers opened fire on his home. In this hostile, lawless environment, Bragg positioned himself to find the truth and write about it, which would require him to risk his own life more than once. There was the time that a young soldier for sport stepped so close to the reporter that the muzzle of his low-slung rifle bore into Bragg's ribs, and the violence he witnessed surely left emotional and spiritual scars on this truth-teller. He recalls:

They [soldiers] had been told to shoot anyone in known Aristide neighborhoods. These are Aristide's people, too, I learn. They are the poor that the army knows it can slaughter without repercussion. They shot women and children. I stood in the middle of it and tried not to cry like a baby (*All Over But the Shoutin'*207).

Although Bragg's stories did not bring an end to this violence and effect the same kind of change that his writing did for someone like Dirty Red, his stories would not allow the disinterested to turn a blind eye to such atrocities.

At the end of October, Bragg returned to Miami and continued writing for his paper. By the summer of 1992, he had been in Miami or based out of the city for nearly three years and has said that he was happy though restless. Friends urged him to apply for Harvard University's Nieman Fellowship for journalists, which awards candidates with nine months of study at the university at no cost along with a \$25,000 stipend. Bragg recalls that he was more than a little nervous about the interview for the fellowship. He saw this interview as a test, a test to determine if he could fit in with "these people" and convince them that "I was smart enough to give something in return, something of value, to the finest university in the land" (*All Over But the Shoutin'*218). Bragg says that the interview was worse than he imagined. In one of the first questions, he basically was asked if he was phony. They wanted to know if he had created some kind of Southern boy image as his gimmick. Bragg writes:

It was not that I sounded Southern – Southerners are some of the most pretentious people on earth – but that I sounded country, or, since I was at Harvard, "rural." Southerners, a lot of them, work to rid themselves of their accents. They believe they sound slow, or at least unsophisticated, to outsiders. I guess now I know why (*All Over But the Shoutin'*218).

The interviewers continued to pose tough questions, but the hardest one of all, Bragg admits, was the most obvious – why did he want this fellowship? Bragg at first answered with only half of the truth: “. . . this business of journalism has a bubble of pretension over it, one that I often found myself pressing against. Harvard would give me a needle, to burst it, to get through” (*All Over But the Shoutin’* 219). Bill Kovach, former *New York Times* editor and reporter and the interviewer who asked Bragg this question, pressed him further, asking him if that distinction, wearing the mighty H on his chest, would solve his problems. Bragg knew he had some more explaining to do and told them that he wanted to learn and knew he needed to learn more so that he genuinely could write with authority rather than “winging it.” Bragg left the interview feeling certain that he would never be asked back and recalls: “I had gone to visit the fancy people, with my hand out, and left feeling like I had forgotten to clean out from under my fingernails” (*All Over But the Shoutin’* 219). A few weeks later, however, Kovach, a journalism icon in Bragg’s eyes, called him with the exciting news – Harvard wanted him! Perhaps this austere institution would lend authority to Bragg’s brand of storytelling. (*All Over But the Shoutin’* 219).

In *All Over But the Shoutin’* Bragg entitles the chapter detailing his Harvard experiences as “Perfume on a Hog.” Here he had the chance to study Latin and Afro-Caribbean history, diplomacy, religion and took every American history class he could. Bragg concedes: “Harvard, to a man who had been in college precisely six months, was a gift, a glorious gift” (*All Over But the Shoutin’*

224). The chip was still on his shoulder, but Bragg made friends with many of the fellows despite their privileged backgrounds. He writes:

The American Niemans, almost all of them, had already been to Ivy League schools. They were from Harvard, Yale, Columbia, Swarthmore, almost all of them, so I was prepared to dislike them on sight . . . the truth is that most of them were good people, and couldn't help it if the worst day of their lives had involved wilted arugula (*All Over But the Shoutin'* 226).

Although Bragg was a little concerned before going to Harvard about whether or not he would fit in, he only experienced one incident of outright rudeness and elitism directed at him. He was at a "white-tablecloth dinner" at the Harvard faculty club and found himself discussing then-President Clinton's appointment of Attorney General Janet Reno with someone he had just met. Bragg thought they were having a friendly argument and told the fellow that he thought it might not be too wise to select an attorney general from what some considered the most ineffective justice system in the nation – Dade County Florida. Rather than politely telling Bragg that he didn't buy his reasoning, which Bragg said he would have accepted, the fellow did about the worst thing one could do to the son of Charles Bragg and the grandson of Charlie Bundrum; he insulted him with the retort, "You embarrass yourself" (*All Over But the Shoutin'* 223). Bragg writes:

My whole life I had wondered if I was as good, as smart, as clean as the people around me. Now this, this insult, hurt like salt flung

in my eyes. "I'll tell you what," I said, "I'll drag you out of here and whip your ass." He turned bright red – I have never seen a man light up like that – and said again, insultingly, "No one's said that to me since elementary school." I just stared at him, and then I laughed in his face. It scared even me, that laugh. It sounded a little crazy . . . He left not long after that, to an uneasy silence that made me feel like I had dragged my sleeve through the peach cobbler or committed some other terrible faux pas (*All Over But the Shoutin'* 224).

Bragg's "adversary" in this argument could have just told him that he did not agree with his reasoning; instead, with the clipped "You embarrass yourself," he attempted to dismiss Bragg by "putting him in his place," by suggesting that Bragg was not knowledgeable enough or perhaps even sophisticated enough to understand and debate the subject with someone of his stature. Bragg shows in this reflection that when someone blatantly exposes his own feelings of inferiority and resentment over class issues, he is capable of making his "chip" heavier while feeling honest rage over the cultural elite's attempt to dismiss him and his people merely because of their class position.

Meanwhile, the regular paying students seemed a bit wary of Bragg as he walked the campus. Bragg recalls: "I was twice their size – Harvard students tend to run small – and some of them would walk all the way off the concrete paths in Harvard Yard to avoid walking close to me" (*All Over But the Shoutin'*

227). A friend in the know advised Bragg not to make any sudden movements and not to throw up his hand and ask students how they're doing because they might hurt themselves trying to get away. In class, students saw him differently; maybe it was because he was sitting down. In class, Bragg asked questions and participated in discussions, and his classmates began quizzing him about the South. They asked him about race in the South, politics in the South, food in the South, and relationships between men and women in the South. Here, Bragg had a chance to contribute in a manner that would make the Nieman program proud. Bragg notes: "I was, by my very presence, a walking lab, a field trip. I had seen the meanness and killing that they read about in their texts on the Third World. I had seen George Wallace, big as life" (*All Over But the Shoutin'* 227). Although Bragg no doubt contributed as a Nieman fellow in his capacity as a Southerner who has real-life experience living in the South, this reflection gives readers another glimpse at his wry sense of humor; he surely is aware that as an individual, he cannot possibly represent or know about all things Southern.

Yes, Bragg did contribute and give back, but he also learned a lot in that year at Harvard; he has even said the place and the people opened his mind a little. The richest lessons Bragg learned came through the sage advice of his journalism idol, Bill Kovach. Kovach challenged Bragg, calling him "mush mouth" when he tried to sidestep a question or hide behind his Southernness or fast-talk his way through an answer. Kovach told Bragg he had a gift but that his writing could use some work. And Kovach saw something in Bragg that he could not

see himself – he asked Bragg what he intended to do with his life and if he had considered writing for *The New York Times*. Bragg dismissed that suggestion because he thought the *Times* would not have him, rather “someone like him.” No, Bragg thought he would pursue a job at *The Los Angeles Times*, but Kovach had planted the seed; more importantly, his suggestion told Bragg that he believed in him and that he could make it at the nation’s most respected newspaper (*All Over But the Shoutin’* 228-29).

When Bragg’s fellowship came to an end at Harvard, he headed back to Florida and *The St. Petersburg Times*, which had closed its Miami bureau but asked Bragg to be a roving national reporter and to go where the best stories were. In time, the job possibilities he and Kovach had discussed materialized. Both *The New York Times* and *The Los Angeles Times* offered him jobs. He interviewed for both and ended up accepting the offer from *The Los Angeles Times*. Bragg explains: “*The New York Times* frightened me. Just reading it frightened me. There was great writing in it, but so many people had warned me that I would never survive there, that I was too different, that the newspaper would try to process me and my work” (*All Over But the Shoutin’* 231). He believed that *The Los Angeles Times* was more similar to *The St. Petersburg Times* and would allow him to write “long, pretty stories.” When Bragg reported to work in Los Angeles, he found that the position that awaited him was not the one offered. On this point, Bragg does not go into detail other than to say that the editors finally agreed to honor the offer they had made, but he believed that

having begun a job by fighting with his bosses did not promise a fruitful future for him. After working for *The Los Angeles Times* for precisely “three weeks, two days, four hours and twenty-seven minutes,” he left (*All Over But the Shoutin’* 233).

*The New York Times* still wanted Bragg and told him he could start fresh there in January. He soon found that most of the warnings he had heard about the paper were either out of date or completely inaccurate. He worked for editors who pressed reporters to simply find the most compelling stories and fill the paper with them. In the newsroom, reporters worked shoulder to shoulder; some of them were nice to him, but others made the chip he carried on his shoulder feel heavier than it had in quite some time. Bragg found his friends where it counted – among the photo staff. The photographers there were street savvy, smart and knew the city as well as any cab driver, and they let Bragg tag along (*All Over But the Shoutin’* 235). Bragg found the kind of stories he wanted to tell, the ones he considered worth telling through these photographers. Nearly every week in that city, someone was murdered in a bodega, a tiny grocery store; Bragg wanted to tell the stories of those who worked behind the counters and served as targets. He told the story of Omar Rosario, who, wearing his store uniform, a bullet-proof vest, faced-down a potential murderer and thief right in front of Bragg’s eyes with his hand on a 9-millimeter pistol, strategically positioned in his coat pocket so that the butt was visible to the punk. Bragg and photographer Angel Franco visited bodega after

bodega in their search for the story and wrote about a store owner who still wore the jacket he was shot in, despite the bullet hole in its arm, and another who still wore the pants he had on the time he was shot in the hip. Bragg explains: "The difference between rich people and poor people is that poor people still wear the clothes they were wearing when they were shot. They save them from the emergency room floor" (*All Over But the Shoutin'* 238-39). Once again, Bragg found a way to expose class issues through his narrative journalism.

Working for *The New York Times* took Bragg many places and allowed him to write about unusual people, people who do not normally get coverage in newspapers. Most often, his stories were about people in misery. Three years after his first visit, Bragg headed back to Haiti, this time for *The New York Times*. Conditions were still dismal; the poor, Aristide's followers, were still being persecuted. In Haiti, machetes were still being used to disfigure women for sport and to assert power. In Haiti, political prisoners disappeared into mass graves. In Haiti, babies with empty, protruding bellies co-existed with deformed children crawling like animals on streets where the ruling class' Mercedes and Land Rovers whizzed by blindly. In Haiti, police still murdered the poor at random, because they could, and stole the bodies so that they could charge the families up to \$100 to release them for burial (*All Over But the Shoutin'* 255).

In Haiti, Bragg continued to write about the miseries, murders and injustices the poor faced and about the man President Clinton sent to broker peace – former President Jimmy Carter. Bragg recalls:

Jimmy Carter came and brokered an unusual three-legged dog of a peace that spared the despots and absurdly married the U. S. military with the same soldiers who had been the instruments of torture and terror. I always liked Jimmy, until then. Aristide would return, but there would be no sweeping justice, no mass executions by flaming necklaces, no satisfaction (*All Over But the Shoutin'*259).

On the home front, Bragg wrote stories about domestic terrors for *The New York Times*; he wrote stories about Susan Smith, who claimed that her two young sons had been carjacked by a black man, a lie she perpetrated to cover up the fact that she sent her boys to a watery death so that she could be free to date and possibly marry the son of her rich boss. Bragg also covered the aftermath of the Oklahoma City bombing. As he recalls the experience of reporting the tragedy, Bragg explains that a reporter has to learn to block out the pain and misery once the story is written so that he can continue to do the work. He writes: "You put it all into your stories, as your fingers hover above the computer keyboard, but when you get up, when it is done, you block much of it out. You have to feel for the people you write about or the words don't amount to much, but you learn to put it down" (*All Over But the Shoutin'*289). This attitude may seem callous to some, but it is a matter of survival. In Oklahoma, Bragg recalls

having dinner with some reporter friends and discussing what they had observed and the stories they were writing. Perhaps they seemed a little too light hearted, seemingly to treat the matter a little too lightly, because they were chastised by someone at a nearby table who told them she was sitting with the mother of one of the children who died in the blast. Bragg apologized sincerely and told them they had not meant to be so insensitive, that in truth they all were sick at heart. He says that he was sorry about what happened but not ashamed, that he has never been ashamed to do the work of a reporter. He explains:

It goes way beyond the craft itself. The assignment, the story of the year, was in my eighteenth year as a reporter, in the role, the only one I have ever felt at peace with, of paid storyteller. It had pulled me out of poverty, literally. It had shown me the world, and I did not mind that the world was so often on fire when I got there. It gave me an education, from books at Harvard, from a thousand stories where I was forced to understand something an hour before deadline. It gave me pride and money, but more pride. It saved me. It surely did. My mother gave me the boost up, and what I found, on the others side of that wall, was this (*All Over But the Shoutin' 290*).

As a storyteller, Bragg had learned that to tell a story with meaning, one had to tell it sometimes from an individual's perspective, and sometimes that meant from a victim's perspective. The trick to surviving and being able to continue

telling others' stories was to find a way to emerge from that perspective. After all, his objective was not to fight one battle through his narrative journalism; it was in a sense to fight a larger war, often to take on the cause of the powerless and the plight of the lower class.

Bragg had been a journalist for more than a decade, and in those years he had developed a style that incorporated the rich storytelling tradition he had learned at the feet of his mother, aunts, uncles and the people of their community of Northeastern Alabama. His writing garnered many awards; the biggest of all, the Pulitzer Prize became his in 1996. He was 36-years-old. He had come close to winning the prize, the highest honor for a journalist, before and knew he was a finalist that year. When Joe Lelyveld, the executive editor of *The New York Times*, summoned Bragg to New York City, he says he was sure that one of two things awaited him: news that he had won the Pulitzer, or that he was going to be fired. Bragg waited at least an hour after the winners were announced to call and give the news to his mother. He explains:

. . . it is a common condition of being poor white trash: you are always afraid that the good things in your life are temporary, that someone can take them away, because you have no power beyond your own brute strength to stop them. But this thing was ours now. No one could take it away from us" (*All Over But the Shoutin'* 297-98).

Poor white trash become award-winning, paid storyteller, Bragg reflects on this moment in his typical, humble manner. In his memoirs, interviews and in-person

appearances, Bragg rarely ever uses the pronoun “I” when noting achievements or awards; most often he uses the inclusive “we” to give credit to his mother, family members and even his community. He takes full responsibility for any mistakes or shortcomings he may have, but he would never claim complete responsibility for the fruit of his labor because he believes that none of it would be possible without the support of his people. That is why it was so important to him to have the cornerstone of that support with him when he accepted the Pulitzer.

Although it took an extraordinary amount of convincing, Bragg did get his mother to accompany him to the awards ceremony in New York. He had made a good living as a journalist for more than 15 years. He had been to Harvard as a Nieman Fellow. He had won the Pulitzer Prize. Now, he had at least one more feat to accomplish – he felt he had to fulfill a promise he made to his mother to buy her a home of her own. On November 2, 1996, he kept that promise.

One might think Bragg’s story would end there. How could he possibly out-do those accomplishments? A workhorse, Bragg took on a new genre: the memoir by writing *All Over but the Shoutin’*, which he calls *Shoutin’* in conversation. Bragg rejects the label memoir and says he simply set out to write a story. A *New York Times* Notable Book of the year and national bestseller, *Shoutin’* is the kind of book people seem hungry to read today, perhaps because it is filled with conflict, struggle and some triumphs and is written in a voice that

makes the reader feel as though Bragg is sitting with her or him on a porch and telling stories. It is accessible. In 2001 Bragg followed with another book, *Ava's Man*. Although this work also is called a memoir, the content and the author's position in terms of writing the story are vastly different. In the first memoir, Bragg was a character; the story was as much about himself as it was about his mother and family. In the second memoir, Bragg has said that he built himself a grandfather because Charlie Bundrum, the focus of this work, died one year before Bragg was born. So, it would seem that he approached the writing and research for this book in much the same way he does his journalistic stories; he interviewed his mother, aunts, uncles and others to find out what kind of man Charlie Bundrum was and listened to story after story about him. In *Ava's Man*, Bragg retells many of those stories, sets them into the context of the times, and connects them to his own observations of his mother and other family members.

In addition to the two memoirs, a collection of some of his newspaper articles, *Somebody Told Me*, was published in 2000 by The University of Alabama Press. Presently, Bragg still writes for *The New York Times*, which allowed him several months of leave in the fall of 2002 to promote *Ava's Man*. He told me that he has another book in the works that will focus on the stories of the people who worked at the mill in Jacksonville, Alabama. First named Profile Mill and later Union Yarn, this is the mill where Bragg's older brother, Sam, worked before it closed in 2001 and essentially ended a way of life for generations of Northeastern Alabamans. Bragg said that he likely will retire from full-time

journalistic writing within a year so that he can focus on writing books and possibly accept a visiting professor position at a college or university where he could teach creative writing.

How does one who has labeled himself as “white trash” evolve into an award-winning, paid storyteller who might even consider teaching the art? This thesis will examine how Rick Bragg’s writing style has evolved through his journalistic writing and will focus on how he has used storytelling in his newspaper stories and memoirs to push the boundaries of creative nonfiction, perhaps even to create a new genre. In many of Bragg’s writings, interviews and presentations, he refers to what his mother calls “Telling God’s Sanction,” a phrase his people use to mean telling God’s honest truth, a phrase they use to underscore the importance of a story they are about to tell or have just told. Telling God’s sanction is precisely what this writer does in his newspaper stories, memoirs and creative nonfiction while he pushes their boundaries. Before one can analyze his memoir writing, one must consider Bragg’s journalist writing and place it within the context of new journalism, now known as narrative journalism or creative nonfiction.

## Chapter Two – Rick Bragg’s Narrative Journalism

It does seem unlikely that a boy from Possum Trot, Alabama with all the obstacles he faced would have come as far as Bragg has – to have made a good living at something other than a manual-labor job, to have his work recognized by scores of awards including the ultimate in his field, the Pulitzer Prize, and to have the opportunity to spend nearly a year at Harvard University as a Nieman Fellow. His knack for telling stories has made his journalistic work utterly readable, engaging and meaningful. His style is unique, but it is not the first of its kind or brand new. Without knowing it, at least at the beginning of his career, Rick Bragg entered a tradition of journalistic writing made popular in the 1960s and '70s by journalists like Truman Capote, author of *In Cold Blood*; Gay Talese, who wrote newspaper stories that were considered “unreportable” in an elegant style, and Tom Wolfe, who wrote for the *New York Herald* and blazed a trail with stream of consciousness journalistic articles. Capote, Talese and Wolfe popularized this journalistic style, which became known as New Journalism, and Wolfe not only practiced it, but also wrote about it in a piece for *New York* magazine entitled “The Birth of ‘The New Journalism’: An Eyewitness Report.”

Published again in Part One of the book *The New Journalism*, edited by Tom Wolfe and E. W. Johnson, this piece describes Tom Wolfe’s view of the kind of writing he and a few other journalists attempted in an effort to gain readers’ attention. Wolfe notes that he started experimenting with his non-fiction writing

in the Sunday supplements of *New York*. Wolfe explains that the Sunday supplements ranked in status well below the ordinary daily newspaper and perhaps slightly above publications like the *National Enquirer*. He goes on to note that since Sunday supplements did not enjoy a large readership, they did not have any particular traditions or promises to live up to, basically no real rules. This he saw as a challenge and explains: "I never felt the slightest hesitation about trying any device that might conceivably grab the reader a few seconds longer. I tried to yell right in his ear: Stick around!" (16). Other journalists, like Jimmy Breslin, Wolfe notes, proved that it was possible to use literary elements, "novelistic details," and symbolism while covering a story factually and make it more engaging to the reader. Wolfe made his own foray into this new type of journalistic writing in the spring of 1963 with an article for *Esquire* entitled "There Goes (Varoom! Varoom!) That Kandy-Kolored (Thphhhhh!) Tangerine-Flake Streamline Baby (Rahghhh!) Around the Bend (Brummmmmmmmmmmmmmm . . . ." Wolfe remembers:

It showed me the possibility of there being something "new" in journalism. What interested me was not simply the discovery that it was possible to write accurate non-fiction with techniques usually associated with novels and short stories. It was that – plus. It was the discovery that it was possible in non-fiction, in journalism, to use any literary device, from the traditional dialogisms of the essay to stream-of-consciousness, and to many different kinds

simultaneously, or within a relatively short space . . . to excite the reader both intellectually and emotionally (15).

Wolfe claims that by the 1960s, newspaper readers were bored with stories in which the narrator was invisible. Some might argue that he and other New Journalists addressed what they saw as a problem, then, with extreme measures. Wolfe, for instance, played with shifting points of view abruptly from one person in the story to another, which he describes as shifting into the "eye sockets" of various subjects (Wolfe 18). As an insult, he was called a chameleon, but he took this as a great compliment. Wolfe also toyed with narrating from within a character in the "Jamesian sense in which fiction writers understand it, entering directly into the mind of a character, experiencing the world through his central nervous system throughout a given scene" (Wolfe 19).

Some critics argue that New Journalism was not really new and that the style certainly was not invented by Wolfe and his contemporaries. In "New Journalism," an article in the *Columbia Journalism Review*, Scott Sherman points out that the roots of this kind of journalistic writing could be traced to the works of Theodore Dreiser, Stephen Crane, George Orwell, James Agee, Joseph Mitchell and A.J. Liebling (59). Other critics have noted that Lillian Ross, John Hersey, and Ernest Hemingway used such techniques. Tracing the roots even deeper, Roy Peter Clark, a senior scholar at the Poynter Institute for Media Studies, maintains: "Any historical study of journalism will reveal the existence of powerful narrative forms of writing going back not only generations, but

centuries” (Harvey 42). However, critics have noted that although 1960s and '70s writers like Tom Wolfe, Truman Capote, Norman Mailer, Gay Talese, Joan Didion, Gail Sheehy, Jimmy Breslin, Hunter S. Thompson, Gloria Steinem, Greil Marcus, Nicholas von Hoffman and Marshall Frady did not invent a new style of writing, they certainly must be given credit for “doing it” and “doing more of it,” perhaps more self-consciously than ever before (Harvey 42). Roy Peter Clark asserts that Tom Wolfe not only practiced New Journalism, but he also “described what he was doing in such a way that it served as a blueprint for future generations of journalists” (Harvey 42).

This kind of journalism is enjoying a revival today, although the style is now being called narrative journalism or creative nonfiction, even literary journalism or literature of fact by some. This is Rick Bragg’s journalism, the kind that won him the Pulitzer Prize. In the beginning of his career, Bragg most likely was not aware that he was a part of a tradition made popular by Tom Wolfe. Bragg’s narrative style was formed by the storytelling tradition that was so much a part of his formative years, and his narrative style was nurtured at papers like *The Anniston Star* and *The St. Petersburg Times* by editors who served as his teachers and guides and coaches in lieu of lessons he may or may not have learned if he had had a chance to continue his higher education studies. Bragg learned on the job and no doubt listened to the echoes of the stories with which his family and community back in northeastern Alabama enriched him.

The storyteller's voice and methods are evident in his journalistic writing. Just examine his November 1, 1995 *New York Times* article "Where Alabama Inmates Fade Into Old Age," and you will see those storytelling echoes and the reason why the Pulitzer Prize committee awarded him the 1996 prize for Feature Writing. One of the articles in the package considered by the Pulitzer committee, this story examines what happens to aging inmates in the prison system of Alabama and is reprinted in the collection of his newspaper stories, *Somebody Told Me*. In his lead, Bragg writes: "Grant Cooper knows he lives in prison, but there are days when he cannot remember why. His crimes flit in and out of his memory like flies through a hole in a screen door so that sometimes his mind and conscience are blank and clean" (*Somebody Told Me* 23). In this lead, Bragg has introduced readers to an aging, senile inmate whom he will use to illustrate the larger problem at the crux of his story – how to handle the aging inmate population in an overcrowded, overburdened prison system that needs to focus its efforts on younger, "hardened" criminals who still pose a threat to society. Yet, the reader must read on to know what the point of the story is, to get to the journalist's point. Bragg has teased or enticed the reader to read on to learn why Grant Cooper cannot remember his crimes and why readers should care about the situation he represents. In this lead, Bragg also has used a literary element that, as Tom Wolfe has noted, one more likely would find in a novel or short story – the use of a simile to illustrate the fact that Cooper's memories come and go as easily as a fly through a hole in a screen. And, Bragg

has introduced an element of tension by suggesting that at times Cooper, a multiple murderer, has a clean conscience when his memory lapses – a reality that readers may find hard to swallow or contemplate. Like any good storyteller, Bragg has set his story up by using a device that will ensure that the reader or listener will want to hear the whole story, will be engaged. Oftentimes, a storyteller will use an individual or a single animal to illustrate a greater truth, to represent a larger issue – as a metaphor for the important lesson, and that is precisely what Bragg has done with Grant Cooper.

Bragg goes on to use tension and irony to illustrate the issue of once hardened criminals who now take up space and resources needed for those more likely to pose a threat. He notes, for instance, that Cooper committed murders in 1936 and 1954 and earned a life sentence. Bragg writes:

Back then, before he needed help to go to the bathroom, Mr. Cooper was a dangerous man. Now he is 77, and since his stroke in 1993 he mostly just lies in his narrow bunk at the Hamilton Prison for the Aged and Infirm, a blue blanket hiding the tubes that run out of his bony body. Sometimes the other inmates put him in a wheelchair and park him in the sun. “I’m lost,” he mumbled. “I’m just lost” (*Somebody Told Me* 23).

Using the literary device of irony, Bragg illustrates the contradiction of Cooper and inmates like him – at one end of his life, he was violent and a threat to

society, but at the latter end he is feeble, harmless and must be cared for by a society that once had to be protected from him.

In this article, Bragg goes on to note that although Cooper is a relic of his violent past, he and the Hamilton Prison for the Aged and Infirm seem to represent the future of corrections, especially in an age of life-without-parole sentences that many judges and politicians advocate. Bragg seems to have a knack for seeing contradictions and using irony, an effective storyteller's strategy, to illustrate them deftly. He writes: "One Hamilton inmate, Thomas Gurley, has Huntington's disease. He sits in a chair all day and shakes and stares. He was a kidnapper, but now he has trouble holding a spoon" (*Somebody Told Me* 24). Further in the article, Bragg uses this device again, like a hammer pounding the point: "There are prison breaks, but the escapees do not usually get far. Two inmates, one blind and one mostly blind and unable to breathe on his own, made it as far as the town hospital. It is across the street" (*Somebody Told Me* 25). Bragg, who often uses repetition in a series of phrases within a paragraph, has used repetition of irony in this article to hook the reader. He uses the device again to illustrate a contradiction the State of Alabama would seem to pose. He writes: "The State of Alabama, often criticized for taking prison reform in the wrong direction with its return to leg irons and breaking rocks, is part of a more progressive trend with Hamilton" (*Somebody Told Me* 26).

Like any good storyteller, Bragg has a keen ear, the ability to listen closely, remember and recall the content and dialogue of his interviews. He uses direct quotes sparingly and with purpose. For instance, he writes: "There comes a time when a man goes through what we call criminal menopause and he is unable to do the crime that he is here for," Mr. Cain [the Angola warden] said. "My prison is becoming an old folks' home" (*Somebody Told Me* 26). The phrase "criminal menopause" creates an important, powerful image.

This particular story is packed with literary devices. Using a simile once again, Bragg writes: "Sentences, especially life sentences, used to be like rubber bands. They stretched or snapped short depending on the inmate's record in prison, crowding and sometimes, whether the inmate could convince the parole board he had found the Lord" (*Somebody Told Me* 27). Bragg also uses irony to point out that some of those aged and infirm inmates serving life originally were given sentences that did not match their crimes. He writes:

The Birmingham jail was full of martyrs and heroes in the 1960's. The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. made history locked behind its walls. William (Tex) Johnson, who snatched \$24 from a man's hand and got caught, was in fancy company. But as the civil rights heroes rejoined their struggle, a white judge gave him 50 years. He escaped three times. "You can't give no 21-year-old boy 50 years; I had to run," he said. While he was out, he committed 38 more crimes. Now he is at Hamilton, finishing his sentence. He

will be released in 1998, but two strokes have left him mostly dead on one side. "I believe I can make it," he said. "I believe I can." There will be nothing on the outside for him. Warden Berry said that when an inmate reached a certain point, it might be more humane to keep him in prison. Wives die, children stop coming to see him (*Somebody Told Me* 27).

In this story, Bragg has presented readers with numerous ironies, including the compelling contradiction that although many of these inmates clearly are incapable of violence and are no threat to society, the society that punished and imprisoned them must care for them because there is no one on the outside to do so.

Although some storytellers use their craft merely to entertain, others use storytelling not just to inform, but also to persuade or at least get their listeners to consider an issue from another point of view. In general, storytellers set out to tell a truth, perhaps, like a fable, to tell a tale embodying a moral. Rick Bragg has said that he does not set out to preach in his journalistic articles, but his writing is effective because he does force the reader to see certain truths by using literary devices, like similes, irony and repetition. Without telling a reader what to think, Bragg entices his readers to see the story from his, the narrator's, point of view. His journalistic articles contain the five Ws and the H (who, what, when, where, why and how), but they do not necessarily follow the traditional

inverted pyramid style. His stories are more like short stories, as Tom Wolfe might say.

Consider another newspaper article, "Tender Memories of Day-Care Center Are All That Remain after the Bomb," a May 3, 1995 *New York Times* piece about the Oklahoma City bombing reprinted in the collection *Somebody Told Me: The Newspaper Stories of Rick Bragg*. The reporter grabs readers with the lead: "The babies used to try to grab the sunlight" (202). In one sentence, Bragg has seized the reader's attention with the phrase "used to," making the reader wonder why he has used the past tense. With the past tense "used to," Bragg has introduced tension and has invited readers to wonder why the babies are not still grabbing for the sunlight. Additionally, Bragg has focused on an image in the lead that any reader could recognize and all would agree about – the innocence of babies, babies who are so unknowing that they try to grasp the ungraspable, just as readers cannot grasp the unbelievable, the idea that an individual would intentionally blow up a building full of people and, yes, innocent babies grasping at sunlight. Bragg notes that four baby cribs were lined up next to the windows on the second floor of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in the America's Kids day-care center. The day-care center's owner, Melva Noakes, told Bragg that the sunlight was good for the babies and that passersby on the street enjoyed looking up at them. Because the babies in their cribs were so visible to anyone on the street, Noakes told Bragg that she believed that the bombers knew children were in the building, even though many did not want to

believe that anyone could be so cruel, so evil to bomb a building filled with so many innocents. Fifteen of the 21 children in the day-care that day died, including all four babies in the crib by the windows, the babies who, as Bragg wrote, "slept, played and cried in the sunshine by the second-floor windows, just a few feet from the origin of the explosion" (204).

When Bragg wrote this story for *The New York Times*, the explosion had just happened 14 days before, and rescuers were still searching for survivors.

Bragg writes:

What they have found are mangled tricycles, shredded teddy bears, melted dolls and pieces of carriages, but no children in the past several days. There were story books in ashes, but no toy guns.

The teachers did not allow them. They said they wanted to protect the children from things that represent violence (204).

Again, Bragg has used irony to note that the children who were protected from violent things were destroyed in an act of ultimate violence. This piece was a so-called straight news story in *The New York Times*, not an editorial, and Bragg has said that he tries not to preach in his stories, to keep himself out of it and just tell the story. Although he has not injected his opinion directly, the way he describes the setting and his observations of what rescue workers were finding are heartfelt. He uses descriptive, powerful words to tell the readers about the conditions of what rescuers were finding, not just teddy bears but "shredded" teddy bears, not just dolls but "melted" dolls, and not just carriages but "pieces"

of them; he did not have to predict for readers what the conditions of the babies might be if rescuers did ever find their remains. With that ironic description, Bragg effectively characterizes the bomber(s) as evil incarnate without literally saying “he or they are evil incarnate.” His descriptive observations powerfully move his readers to that conclusion.

In this article, Bragg also uses another literary device in a powerful way – repetition. In many of Bragg’s journalistic stories and in his memoirs, he uses repetition; sometimes, he uses the same phrase or word to begin a series of paragraphs, and sometimes he repeats a certain word or phrase within a paragraph. Bragg’s use of repetition is his way of emphasizing a point, and gives his writing a unique rhythm. Often, Bragg’s use of repetition encourages a reader to read out loud or at least hear the words in his head so that his cadence and rhythm are clear and even lyrical. In this article, Bragg repeats the verb phrase “would have” and in a few cases a slight variation of “would.” His repetitive use of this phrase is not lyrical in this article, but it effectively emphasizes his point – what might have been if the bomber(s) had not selected a building housing a day-care center. He begins the repetition by explaining the daily routine of the day-care center as recalled by its owner, Noakes. Bragg writes [I have italicized his use of repetition for emphasis]:

At 7 a.m., the first of the children *would have* arrived. Some of them *would have* cried a little as their parents left. At 8 a.m., they *would* gather for breakfast. By 8:10, the first milk *would be* spilled.

Just after 9 a.m., the time the truck loaded with explosives rolled up to the building, they *would have* all gathered around their teachers and sang a song probably several songs. Like millions of children in America, they had been singing the Barney song. "That one that goes, 'I love you, you love me,'" said Mrs. Noakes. If the unthinkable had not happened, they *would have* gone to play at about 9:30, or formed a circle and told something that happened in their lives to their classmates. The babies *would have* been lifted from the buggies and taken for a ride. If the bomber had been just a little later, the infants *would have* been speeding down the hallways in buggies, away from the windows. In the afternoon, about 2:30 p.m., *would have* been nap time. The toddlers and older children *would have* snuggled with bears and drifted off. P.J. Allen, 20 months old, *would have* either pretended to sleep or else awakened early, and *would have* sneaked into the director's office to search for cookies. He is in critical condition with burns on 55 percent of his body. At 3 p.m., it *would have* been snack time, with crackers, cookies and fruit, with milk. The rest of the afternoon *would have* been devoted to reading stories, playing with building blocks, maybe more singing. Nekia and the other older children *would have* painted pictures. "Sometimes I couldn't tell what it was when she brought it home," said Nekia's grandmother.

Someone *would have* had to broken up a fight between 3-year-old Zachary T. Chavez and another child. Zachary died in the blast. The director, 24-year-old Dana Cooper, *would have* been surrounded by children, wanting a cookie a story, a hug. "She was a pushover," and the children knew. She and her 2-year-old son, Christopher, who was there with her, were both killed. "Now her husband has a big empty house," Mrs. Noakes said. Wanda Howell, a 34-year-old teacher, *would have* had a child on her lap, reading a story" (205).

To emphasize what might have been, what the routine would have been if Oklahoma City Bomber Timothy McVeigh had not blown the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building apart, Bragg used the phrase "would have" or close variations of it 18 times in this article. The repetition is Bragg's hammer as he pounds the point over and over, giving the reader a sense of just who was affected by the Ryder truck full of explosives. The babies and the older children had faces, habits, personalities, routines, lives, and Bragg has hammered out their personalities for the reader with this repetition so that they do not seem like distant statistics, some inanimate objects we might read about in a newspaper article. He has made them real, and his use of repetition was no accident in this article; it is one of the tools that makes Rick Bragg's writing distinctive, recognizable, powerful, and it is the mark of a storyteller.

From the beginning of Rick Bragg's career as a journalist, he was fortunate to work with supportive mentors, patient editors who guided him and allowed him space to develop and use his own style once he proved himself. Occasionally, he ran into or up against colleagues and other editors who perhaps thought Bragg did not have the appropriate journalistic training, schooling or even personal pedigree, and although the chip on his shoulder weighed heavily on him at times, the work ethic he had learned from his mother, his uncle, Ed, his older brother, Sam, and others in his community forced him to persevere. The lessons in storytelling that he learned at their knees allowed him to prevail.

### Chapter Three - All Over But the Shoutin'

It was almost inevitable that Bragg's mastery of storytelling in journalism would lead to another genre, memoir. His journalistic writing having been recognized with numerous awards, including the ultimate in his field, the Pulitzer Prize, Bragg received two interesting telephone calls at about the same time. The first was from an editor who said she liked his writing and asked him if he had ever considered writing a book. Ever humble, he said he had not and seemed a little dumbfounded at the inquiry. Soon after, Bragg received a call from an agent, who like the editor, said she liked his writing and wondered if he had ever considered writing a book. Again, he answered no. When he relayed these inquiries to a friend, that friend told him that he was an idiot for not following up. "These two women [the editor and the agent] were at the top of their games," Bragg recalled during a conversation with high school students at the West Virginia Book Festival in Charleston, West Virginia in October 2002 (Personal Interview). After giving the prospect a little thought, Bragg called the editor and the agent back and told them of some of his ideas, the stories he would like to tell, and this was how his first memoir, *All Over But the Shoutin'*, was born.

Once again, Bragg, unaware, entered a tradition that has seen cyclical practice and popularity, a tradition that dates back to at least 1673, which the *Oxford English Dictionary* notes as the time when the term memoir was used and

defined as "a person's written account of incidents in his own life, of the persons whom he has known, and the transactions or movements in which he has been concerned" ("memoir," def. 3b). The earliest definition of the word memoir appears to be dated 1567 when "memoyr" was defined as a note, memorandum or record ("memoir," def. 1). Although some critics of the genre seem to imply that memoir, which is so popular now, is a product of the 1990s era of tell-all talk shows where individuals divulge their deepest, darkest secrets for the general public, the literary memoir, for instance, served as a genre and outlet for Virginia Woolf, who at the first meeting of the Memoir Club on March 4, 1920 shared "22 Hyde Park Gate," her memoir of her half-brother's incestuous relationship with her and her sister, Vanessa (Barrington 11). It is true, however, that the genre enjoyed a resurgence in the 1990s and beyond. William Zinsser notes that this is the "age of memoir" and that Frank McCourt's *Angela's Ashes* serves as the "ultimate symbol" of the classic literary memoir of the current boom (3). Rick Bragg, then, was well positioned to use memoir to tell his mother's story and his own in *All Over But the Shoutin'*.

*All Over But the Shoutin'* is the story of a mother who managed to raise three spirited boys, to keep them fed and clothed and safe, after being abandoned by her husband countless times and finally for good in Northeastern Alabama. This is the story of a mother who "forgot" to eat when provisions were scarce so that her three growing sons would have enough. This is the story of a mother who pulled a son on her cotton-picking sack up and down miles of cotton

rows so that she could look after the infant and earn whatever she could for her family. This is the story of a mother who went eighteen years without a new dress so that what little money she had would pay for her boys' school clothes. Why tell it? Would this story matter to anyone outside of Rick Bragg's family? Would anyone care about a mother's sacrifice? Would anyone want to read a story that examines the painful issues of class and race? Bragg explains:

This story is important only to me and a few people who lived it, people with my last name. I tell it because there should be a record of my momma's sacrifice even if it means unleashing ghosts, because it is one of the few ways I can think of – beyond financing her new false teeth and making sure the rest of her life is without the deprivations of her past – to repay her for all the suffering and indignity she absorbed for us, for me. I tell it because I can, because it is how I earn my paycheck, now at *The New York Times*, before at so many other places, telling stories. It is easy to tell a stranger's story; I didn't know if I had the guts to tell my own . . . this story is for her, as have been, in smaller ways all the stories I have ever told and the method in which I told them" (*All Over But the Shoutin'*xii - xxi).

Bragg's position as a paid storyteller gave him the power to tell this story and to force readers to deal with or at least to face the issues, particularly the issue of class, that his people have lived through and continue to encounter.

Bragg's memoir can be divided roughly into three sections or what he calls seams. Section one is entitled "The Widow's Mite" and is the portion in which he explains the background of his mother and father and focuses on stories that show his mother's sacrifices in raising three sons after being abandoned by a drunken husband. Section Two is "Lies to My Mother" and details Rick Bragg's career as a journalist. The finale and third seam, "Getting Even with Life," explains some of Bragg's triumphs, including fulfilling his mother's dream of having a home of her own. In his introduction, Bragg makes the point that his mother's sacrifice is symbolic of the kinds of sacrifices a lot of mothers have made for their children. His is a story that could be told about a lot of people's mothers, fathers and extended family, "families [that] just came to pieces in that time and place and condition, like paper lace in a summer rain" (*All Over But the Shoutin'*xii). Bragg used a simile, "like paper lace in a summer rain," to illustrate the fragility of families and life in that place, in that time. When Bragg refers to the method in which he told this and other stories, he is referring to the rich storytelling tradition his mother and family bestowed upon him. His use of storytelling makes this memoir flow like the best of his journalistic pieces, engaging the reader, allowing the reader to relate to the story of deprivation and resolve and even triumph in the rural South, in the foothills of Appalachia.

William Zinsser and Judith Barrington note that honest reflection is required in memoir, and *All Over But the Shoutin'* is filled with several stories accompanied by Bragg's adult reflection on what they meant then and mean now

– how as an adult he has come to terms with those experiences. However, in a sense, Rick Bragg rejects the label “memoir” for this work. In his prologue, Bragg writes: “The people who know about books call it a memoir, but that is much too fancy a word for me, for her, for him. It is only a story of a handful of lives . . . In these pages I will make the dead dance again with the living, not to get at any great truth, just a few little ones” (*All Over But the Shoutin’* xxi-xxii). I do not think he rejects the term because the definitions of memoir do not fit this work (because they do); I think he shrugs off the term because he and his people are humble and avoid what his mother refers to as “false pride.” I think Bragg still has something of a chip on his shoulder, however whittled away by now, and does not feel completely at ease having his work described in literary terms. Thus far, he has been a journalist and has had to struggle to carve a niche for himself in that world. Considering himself and his work now in another genre, one linked to academia, perhaps is overwhelming to a man who technically still is a freshman at Jacksonville State University.

Despite Bragg’s reluctance to classify his work as a memoir, does *All Over But the Shoutin’* meet the criteria or definitions of memoir? Many describe the genre as a slice of life, a memorable portion of a life. In his introduction of *Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoir*, William Zinsser notes that “unlike autobiography, which moves in a dutiful line from birth to fame, memoir narrows the lens, focusing on a time in the writer’s life that was unusually vivid, such a childhood or adolescence, or that was framed by war or travel or public

service or some other special circumstance" (15). That definition proves problematic in applying the label of memoir, then, to Bragg's work because Bragg's story encompasses something more than a portion of a life, yet it could not be called an autobiography because it is not a record of his own life from birth to death. Nor is it a biography of his mother because it is not simply a record of her life from birth to death; it is a story of both of their lives in a sense with a focus on struggles and a few triumphs. Zinsser also points out that an effective memoir is one that focuses on a distinctive moment in the life of a person and a society, thereby becoming a work of history (15). Bragg's work certainly fulfills that criteria in that it chronicles a period and a culture in the South, in the foothills of Appalachia. Bragg's work includes issues of class, race and poverty and is deeply embedded in the context of the times.

In *Writing the Memoir: From Truth to Art*, Judith Barrington suggests that it is essential for the memoirist to both tell the story and muse upon it "trying to unravel what it means in the light of her current knowledge" (20). Barrington maintains that retrospection in memoir is a must and that readers want to know how the writer understands the events of the past on which the memoir focuses. Retrospection is evident in many parts of *All Over But the Shoutin'*. In one story, Bragg recalls the time when he had his first experience with the class system and the educational system of Alabama, and he learned that classrooms could be divided into a rigid caste system as he was put not into the Cardinal section of the affluent children but with the Jaybirds who were poor or "just plain dumb"

and who “got what was left after the good books were passed out” (*All Over But the Shoutin’* 55). A reader, Rick impressed his teacher one day with his memorization of their simplistic text. So impressed, she allowed him to read with the Cardinals, and although he did not miss a word, she sent him back to the Jaybirds the following day. Bragg remembers: “The teacher – and I will always, always remember this – told me I would be much more comfortable with my own kind. I was six, but even at six you understand what it means to be told you are not good enough to sit with the well-scrubbed” (*All Over But the Shoutin’* 55). This may well be the origin or the time the chip on his shoulder was born. Having a chip on his shoulder and confronting what it means is a prominent theme in Bragg’s memoir, and most often that chip is related to class and his and his family’s position in society.

His memoir also contains stories that illustrate the racial divide in the South during his time and the lessons he learned that transcended the divide. By the fall of 1965, Rick’s father had lapsed into his habit of drinking again and quit work. His father stayed drunk throughout the week, not just on the weekends. He yelled at Rick’s mother about the “passel of brats” she had brought into his life and “went mean again” (*All Over But the Shoutin’* 63-64). It was during this time that stories and beliefs about blacks and race and culture Rick had been picking up were challenged by an act of kindness and selflessness. Rick had spent some time around his father’s family, who sometimes talked about “the nigger trouble.” Rick had really never had much contact with anyone

other than his family and the white folks around them. His school was not integrated, and although blacks picked cotton beside whites like his mother in the field, Rick's memory is that they kept to themselves, so he was puzzled by the nature of this "trouble" that the men discussed during those visits to his grandfather's house.

Although he evidently finds it painful and no doubt embarrassing, Bragg nonetheless is honest about the culture, the views and even the language of his family. Bragg writes: "I grew up in a house where the word *nigger* was as much a part of the vocabulary as 'hey,' or 'pass the peas,'" and he admits that if he were writing this memoir to make his life sound perfect, this is the part that he would change, "but it would be a lie. It is part of me, of who I was, and I guess who I am" (*All Over But the Shoutin'* 61). This is one of the strongest moments of reflection in Bragg's memoir, as he notes that trying to qualify and explain such epithets does no good, means nothing to "the people whom that word slashes like a razor" (*All Over But the Shoutin'* 61). As Bragg begins to tell the story, he describes for his readers the process of recovery of this memory. He writes: "I have to reach back into the darkest and ugliest time of my childhood. To find the good in it we have to peel back the layers of bad, the last few months we lived with our daddy, the year we went to sleep every night afraid" (*All Over But the Shoutin'* 62). Bragg explains that the backdrop of this story included a broader, racial meanness, a year of Ku Klux Klan picnics, bus burnings and proclamations from George Wallace, who claimed he lost his first bid for

governor because he was "out-niggered" (*All Over But the Shoutin'* 62). It was against this backdrop that Bragg's family experienced abandonment once again, and they hit rock bottom. This time they did not have welfare checks or government commodities to sustain them because those handouts ceased when Bragg's mother went back to his father. Bragg's mother put off going back to her mother's or being rescued by her sisters, who often came to her aid, because "hurt and bad feelings" grew when she had gone back to her husband this time. Bragg explains: "Out of pride, she wanted to wait as long as she could" (*All Over But the Shoutin'* 65).

Before long, however, their credit ran out at a nearby store, and the milkman stopped his deliveries. They ate what was left in the house until Bragg's memory recalls nothing but hoecakes. Then, Bragg's mother "got sick," and she struggled out of bed each day long enough to find something for the boys to eat. Although the boys did not realize it then, their mother was pregnant with her fourth child. This is when something short of a miracle happened, when Bragg and his brothers learned a powerful lesson about kindness and generosity and character from a black family who lived down the road. They sent one of the children, a little boy "the color of bourbon" to the Bragg's door with some corn (*All Over But the Shoutin'* 65). Bragg writes:

They must have seen us, walking that road. They must have heard how our daddy ran off. They knew. They were poor, very poor, living in unpainted houses that leaned like a drunk on a Saturday

night, but for a window in time they had more than us. It may seem like a little bitty thing, by 1990s reasoning. But this was a time when beatings were common, when it was routine, out of pure meanness, to take a young black man for a ride and leave him cut, broken or worse on the side of some pulpwood road. For sport. For fun. This was a time when townspeople in nearby Anniston clubbed riders and burned the buses of the Freedom Riders. This was a time of horrors, in Birmingham, in the backwoods of Mississippi. This was a time when the whole damn world seemed on fire. That is why it mattered so (*All Over But the Shoutin'* 65-66).

Bragg recalls that they had seen the children and their families before at a distance. Like Rick and his brothers, these children climbed the same trees and swam in the same creek, but somehow their paths did not connect, except in a few instances when Rick and company threw rocks at them. Bragg remembers:

I knew only one of them by name. He had some kind of brain condition that caused tremendous swelling in his head. The others called him Water Head, and he ran slower than the rest and I bounced a rock off his back. I heard him cry out. I would like to say that we came together, after the little boy brought us that food, that we learned about and from each other, but that would be a lie. It was rural Alabama in 1965, two separate, distinct states.

But at least, we didn't throw no more rocks (*All Over But the Shoutin'* 66).

Bragg's reflection reveals the complex world he grew up in and his complicated feelings about it, about the racism prevalent in that time and place. By resisting the temptation to "revise" this story and reflecting on what he learned, he has gained more credibility and understanding among his readers.

These are just two of many stories in this work accompanied by the adult Bragg's reflection. In *All Over But the Shoutin'*, Bragg reflects on his father's treatment of his mother and his sons. He reflects on the fact that his mother took his father back so many times after his cruelty towards them all. He reflects on his mother's sacrifices that he did not fully understand or appreciate at the time. He reflects on issues of race and culture and poverty of the time and place. He reflects on the chip on his shoulder and the many times he did not feel good enough to fit in with the company around him or was made not to feel good enough. Bragg is reflective on most issues in the memoir that are of importance except for one, his seeming inability to sustain an intimate relationship with a woman. Divorced in his twenties after just a few years of marriage, Bragg notes countless times in this memoir, in interviews, and in discussions that he has been dumped by a multitude of "good women," 43 as of October 2002. He jokes about it and mentions that his bad habits get in the way. The closest he comes to reflecting on the issue is to say that he just did not allow the time in his life for a relationship, that his job always took

precedence, and once he wrote that he was concerned that he might be too much like his father. More than once in the memoir Bragg maintains that his heart never really gets broken and that he is not without female companionship for long if he so chooses. When he writes of girlfriends, he most usually describes them in positive, flattering terms, but he just seems unable or unwilling to delve too far into this area of his life. Readers of this memoir might wonder if his devotion to his mother, trying to make up for all the wrongs his father and life dealt her, has become a barrier to establishing a relationship of substance, an intimacy defined not just in terms of sex with a woman. Although Bragg seems open and willing to reveal many truths of his and his mother's and family's lives, he seems to avoid any in-depth reflection over this portion of his life and often uses humor when mentioning girlfriends and inevitable break-ups. In his presentation at the West Virginia Book Festival, Bragg told the audience that *All Over But the Shoutin'* was not a "tell-all" book and did not include any "Oprah moments" (Personal Interview). It would seem that he has deliberately chosen not to deal with this part of his life, to "tell all" on the printed page; this part of his life is private, and he has prepared some witty quips to derail curious readers, fans and interviewers. In his introduction to *Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoir*, William Zinsser suggests that writers sometimes use humor as a defense. Zinsser writes: "Humor is the writer's armor against the hard emotions – and therefore, in the case of memoir, one more distortion of the

truth" (10-11). It would appear, then, that Bragg uses humor when it comes to this subject as a defense to keep this part of his life to himself, private.

Nevertheless, Bragg's is an engaging voice in this memoir. Judith Barrington focuses on the necessity of using an engaging voice in memoir. A conversational voice, one that captures a personality will make the reader feel spoken to, and if the memoirist is consistent, readers will begin to recognize a particular memoirist's voice, which is "something like the fingerprint of the writer" (Barrington 21). As with his newspaper writing, Bragg's voice is distinctive and evident throughout the memoir. Bragg's distinctiveness, what Barrington calls the memoirist's "particular linguistic quirks, sentence rhythms and recurring images," evolve from the culture of storytelling in which he was born and reared. At numerous points in this memoir and in subsequent interviews and discussions, Bragg has given credit to the storytellers in his family for helping to form his own voice and storytelling skills. In an interview in Charleston, West Virginia in October 2002, the writer told me, "I grew up at the knees of the best storytellers in the world," and ever humble, he remarked that he is not as gifted as his brother and other kinfolk at storytelling. However, it is precisely his use of storytelling that has engaged readers so and has made this work a bestseller. Readers seem hungry for this kind of a voice, for oral in narrative. One of Bragg's most effective storytelling tools that makes his voice distinctive is repetition. Storytellers often use repetition to engage their listeners, to make a point, and to make their stories rhythmic, even lyrical. Here

is one of many uses of repetition in *All Over But the Shoutin'* as he recalls a story he wrote about the 1994 tornado that hit northeastern Alabama and his own hometown:

This is a place where grandmothers hold babies on their laps under the stars and whisper in their ears that the lights in the sky are holes in the floor of heaven. This is a place where the song "Jesus Loves Me" has rocked generations to sleep, and heaven is not a concept, but a destination. Yet in this place where many things, even storms, are viewed as God's will, people strong in their faith and their children have died in, of all places, a church (*All Over But the Shoutin'* 246-247).

Bragg's repetition of "this is a place" and "yet in this place" gets the reader's attention and asks him to listen closely to what follows, for it is important. Bragg also uses another one of his most potent storytelling weapons in this opening – irony. He sets the reader up to understand that this is a place of faith and comforting grandmothers and innocent babies and where most people live their lives with the intention of making it to Heaven, and just as Bragg has lulled his readers into picturing this picturesque place, he turns the scene upside down in the same breath as he reveals that these, some of "God's people" have died in the house of God, a church.

Both in his journalistic writing and now in *All Over But the Shoutin'* Bragg loves to play with repetition and irony, and he is good at it. He uses repetition

and irony as devices to paint the reader a picture, to make him see and feel what Bragg, the observer sees and feels. Bragg has said that he does not preach in his writing, does not tell the reader what to think or feel; he does not have to because his use of these and other storytelling devices are persuasive enough. In a chapter in which he describes moving to New York City to work for *The New York Times*, Bragg juxtaposes reality with the stories he told his mother. He writes:

I settled on the Upper West Side, near the corner of 110<sup>th</sup> and Broadway. The homeless were five to a block, there had been a fatal stabbing two doors down. It was a real neighborhood.

I told my momma it was safe as a church.

I had two rooms, a galley kitchen and a view of nothing. It cost just \$1,185.50 a month, and it was on the subway line to Times Square, a straight shot. Across the street there was a place that sold hot dogs for fifty cents.

I told my momma I was eating right.

My belongings arrived in early July. I walked around the opened boxes and thought to myself that a thirty-five-year-old man should have more stuff than this. There was a couch and chair, book shelves, a bed, and television and stereo, some pictures.

I told my momma my life was rich and full . . .

The next day, the foreign desk asked me if I would like to go back to Haiti. A week later I was disembarking at what they used to call Duvalier Airport, searching the sky for smoke, and the ground for bodies, again.

I told my momma I was going to spend a few weeks in the Caribbean (*All Over But the Shoutin'* 253-254).

Bragg often uses juxtaposition to unveil irony, and his use of repetition is almost oral; the reader can hear the story, almost hear Bragg say the words. The detail and length of the sentences describing reality versus the brevity and fantasy of the stories he told his mother are compelling, and his use of "I told my momma," a down-home phrase sounds comfortable, safe, and familial.

In "Rick Bragg on the Art of Storytelling," an article for the periodical *Writer*, Elfrieda Abbe observes: "His writing simmers with down-home phrases: 'His temper was as hot as bird's blood.' 'His daddy was just a name, but his momma was a bird flying'" (23). In this article, for which Abbe interviewed Bragg, Bragg directly addresses his use of storytelling and offers advice to those who would like to do what he has done – tell stories about their own families and make them interesting enough for others to read. Bragg offers:

I tell people to tell the stories the way they heard them. It's hard to scratch a culture and not find a storyteller somewhere in it. Tell it with the flavor, the drama, the grace and the wit that it's told to you. People say [my] language is so beautiful. Well, the language

was stolen. I stole it from my people. It was their rhythms, their cadences, their beautiful communications that came through. I have some skill at it, but the truth is, I had it at hand (Abbe 24).

From his family, Bragg learned the elements of storytelling as one might learn a song or how to play a musical instrument from a mother, a father or a grandparent.

In a sense, memoirs are nothing but stories, one long one or a number of shorter interconnected stories. Judith Barrington notes that in some memoirs, one story is interspersed with the narrator's commentary and in others, many different stories are used to illustrate a theme. Regardless of the approach, the memoirist needs to use fiction-writing skills to move through the story, Barrington suggests, and scene and summary serve as two useful tools to do so. The memoir writer uses summary to move through time in a few paragraphs, while scene allows the writer to focus or zoom in on a character or characters, a setting, etc. Barrington writes that the memoirist:

can give the exact dialogue, note the expressions, reactions and movements of the speakers, as well as the sounds, sights, smells, etc., in the immediate environment. She (memoirist) may go inside a character's head and give us thoughts that aren't expressed in the dialogue. She may describe in some detail the facial expression of one character. She selects which details to render in sharp focus (82).

Bragg uses these fictional elements, scene and summary, adeptly in his memoir writing; he learned how to use scene and summary in his journalistic writing and honed those skills over the years as he developed his narrative style. In the Abbe interview, Bragg credits his journalistic writing for readying him for writing *All Over But the Shoutin'*. Bragg comments: "Every word I ever wrote for every newspaper I worked for made me a better writer, gave me discipline and experience . . . I've written a lot about great sadness – bombings, violence in housing projects, and murder cases. It teaches you how to write about pain and suffering without being maudlin" (25). Though he does not specifically use the terms "scene" and "summary," he definitely uses those tools to move through a narrative and to focus when appropriate. In fact, he told me in my interview in October 2002 in Charleston, West Virginia that he uses direct quotes (a form of scene) sparingly, only as needed, and uses summary to paint a picture and to move the story along.

Comfortable in using narrative to "report" or tell a story, Bragg has managed to use narrative to tie together a number of smaller stories to carve out a theme. William Zinsser writes that it is essential for memoir writers to affix narrative order on a "jumble of half-remembered" events and thus to manufacture a text. Zinsser observes: "With that feat of manipulation they arrive at a truth that is theirs alone, not quite like that of anybody else who was present at the same events" (6). In Bragg's memoir, for instance, he has tied together three stories into one: his father's abandonment and his mother's

sacrifices in raising her three sons, Bragg's career as a journalist, which was made possible by his mother's sacrifices, and finally getting even, enjoying some triumphs that resulted from all their hard work.

*All Over But the Shoutin'* is a memoir. It may not neatly fit all the criteria that critics say a memoir must fit, but Bragg has successfully bent boundaries to fit his needs. Although his work covers a lot of territory and incorporates many stories, they are all masterfully tied together by a common theme and by the narrative order he impresses upon it by using effective storytelling skills. Writing about the "new memoir," Zinsser argues that the best of them "elevate the pain of the past with forgiveness, arriving at a larger truth about families in various stages of brokenness. There's no self-pity, no whining, no hunger for revenge; the writers are as honest about their own young selves as they are about the sins of their elders" (5). Although there is no evidence in *All Over But the Shoutin'* that Bragg has forgiven his father for his abandonment of and cruelties towards his mother, his brothers and himself, he does seem to have come to terms with or dealt with that issue as he has worked through many other deprivations of his past, which in many ways have made him a stronger person, like his mother, a person who endures and emerges stronger and more sensitive to the world around him. Bragg writes: "I hope she sees some of her gentleness and sensitivity in my words because if there is any of that in me still, it came from her" and that his goal with this work was "not to get at any great truth, just a few little ones" (xx-xxii). As many readers and critics will attest, *All*

*Over But the Shoutin'* is so powerful because it speaks many truths in a voice that is lyrical, a storyteller's voice that entralls the reader.

## Chapter Four – *Ava's Man*

In 2001, Bragg followed his memoir, *All Over But the Shoutin'*, with *Ava's Man*, which became a national bestseller as well and bent the notion of genre even further. In *Ava's Man*, Bragg tells the story of Charlie Bundrum, his mother's father and source of strength, a beloved grandfather he never knew. Bragg's grandfather died in 1958, a year before Rick Bragg was born. Bragg laments: "I have never forgiven him for that" (*Ava's Man* 8). Bragg says that the work grew out of the prodding of readers who came to his book signings for *All Over But the Shoutin'*. Invariably, they asked him about the source of his mother's strength and character and told him that he "left out the good part" (Personal Interview). Although both parents provided support and a positive influence on Margaret Marie Bundrum Bragg, Bragg's grandfather was the main source of his mother's strength and character. In many ways, however, Bragg's grandfather remained an enigma to him; over the years, he noticed that his mother and aunts talked little of their father and seemed almost secretive on the subject. Occasionally, Bragg's grandmother, Abigail, better known as "Ava," would refer to him when her grandsons pestered her too much. Evidently, the widow caught the fancy of a traveling salesman for the Saxon Candy Company "who seemed to have a lot more on his mind than salt-water taffy." When her grandchildren kidded her about the peddler of sweets and asked, "Grandma, you goin' to get you a man?" she occasionally applied the brakes to her rocking chair

and proclaimed, "No, hon . . . I ain't goin' to get me no man . . . I had me one" (*Ava's Man* 6-7).

Bragg only had scraps of information about this man; he knew that his maternal grandfather had been a "carpenter, roofer, whiskey maker, sawmill hand, well digger, hunter, poacher and a river man" (*Ava's Man* 8). That was the extent of the information Bragg possessed, which he had pieced together over the years, but he was certain that his family members were not ashamed of the family patriarch. Bragg confides: "But in a family rich in storytellers, they were stingy with him, just him. It always left me with the same feeling I used to get when we would drive past the giant Merita bread factory in Birmingham" (*Ava's Man* 9). The snippets of stories he had heard about Charlie Bundrum whet his appetite just as the aroma of baking bread made him long for a taste. About two years before *Ava's Man* was published, Bragg asked his mother why the family was so reticent on the subject of his grandfather, and she promised him that "it was just a matter of time" (9).

An award-winning journalist, Bragg approached the mystery in much the same way he would pursue any story he wished to develop. He began asking questions; he informally interviewed his mother, his aunts, his uncles, cousins and anyone else who had known his grandfather. One December night, Bragg asked his mother and his aunts to tell him about his grandfather's funeral. He recalls that he was immediately embarrassed by the reaction he caused, the emotions he unleashed. All in their sixties, Charlie Bundrum's daughters "stared

hard at the floor,” and one aunt, who was “tough as whalebone and hell” cried softly as another, who had survived numerous tribulations, dabbed at her eyes (*Ava’s Man* 9). His mother left the room with the excuse of getting coffee.

Bragg recalls: “What kind of man was this, I wondered, who is so beloved, so missed, that the mere mention of his death would make them cry forty-two years after he was preached into the sky? A man like that, I thought to myself, probably deserves a book” (*Ava’s Man* 9).

Bragg decided against using a tape recorder when he asked his relatives to tell him all the stories they could remember of Charlie Bundrum because he knew the mechanical device would turn them off. Instead, he used pen and paper and his sharp ear, which had served him well over the years as a reporter. Bragg’s knack for listening and remembering the stories he was told actually sprang from growing up in a storytelling family embedded in a storytelling culture. In a telephone interview on March 31, 2003, Bragg told me that his approach to writing this book was not really that different from that used in researching and writing a biography. Bragg offered: “Suppose I were writing a biography of Charles Lindbergh or Dwight D. Eisenhower. The difference is that they have letters; I am quoting people who can’t read” (Telephone Interview). In *Ava’s Man*, Bragg uses the language of his aunts, uncles and others of the community – his language, the voice of the storyteller. In many cases, the structure may not be grammatically correct in a traditional sense. He may not use standard English consistently, but he adds authenticity to the story by using

what Henry Louis Gates, Jr. has described as the "speakerly text" (*The Signifying Monkey* 174). Bragg essentially has created a speakerly text with *Ava's Man* by combining oral storytelling and fictional devices to tell the story of Charlie Bundrum. *Ava's Man* is not a verbatim story from start to finish in his family's voice or language; it is a combination of three voices: his family's language and stories, the language of Bragg-the-son/grandson/nephew learned at the knees of those family members, and the language of Bragg-the-journalist. The work has become a speakerly text with that combination of voices telling the story of Charlie Bundrum. In the text and in the oral presentations Bragg gives on *Ava's Man*, he moves smoothly, seamlessly among the three voices.

In his prologue, Bragg is open about the methods he used to investigate and then write about his exulted grandfather. Bragg explains: "I built him up from dirt level, using half-forgotten sayings, half-remembered stories and a few yellowed, brittle, black-and-white photographs that, under the watch of my kin, I handled like diamonds" (*Ava's Man* 10). Once Bragg enticed his kinfolds into letting down their guard and talking about his grandfather, the stories flowed, and Bragg learned that although Charlie Bundrum left no material goods when he left this world, he left behind a legacy and was regarded as a hero by his family and by many in their community. A great-nephew of Charlie's told Bragg: "He ought to have a monument because there ain't no more like him. All his kind are gone" (*Ava's Man* 12). Bragg's grandfather was not entirely unique in his time. There were other men like him, blue-collar men who loved their

families and who toiled to try to make enough to keep them fed and clothed and safe. However, history books and other genres tend to ignore this type of man and woman even though they comprised an essential part of the fabric of this country.

Bragg begins Charlie Bundrum's story with a story and chapter entitled "The Beatin' of Blackie Lee" because he argues that the story proves to him how much his grandmother both loved and hated his grandfather and "which emotion won out in the end" (*Ava's Man* 19). Bragg's aunt Edna told him that evidently her father stopped by a bootlegger's, a locale he was not averse to visiting, and met Blackie Lee, "a traveling woman with crimson lipstick and silk stockings" whose coal-black hair earned her a distinctive name and who told Charlie that "she surely was parched and tired and sure would appreciate a place to wash her clothes and rest a spell before she moved on down the road" (*Ava's Man* 20). Known for taking in strays – dogs and men - Charlie told her she was welcome at his house. As the story goes, Ava and the five children, James, William, Edna, Gracie Juanita and Margaret (Bragg's mother), were working a few miles from the house in Newt Morrison's cotton field. Morrison's daughter, Sis, had driven by the Bundrum house earlier and approached Ava in the cotton field, where she "lit the fuse" by telling Ava that she noticed some silk stockings hanging on her clothesline and wondered if her sister had come in for a visit. Ava told her that her sister was not visiting and that she would have written or sent word if she had planned such a trip. Ava continued to pick cotton for awhile but suddenly

"jerked bolt upright as if she had been stung by a bee," hurled her cotton-filled sack across two rows and walked purposely the miles towards home. Her children were puzzled by her behavior and followed (*Ava's Man* 20-21).

By the time Ava made it home, it was nearly dark, and the traveling woman was still cooling herself on Ava's porch. Bragg writes: "Ava stopped and drew a breath and just looked at her for a moment, measuring her for her coffin. Then she stomped over to the woodpile and picked up the ax" (*Ava's Man* 21). Blackie Lee must have realized who Ava was and what she had in mind because she ran into their house, bolted the door and "began to speak to Jesus." Ava announced to the woman that she could come out and take her "beatin'" or Ava would chop down her own door, and she'd still have to take a "beatin'" at the hands of a woman with an ax (*Ava's Man* 22). The traveling woman chose the beating without the ax, and Bragg's aunt Edna told him that Ava's punishment of her might not have been so bad if Blackie Lee had not had the misfortune to wash her soiled clothes in Ava's dishpan. Bragg writes: "No one, no one, washed their clothes in Ava's dishpan" (*Ava's Man* 22). For flavor, Bragg allows Edna to tell the story directly as he writes:

Edna stood at the door, peeking.

Listen to her [Edna]:

"Momma beat her all through the house. She beat her out onto the porch, beat her out into the yard and beat her down to the road, beat her so hard that her hands swelled up so big she

couldn't fit 'em in her apron pocket. Then she grabbed aholt of her with one hand and used the other to flag down a car that was comin', and she jerked open that car door and flung that woman in and told the man drivin' that car to get her 'on outta here.' And that man said, 'Yes, ma'am,' and drove off with Blackie Lee" (*Ava's Man* 22).

In this story, the reader hears not only the voice of Bragg-the-storyteller, but also that of his aunt, Edna, in her own words. By transcribing Edna's voice on paper, Bragg has retained the oral quality of storytelling in this story and has added authenticity to it.

Charlie Bundrum had been at work during the beating of Blackie Lee, and his kinfolks say that fact may have saved his life; it did not, however, save him from a beating of sorts at the hands of Ava, who had some fight left in her for him. She had taken the children back to Newt Morrison's, who was a distant relative. Charlie came that night to collect them, and Ava "lit into him" like a "badger crawling and spittin' around [his] head" (*Ava's Man* 22). Morrison, hearing the commotion as children screamed and dogs barked, thought that Charlie might be beating his wife and tried to intercede by pulling out a pocketknife. Ava saw the knife, protectively flung her own body over the one she had been pummeling, and hissed "Don't you touch him" (*Ava's Man* 22-23). Although their marriage never saw another incident as ferocious, hateful or passionate as the one involving Blackie Lee, Charlie's and Ava's union never

lacked for drama, according to Bragg's relatives. He heard about other arguments and squabbles the two engaged in, but he also was told the stories about how they talked and talked, told stories, sang and even dueled each other, Charlie, "hell-hot" on his banjo, and Ava on her guitar. Generally, the duels ended in dancing as Charlie played his banjo while Ava "buck-danced" (what we might recognize today as a form of "River Dance") around the kitchen (*Ava's Man* 24-25).

Bragg continues Charlie Bundrum's story and the story of his family by tracing their roots to the Huguenots by way of the name Bondurant which shifted in spelling to Bundren and finally Bundrum. Bragg's descendants left few written records or material goods as is often the case with those who are not a part of the ruling class or affluent. Stories were the precious artifacts they passed down through the generations. Bragg tells other stories about his grandfather that were told to him by aunts, uncles, cousins thrice-removed and assorted other family members. Once he got them started, kinfolk loved to tell their stories of Charlie Bundrum, and sometimes an aunt would begin a story at Thanksgiving that was not finished until well after Christmas due to the countless interruptions of her sisters, who wished to add to the plot or to diverge to another story for a spell. They told their reporter-nephew stories about how Charlie and Ava met, how he courted her and how they slipped off to marry and begin a life together against all odds. They told him stories about how Charlie loved babies, how he beamed in their presence and how the code he lived by centered around

protecting them, a code he taught years later to his grown son when he had a baby of his own by instructing: "Don't let nothin' happen to it. Kill if you have to, but don't never, ever let nothin' happen to it, because it is weak, and small, and it belongs to you" (*Ava's Man* 76). They told him stories about his fierceness and hot temper, the danger of it never directed towards family but only towards those who threatened someone he loved, like Old Man Dempsey, who set his fighting dog on Charlie's son, William, for sport, for fun. When Charlie, who had been at work when it happened, learned that the dog gnashed out part of William's side, he quietly but fiercely faced down Old Dempsey and, shotgun in hand, told him he had come for his dog. When Dempsey told Charlie he couldn't have the dog, Charlie gave him a choice, saying: "I've come for the dog . . . or I've come for you" (*Ava's Man* 78-79).

They told him stories about Charlie's goodness, his sensitivity and tendency to protect whomever and whatever needed protecting, like Jessie Clines, known simply as "Hootie," a little gremlin of a man who was harmless, kind and talked to the owls but who became a target of rumors and then the brutality of drunks who made a ritual of beating him. Charlie essentially adopted the little man, who loved to listen to Charlie's stories, and he became a part of the family. They also told their nephew stories about the moonshine Charlie made, which was pure and clear and much sought-after by those who wanted safe "likker," not the kind manufactured in rusted truck radiators that became contaminated by lead salts; the moonshine that Charlie made also was sought by

revenueurs and police. Based on the stories he was told, Bragg explains his grandfather's moonshine escapades by explaining the context of the times. Although Prohibition was history by that time, Georgia and most of Alabama were officially "dry," but bootleggers supplied the constant demand for the kind of whiskey that made a man feel like blue fire coursed through his veins and made him forget just for a little while the poverty that bound him. Although Charlie most definitely sampled and enjoyed his own product because he wouldn't sell a drop that had not been tested first by his own liver (his method of quality assurance), he made the moonshine to help supplement his meager income. Bragg explains:

I am not trying to excuse it. He did things that he shouldn't have. I guess it takes someone who has outlived a mean drunk to appreciate a kind one. But he never poisoned anybody. He never caused anyone to go lame or blind from bad whiskey, and if you're going to have whiskey – and it, like the mountains where it was made, will always be with us – you might as well have memorable whiskey. And people do recall it [specifically Charlie's moonshine]. They truly do (*Ava's Man* 133).

Like good moonshine, the stories about Charlie Bundrum flowed clear and hot once his grandson tapped the source. His family told him the story of how a thug named Jerry Rearden and his two-hundred-some-odd pound girlfriend, Norris, came for Hootie one day with evil intentions. Evidently, Jerry had been

one of the drunks who in the past had beat Hootie for the sport of hit. In his hot-rod Ford, Jerry rumbled into the Bundrum's yard with Norris seated in the rumble seat "like a chubby child on a kiddy car, drinking soda pop and looking mean" (*Ava's Man* 145). Ever the protector and not pleased that Jerry had come to his house threatening violence in the presence of his wife and children, Charlie told him to leave. Jerry raised his .410 shotgun and leveled it at Charlie as Charlie, unarmed, walked towards the enraged man. Jerry shot but barely missed Charlie, who with a "fist the size of a lard bucket," knocked him out. The play-by-play having been told to him by the daughters who were there to witness the violence, Bragg continues the story by describing what happened next:

Jerry dropped like a box of rocks, his face and teeth a red mess. And just then Charlie saw a huge figure hurl itself at him from the shadows. It was that big woman, and she lunged at him with a hog-killing knife. Charlie whirled and fired. The woman, who was turned sideways to stab him, took the shot in the side of her breast, point blank. The shot passed through the breast and went into and through the other one, and the woman fell hard and heavy onto the grass . . . She was blessed that day, that woman, and Charlie was, too. The gun he snatched from Jerry Rearden was a little .410 used for squirrel and rabbit and sometimes deer, not a

12-gauge . . . [which] would have ripped that poor woman almost in two, at point-blank range (*Ava's Man* 148-149).

Bragg has recalled this story in places other than *Ava's Man*; he did so during his talk at the West Virginia Book Festival. There, he said he realizes how brutal it must sound that his grandfather shot a woman through both breasts, but that action, he says, must be tempered by two facts: the woman was hurling herself towards him with a hog-killing knife and Norris and Jerry brought the threat of violence in the midst of Charlie's wife, two sons, three little girls and an infant.

Violent stories like this one are tempered by others which describe the softness, the tenderness in Charlie Bundrum, especially for his children. He gave his children nicknames and called Rick's mother, his pet, "Pooh Boy." In his presence, his daughters felt safe, and he taught his sons and nephews how to hunt the woods without making a sound and how to catch the biggest fish in the rivers because in his time and in that place, hunting and fishing were ways to put food on the table, not sporting activities. Rick concedes that his grandfather would have been considered a poacher because he did not necessarily adhere to the calendar or quotas for hunting purposes "because how could a game warden in Montgomery or Atlanta know if his babies were hungry?" (*Ava's Man* 8). His family came first, not the laws of Alabama and Georgia, states in which the family moved around often. Comprised of several, shorter stories, Charlie Bundrum's is a story that embodies the stories of so many other poverty-stricken men and families in the Deep South and the foothills of Appalachia during and

after the Great Depression. It is notable because it is now in print, not just in the oral culture of storytellers, a culture that is disappearing.

In his introduction to book *Storytellers: Folktales & Legends from the South*, editor John Burrison notes that stories have been narrated orally for thousands of years for the benefit of audiences including family members, neighbors and even patrons. He suggests: "People have always loved a good story. The narrative impulse – the need to tell of or listen to experience and imagination structured into plot – is one of the traits that make us human" (1). Storytelling and the oral tradition serve as the method for cultures to preserve their memories, their truths, and their history. Because they function as entertainment and a way to transmit knowledge, good stories, Burrison maintains, became a "precious commodity" that had to be preserved by the community, which passed on the stories throughout generations. Depending on the quality of the intellect, memory and creativity of storytellers from one generation to another, stories underwent "refinement or degeneration," Burrison points out, and some stories, such as Homer's epic poetry and stories of the Old Testament, saw the transformation from "ear literature" to "eye literature" by being recorded through pictographs and the inscriptions of priests on clay tablets (1). Burrison offers:

Their removal from an immediate, responsive audience and new orientation to the written page led inevitably to changes in style, form and content, and the oral and written branches of the river of

verbal art grew further apart. So long as writing was in the hands of an elite minority these changes did not affect the masses, who still received their lore orally (1).

Given that an elite minority owned the written word originally, one may better understand the roots of the negative attitude that some academics today have for storytelling and the oral culture.

However, the invention of movable type made the written word more accessible to the masses, who became more reliant on the printed word as literacy increased over time. In the twentieth century, television, computers and the Internet have become powerful influences on communication that compete for individuals' attention. Burrison suggests, then, that the importance of oral storytelling has diminished unsurprisingly with the advent of "communications advances that require less human involvement and energy" (1). Burrison goes on to point out, however, that some types of oral narration have survived and flourish because there is a hunger for the type of interaction that "impersonal media" cannot provide. Burrison argues:

Nowhere in the United States is storytelling more vital than in the South, where skill with the spoken word has always been emphasized. Strong traditions of storytelling from such Old World source areas of the southern population as Ulster, West Africa, and southern England, reinforced by the physical isolation of dispersed

settlement and a conservative mindset that valued the old ways, certainly contributed to this tendency (1-2).

Marginalized groups have depended on storytelling as a way to transmit their knowledge, history and values. Like African Americans, those of Scots-Irish descent in Appalachia, can be defined as a marginalized group. Bragg's people, who are Scots-Irish, are considered Appalachian both economically and geographically. This is supported by the Appalachian Regional Commission's map, "The Appalachian Region," which defines Appalachia as the area from the Finger Lakes region of upstate New York through Bragg's area of Northeastern Alabama and below and west into Mississippi (*The Appalachian Region* – see appendix). Marginalized groups like Bragg's family, then, have relied on storytelling to inform, to teach, to persuade, to warn and to entertain.

With *Ava's Man*, Bragg effectively translates oral storytelling to written storytelling; he not only wanted to tell the story of his grandfather, but he also wanted to preserve something larger, the tradition and the culture that created him. In an interview by Ellen Kanner for the online site, *Book Page*, Bragg comments on the storytelling of his people. He told Kanner: "You can't assume storytelling stops at the county line, but I believe we have a richer tradition of storytelling . . . It's deeper and wider. You can't walk down the street without hearing a good story" (Kanner). In the interview with Kanner as well as with me in Charleston, West Virginia last October, Bragg said he worries that this part of his culture and their unique speech patterns are vanishing. He seemed almost

angry or at least irritated as he recounted to me that young girls from the area he grew up in sounded as though they were from “the valley” in California and that school children in Atlanta are made fun of if they sound “Southern.” It seems natural, then, or actually quite deliberate, that storytelling would enter into Bragg’s genre of memoir. Making his living by telling stories, Bragg simply used the stories his family finally shared with him to tell the story of his grandfather, and many readers and reviewers refer to the work as a memoir, the label also applied to *All Over But the Shoutin’*.

Although his first work may have pressed the boundaries of the definition of memoir, *All Over But the Shoutin’* can be included in that genre as it is Bragg’s story of his mother’s life and his own as shaped by his mother and family. It is fair to question, however, if a story constructed about a grandfather he never technically met can be considered as part of that same genre. If one writes a story about another, familial or not, by interviewing, researching and gathering information on that individual, whom he has never met, might it be more aptly classified in the genre biography? Indeed, other readers and reviewers of the work have labeled *Ava’s Man* a biography. In fact, in its cataloging of the book, the Library of Congress classifies the work as: “1. Bundrum, Charlie. 2. Working class whites – Southern States – Biography. 3. Depressions – 1929 – Southern States. 4. Southern States – Social life and customs – 20<sup>th</sup> century. 5. Southern States – Biography” (Back side of title page of *Ava’s Man*). However, the Library of Congress also applied the term biography to *All Over But the Shoutin’*, which

is widely regarded as a memoir. Marshall University cataloguer Pam Ford notes that the *Library of Congress Subject Headings*, a source cataloguers use to catalog books and other works, directs cataloguers to use Autobiography or Biography for memoir; in other words, memoir is not a subject heading the Library of Congress uses presently to catalog and classify works.

Nevertheless, memoir seems to be the prevailing label used by reviewers. In his *New York Times* book review of *Ava's Man* entitled "Down Home," Robert Morgan, author of the novel *Gap Creek*, refers to the work as a memoir about Bragg's maternal grandfather (9). In his unfavorable *Washington Post* review of Bragg's effort, Fred Chappell also labels the work as "a memoir that relies on oral history for the most part, on interviews with kinfolk, friends and others who were Bundrum's Georgia or Alabama neighbors" (4). In "Building Himself a Grandfather," her review of the work for *Library Journal*, Pam Kingsbury refers to it as "another affecting family memoir" (194). Bragg is identified as a journalist and memoirist in the career portion of *Contemporary Authors New Revision Series*, volume 112.

As with his first work, however, Bragg seems still to feel slightly uncomfortable with the term memoir. In an October 2001 interview for the *Baltimore City Paper online* to promote *Ava's Man*, interviewer Frank Diller notes that:

Bragg considers *Shoutirl* to be an odd memoir because it discusses his childhood, his journalism career and his travels with this mother

to accept the Pulitzer Prize and to buy her a house. "It's an homage to my mother, but I had to write about myself to show what [she] went through . . . You shouldn't write memoirs when you're 35 anyway," he adds (Diller).

That is precisely the misunderstanding many have about the genre, according to Judith Barrington. Even she has made the mistake, and she confides:

Like many people today, I confused "the memoir" with "memoirs." It was easy to do back then, when the literary memoir was not basking in the popularity it currently enjoys. The term memoirs was used to describe something closer to autobiography than the essaylike literary memoir . . . Of course, the boundary between these genres was not – and still is not – as clearly delineated as I have made it sound (19-20).

Perhaps as more literary memoirs, such as Rick Bragg's, are published and read, the fuzzy boundaries will be sharpened.

Regardless of labeling, one thing Bragg does seem comfortable with and to do deliberately is to push the boundaries of any genre he writes in, in which he is placed. He did it by pushing narrative into his newspaper pieces, becoming a part of the narrative journalism tradition notably practiced by Tom Wolfe and Truman Capote and Gay Talese. He used narrative so successfully that he won countless awards, including the Pulitzer, steadily moved up the ladder of prestigious reporting jobs until he found himself at *The New York Times*, and

then was approached by a top-rate editor and agent to write his first book, which was published by Random-House, a leading publisher. He pushed the boundaries slowly and steadily under the direction of supportive editors. He pushed the boundaries later because he could, because his success allowed him the power to "break rules." In pushing the boundaries in all of his creative nonfiction, that is narrative journalism and the two memoirs, has Bragg essentially created a new genre? Are the boundaries of genres fixed? Can they be redefined? Students of literary criticism argue that genres are fluid constructs of a given society and its sense of history and values at the time.

In "Genre Theory, Literary History, and Historical Change," an essay in *Theoretical Issues in Literary History*, Ralph Cohen writes: "In their reemergence, genre criticism and theory have moved from assumptions of genres as fixed to genre as process of textual change" (86-87). Cohen traces the debate of the "fixity of literary genre classifications" to Northrop Frye, Alastair Fowler, Rosalie Colie, and Barbara Lewalski, who show that such debates took place in the Renaissance (89). Cohen argues that "genres are cultural formations and their relation to cultural forces should perhaps begin with an inquiry into their critical and theoretical reemergence" (89). Cohen questions:

Why at this time have generic theories once again become important? In recent years a huge number of little known texts written by women, by African Americans, and other minorities have been recovered. They reveal the inadequate "data bases" for

constructing genres in the past. We now know that critics and theorists have disregarded texts such as slave narratives, domestic journals, feminist autobiographies, and confessions and kept them outside the range of literary study. Such genres did not fit a conception of education aimed at preparing white males for advancing in social and economic hierarchies. The need now is to educate people to understand that received genres, the so-called mass culture genres such as Westerns and detective stories and new ones such as advertising or television sitcoms, affect their thinking, feeling and knowledge. Reemergence of genre criticism and theory results from the need for feminist and African American and sympathetic critics to demonstrate the prejudices hidden or obvious in received texts. Such critics undermine the assumptions of objectivity of received critical and theoretical genres. Moreover, writings that deal with interrelations between literary and nonliterary genres or between genres of different disciplines – literary history and art history, literary criticism and psychoanalytical criticism and practice – have led critics and theorists to a reconsideration of genre as a unified kind (90).

Cohen suggests that a generic history of past writings allows one to study which constituents have been included and which have been left out in creating genre classifications. Cohen writes: "A generic history both stresses the need for

classification and the need to realize the limits of any monolithic classification. Classifications are multidimensional; thus every text within a genre can also be a member of another genre" (90). Cohen's argument helps to explain the difficulty in affixing one label or genre to Bragg's *Ava's Man*.

If the New Journalists paved the way for Bragg to inject storytelling and his narrative style into the genre of newspaper writing, who or what paved the way for him to push the boundaries of the genre of memoir? Has his success as a journalist and then the commercial and critical success of *All Over But the Shoutin'* allowed him to blend genres on his own or to create an entirely new one? Critics might argue that Southerners like Eudora Welty, Flannery O'Connor and William Faulkner have used storytelling in literature before and that Bragg's style is not new or groundbreaking. However, writers like Welty, O'Connor and Faulkner wrote fiction – short stories and novels – unlike Bragg's creative nonfiction. Though debates rage about truth in nonfiction, particularly in the genre of memoir, Bragg offers the story of his grandfather not as a novel, not as a work of fiction, but as an essentially "true" account of the life of a man living in the foothills of Appalachia and representing a time, place and individuals who transcended seemingly insurmountable odds. As his mother might say, Rick Bragg told "God's sanction" in *Ava's Man*. Some reviewers of the work do take issue with the element of truth in *Ava's Man*, and theirs represents a larger debate about the role of truth in the genre of memoir.

In *Writing the Memoir: From Truth to Art*, Judith Barrington devotes an entire chapter to the subject of truth in this genre. Barrington questions the nature of truth, its relationship to facts and whether one person can know the truth. She notes that there is a difference between factual truth and emotional truth and that some memoirists do extensive research in order to write while others prefer not to do too much so that it will not influence or color memory disproportionately. A memoir writer herself, Barrington reveals that she sometimes plays with time, reorders events and approximates dialogue which she finds necessary and permissible as long as it captures the essence of what happened (65-66). Are fact and truth synonymous? Toni Morrison offers an interesting perspective on the issue in her essay for William Zinsser's *Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoir*. In "The Site of Memory," Morrison writes: ". . . the crucial distinction for me is not the difference between fact and fiction, but the distinction between fact and truth. Because facts can exist without human intelligence, but truth cannot" (193). Barrington suggests that memoirists make peace with the idea that because absolute truth does not exist in life, it cannot exist in memoir and cites Anna Akhmatova, who said that falsification is present in every attempt to fashion a memoir (66-67). Barrington does stress, however, that the memoir writer must be committed to telling a story honestly because his readers expect no less.

Barrington tackles another dimension of truth in memoir as she notes that the truth sometimes hurts, both the writer and possibly even family members

and others who a part of the story. Barrington writes: "Most people belong to some group that demands their loyalty. Telling the truth almost always breaks unspoken laws, the solidarity expected from members of that group, whether it be a family or a larger community" (69). She goes on to suggest that the individuals who plead for the memoirist to remain silent perhaps are the very individuals who most "need" him to write about it. In the prologue, Bragg addresses this type of challenge in writing about his grandfather; the man was so beloved, so revered by his family that the writer worried he might be disowned if he painted the whole picture, which would include some stories that might not be entirely flattering. Bragg suggests: "If I ever let his wings drag in the dust, his surviving daughters would do more than forget my birthday" (*Ava's Man* 11). In the end, Bragg concluded, his grandfather's story was made more meaningful by including all the stories, even the ones that detailed his moonshine making and a close call with his fierce wife, Ava, over a woman named Blackie Lee. Bragg knew that his readers would not accept a censored version of his grandfather, and neither would Charlie Bundrum, for that matter, if he were still alive. Bragg concludes: ". . . he is so much more precious smelling of hot cornbread and whiskey than milk and honey . . . The one thing I am dead sure of is that his ghost, conjured in a hundred stories, would have haunted me forever if I had whitewashed him" (*Ava's Man* 11).

What constitutes truth, however, is the very issue that is at the heart of criticism of *Ava's Man*. Admittedly, it is hard to find reviews that do not laud the

work; one has to really search to find reviewers who criticize the work. I managed to find two. One review that takes the writer to task is by Elizabeth Bennett, a free-lance writer. Writing for the online edition of the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, Bennett praises Bragg's ability to write about working-class people in a "sad, funny, moving and poetic" manner, but she criticizes the writer for repeating a conversation his grandfather had with "another long-dead person" and for appropriating feelings and thoughts on a grandfather who died before he was born (Pittsburgh Post-Gazette online). Bennett writes: "Rumor has it that Bragg, too, takes liberties with the facts, sometimes doctoring his quotes in his *New York Times* stories to make more colorful copy" (Pittsburgh Post-Gazette online).

Bennett goes on to tell readers what "irritated" her most, which she describes as "Bragg's intentional bad grammar – phrases like 'to live decent,' 'if he had drank,' and 'a real whole lot.'" Calling it a quibble, she nonetheless complains:

He did the same thing in "Shoutin'" using – in his own telling of the story and not in quotes – such expressions as "anywheres close" and "it ain't noways true." They upset the narrative flow, and make Bragg come across as wearing his background "like a bull – badge of honor," as he has admitted doing (Pittsburgh Post-Gazette online).

Writers write for an audience. Astute writers and storytellers vary their tone and style to fit their purpose, to match their genre. The examples Bennett criticizes are not from newspaper pieces for *The New York Times*; they are from the story of his grandfather pieced together from multiple stories his family told him – family that live in the pines of northeastern Alabama, where Rick Bragg was born and raised and from which he developed his own, unique dialect. Although it is true that he never met his maternal grandfather, he also is not some unrelated, distant, entirely objective writer attempting to pen a biography. With *Ava's Man*, Bragg is not just writing about his grandfather, he is telling the story of his grandfather and family to which he is very much connected. Would it be fair, “truthful” for him to write about his family in a style that seems “unnatural,” “cleansed” of any words or phrasings that do not strictly adhere to formal English, which does not accurately represent the way he and his family speak, tell stories? In *Storytellers: Folktales & Legends from the South*, John Burrison counters:

Regional differences in vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation (the latter being what we most often associate with an accent and the most difficult aspect to represent on paper) are what give our speech its character and rootedness and reflect the diverse cultural backgrounds that make up our nation. The expressive power of dialect has not been lost on our finest creative writers whose use of it in dialogue infuses their work with a sense of place. And

nowhere in the United States is dialect a stronger identity-marker (among both insiders and outsiders) than in the South (11).

Given that Bragg was clear in the prologue to *Ava's Man* that he constructed the story from the stories of his family members and set out to spin the tale himself on paper, he should be able to write this creative nonfiction piece using the language that is natural to him and his people, their true language to make a speakerly text, as Gates might say.

Nevertheless, not all reviewers are convinced and seem to expect him to use grammatical constructions that fit their sense of standard English even if it is not true to the subject of his work. In "Hardscrabble," a review of *Ava's Man* for *The Washington Post*, Fred Chappell notes that the work relies on oral history and interviews and suggests: "He seems to believe that the use of oral sources gives him leeway to enter into a folkloric mode of narrative – and he lays it on with a snow shovel" (4). One is compelled to ask Chappell why in his estimation Bragg does not have the right to use a folkloric mode of narrative, a storyteller's approach? Chappell goes on to level: "*Ava's Man* is a mixture of adulation, rumor, hyperbole, hot air and execrable writing" (4). Conceding that Charlie Bundrum and the men he represents had admirable qualities, Chappell nonetheless argues that he and "his type" were in no way unique and that his grandson has misrepresented him and memorialized him with bad writing. He then launches into a list of what he calls Bragg's "transgressions" and points out what he considers "horrendous grammar," clichés, cruel caricature, faulty logic,

mixed metaphor, pompous silliness and bathos (4). At the end of the list, Chappell writes: "It is tempting to go on this way, pointing out in the interests of national literacy, passages of egregious badness. But I begin to feel I'm assassinating a moth with a .44 pistol" (4). Chappell ends his lambaste with the note that Bragg, a writer for *The New York Times*, received much acclaim for his first memoir and that he is left to surmise that Bragg "litters the pages of *Ava's Man* with cornball, hick locutions to convince us that he really is a rube, despite his fancy qualifications. A professional rube is someone who plays his audience for suckers. Charlie Bundrum might be ashamed, not of his grandson but for him" (4).

Chappell, who says in the review that he also was born in Appalachia during the Depression, seems to think, like Burrison, that Bragg should limit his use of the vernacular to direct quotes, that he should not use his own way of speaking, what Chappell calls "hick locution," to essentially translate oral storytelling to paper. Again, Bragg has been upfront about his method for gathering and writing the story of his grandfather; he had to rely on the oral memories of his people, people who do not read or write, people who leave only stories, not written records, to put them on paper. The work cannot be one long direct quote or a series of direct quotes. He had to listen, learn and then tell the story himself, making a few revisions here and there like any good storyteller. The difference is that Bragg had the challenge of translating the oral to paper without losing too much of its style, and to do that he wrote in the way that he

and his people speak in their everyday lives, using the pronunciations, the phrasings and the grammatical constructs that are true in his part of the world. He created a speakerly text. Chappell, a novelist and poet, perhaps did not take this notion into account and perhaps betrays a little professional jealousy in his diatribe; after all, he is not a Pulitzer-Prize winner, and although his works have received favorable reviews, his books are not best-sellers thus far, certainly not to the degree Bragg's are.

If Bragg could answer this criticism, explain why he chose to use the language of his people (and it is a deliberate choice because a quick review of his newspaper stories demonstrates his knowledge and mastery of standard English), he likely would say that doing so was essential to creating a voice of truth in this story, and he is motivated by a need to preserve what makes his people unique, part of which is the beautiful way in which they speak and tell stories. Again, he has noted his concern for the demise of his people's vernacular. *Ava's Man* is as much written for Bragg and his family as it is for the people and culture it represents, and it relies on the mixture of the language of his people, his own, and his more refined journalistic language. Thanks to his award-winning and commercial success, Bragg has found the power to shoulder his people from a vanishing oral existence into a written one that will preserve them. In what could be considered "the last word" on his motivation, Bragg writes:

. . . I do not think I have ever had so much fun as I have in learning and sharing the stories of a man that history would otherwise have ignored, as it would have ignored my mother and people like her, the working people of the Deep South . . . I wrote this book for a lot of reasons, but for that above all others – to give one more glimpse into a vanishing culture for the people who found themselves inside such stories, the people who shook my hand and said, “Son, you stole my story” (*Ava’s Man* 12-13).

## Conclusion

Rick Bragg's is an unlikely story, a story of "dumb, blind luck" and determination. Who would have thought that a boy from the pines of northeastern Alabama, a boy whose father abandoned him and his family, a boy who with his mother and two brothers lived on government commodities, welfare and the few dollars his mother earned from picking leftover cotton and ironing other people's clothes, a boy who never made it beyond the first semester of his freshman year at Jacksonville State University would grow into the man who could make a decent living by writing newspaper stories, ascend to a prime position at *The New York Times*, win numerous awards including the ultimate in his field, the Pulitzer, and be asked to write the stories of his family, which became bestsellers, widely celebrated and essentially anthems for working class people?

Unlikely, yes; impossible, no – not impossible for a boy who took his backbone from a mother who found the strength to raise three boys on her own in the midst of poverty, a mother who pulled her infant son on a cotton sack while she picked up and down miles of rows to supplement their subsistence, a mother who paradoxically accepted handouts from churches with a bent head and who rarely went out in public because she was ashamed and feared that she was not "enough," but who taught her boys "don't never take nothin' off of nobody," a mother who took her own backbone from strong parents, particularly

from a father whose resourcefulness kept his family from starving in the years of the Depression and just after in a place where prosperity never quite made it.

From this mother and all his people, Rick Bragg learned resourcefulness and resiliency. He learned to work hard, to fight the fights worth fighting, and despite that big chip on his shoulder, how to succeed. From his people, Bragg learned the art of storytelling and found a way to make this skill at first earn him a living and later carve a place in the establishment, literary and otherwise, for him and his people. To do this, Bragg had to break rules now and then, but only after he proved himself, only after he proved that he could play their game with their rules – essentially telling stories using standard English and traditional journalistic approaches. Once he proved he could write like anybody else and perhaps because he would take on tough assignments and asked for so little, supportive editors allowed him a little free reign, which he used to inject some of the storytelling lessons he had learned “at the knees of some of the best front porch talkers on this earth.” And, it is worth noting that Bragg got his start and learned his trade at southern newspapers, whose audience, no doubt, appreciated and perhaps expected a good story, a narrative that put statistics or politics or any other number of disconnected facts into perspective, into a story that held meaning.

Without realizing it, Rick Bragg carved himself a space in the narrative journalism tradition practiced by the likes of Truman Capote, Tom Wolfe and a few others who found a way to use story and fictional elements in reporting. At

first Bragg may not have realized that he was placing himself in this tradition; it is more likely that, like his people, he just knew how to tell a good story, how to engage an audience, and people listened. Bragg's success with narrative journalism gave him the break he never knew he wanted – the opportunity to write about the subject he cares most about: his people. And even then, he wrote on his own terms because he could, because by that time he had a little power in the establishment, power that he would use to celebrate those who had none.

With *All Over But the Shoutin'* and *Ava's Man*, Rick Bragg has pushed boundaries once again, the boundaries of genre, and this is how genres are born. Inevitably, works that push boundaries the way Bragg's do will receive criticism because if one invents a genre, in the short term doing so is not considered a legitimate way to express truth because it is new, because it breaks rules, because it stretches the boundaries to the breaking point. Criticism of *Ava's Man*, particularly that by Fred Chappell, then, is not unexpected and actually is enlightening and useful because it demonstrates just how far Bragg has pushed the boundaries of the genre of memoir or even biography and how he has made some in the literary establishment uncomfortable. Clearly, there is an audience for such a narrative, and Bragg is using his success and power to tell more stories about his people and place. At this point, he is working on another creative nonfiction piece that will examine the cotton mill industry and particularly the mill his older brother, Sam, worked at in Anniston, Alabama. The

mill has closed and with it another culture seems on the brink of demise. This is precisely the type of subject Bragg prefers to consider and to try to do something about through writing, the tool he knows how to use to create anthems for working class people, his people. Bragg will continue to use his writing not only to engage readers with the subjects of class and the class divide, still very much alive in the United States, but also to celebrate and preserve the stories and beautiful language of his people, the working class, in his own brand of written storytelling. Rick Bragg will continue to tell God's sanction in his speakerly texts, and in doing so, he carves a place and expands genre boundaries for others who wish to use storytelling in narrative to create their own anthems.

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## Appendix

# ENCYCLOPEDIA OF APPALACHIA

