

seven or eight hours a day writing. I am a full-time writer; that really matters. You can be more ambitious about something when it's all you do. I always say (in answer to the question "Which is your favorite among your novels?") that, of my twelve novels, any of the last seven is better made—better constructed, better written (better language), better thought-out, better planned—than any of the first five, which would include *The World According to Garp*. I think I really didn't hit full stride as a storyteller until my sixth novel—*The Cider House Rules*—and I've known more about what I'm doing ever since.

Iowa meant a lot to me—both as a graduate student and, later, as a teacher in the Iowa Writers' Workshop. Not only Vance helped; Kurt Vonnegut was also my teacher, and he became a lifelong friend. I was really lucky to meet those men when I did—and to know Kurt for so many years, especially. Sometimes, I find myself starting a letter to Kurt—or picking up the phone to call him. It's always a blow to remember that he's gone.

God of the Slide Guitar
A biography of Duane Allman stirs rock memories

Michael Ray Taylor, M.F.A.
Professor of Mass Media Communication

SKYDOG: THE DUANE ALLMAN STORY
By Randy Poe (Backbeat Books, 314 pp., \$16.95)

Every suburban neighborhood has one: a garage band of teenagers who practice on the weekend at decibel levels sure to get the cops called. In my neighborhood in Ormond Beach, Florida, the band was called The Escorts, but my mother called them "those Allman boys." She employed the same tone of voice a contemporary mother might use to say, "those al Qaeda boys." They had long hair. They were rumored to drink. They were always tearing around on loud motorcycles, always in some kind of trouble at the high school. It was 1965, a time when even first graders were allowed to wander the town at will, but Mom told me in no uncertain terms to stay away from the house down the street where those Allman boys practiced.

But one Saturday, I wound up there anyway. The band member who lived there (it had to have been Escort drummer Maynard Portwood or bassist Van Harrison, but I can't be certain which) had a younger brother and sister close to my age. I was playing in their front yard, when the older brother asked us if we wanted to come over to the beach and watch them practice. Without telling my mother or anyone else, I piled into a station wagon with them, and off we went to a rambling Victorian beach house miles away, where, sure enough, I could see those Allman boys up close and personal.

In my house, the record player was always on in the evening, playing Broadway cast recordings, Perry Como, Dean Martin, Mitch Miller and once in a great while Chet Atkins or Frank Sinatra. There was nothing close to rock, not even Elvis. Whenever someone mentioned rock music, my father would say, for decades afterward, "Can't get no, ain't got no, don't want

no”—making fun of “Satisfaction,” a song he had memorized, thanks to the time The Escorts played it over and over one particularly loud Sunday afternoon. But at the beach house, with the Atlantic ocean pounding 30 feet away, I heard rock and blues for the first time, and I felt something shift in my soul. That Allman boy with the guitar—all hair and whiskers, the very devil my mother had warned against—played with his eyes closed, reaching for something on his Gibson frets that even as a small child I knew was somehow sacred, was a thing infinitely more profound than the party atmosphere of the teen gathering suggested.

By the time my mother tracked me down near sunset, and gave me a whipping that I remember to this day, I had learned never to wander off without telling her, but I also had learned to search for the musical bliss I saw that day on the face of 18-year-old Duane Allman. If ever there was a James Dean of rock—someone who cultivated a bad boy image, influenced a generation with his talent and became truly famous only in death—Duane Allman is the one. Until Randy Poe’s *Skydog: The Duane Allman Story* came along, much of his short life was a mystery

First published in 2006 and now released in an expanded and revised paperback, *Skydog* is the first definitive biography of the guitarist, band leader and music visionary, covering his boyhood in Tennessee, the various Florida bands from The Escorts through the Allman Joys and The Second Coming, as well as Duane’s extensive studio work. Poe, a seasoned music journalist and the author of over 100 album liners, many of them rock classics, conducted hundreds of hours of interviews for the book. When publication of the hardback edition brought out dozens of “lost” Duane anecdotes from readers, he extended the biography to its present version. The book also includes a stream-of-consciousness forward by ZZ Tops’ Billy Gibbons, recalling a shared billing with the original Allman Brothers in New Orleans.

When the Allman Brothers formed in March 1969, it was just another in a long series of short-lived bands for 22-year-old Duane and his younger brother, Gregg, both Nashville natives who moved to Florida with their widowed mother in 1960. By the time Duane died in a motorcycle crash in Macon, Georgia, just two and half years later, he had left a mark on rock and roll as indelible as the mark he left on me that sunny Saturday in 1965. He influenced a generation of musicians and was ultimately named No. 2 in *Rolling Stone*’s list of the greatest guitarists of all time, second only to Jimi Hendrix.

During the late 1960s, the Allman Joys became a frequent act—nearly the house band—at the legendary Briar Patch in Nashville, and it was here, Poe writes, that Duane and Gregg developed the freeform blues improvisations that would later be their trademark. As early Allman’s manager John Loudermilk told Poe, he tried a test at the Briar Patch that he had learned from Tom Parker, Elvis’s manager: “Turn your back to the artist. You know what he looks like onstage. Just turn around and watch the audience. You can see the emotion in their faces, and you can tell about how much they’ll pay to continue having that emotion.”

What Loudermilk saw in those early Nashville jams was, I am certain, the same look that lit up the face of a six-year-old in deep trouble in 1965, and loving every minute of it. It is the look I

search for with my 40-something white-collar band mates as we send noise out over our neighborhood every Saturday afternoon, hoping no one calls the cops.

Words, Words, Words

From cellulite to sonnets, Kafka to Keillor, uvula to vulva, Roy Blount Jr., proves himself a wordsmith for the ages.

**Michael Ray Taylor, M.F.A.
Professor of Mass Media Communication**

ALPHABET JUICE

By Roy Blount Jr. (Sarah Crichton Books, 364 pp., \$25)

One day when I was four years old and my sister just three, I saw her pick up the biggest book in the house and begin to read aloud.

“Mama, come quick!” I shouted. “Jeannie’s reading the dictionary!”

My mother hurried into the living room as my sister pointed to two tiny pictures on a page filled with dense, incomprehensible words and began to recite: “Once there was a bear who went for a walk in the woods, where he met a bee. ‘Hello,’ he said to the bee, ‘I want some honey.’”

Mom merely laughed. Much later, when I was able to read well enough to understand exactly how I’d been had that day, I was sorely disappointed. (To be fair, I surely deserved to have my little sister to pull one over on me, as this was about the same time I talked her into climbing the drainpipe to the roof, putting a bean up her nose, etc. But I digress.) For years after, I clung to the notion that dictionary really did hide *stories*, if only someone knew how to go about finding them.

Turns out, someone did. Luckily for those who care about words, that someone was Roy Blount Jr., who happens to be one of the wittiest writers alive (not to mention a charmingly Southern graduate of Vanderbilt). Blount has, at long last, finished the job my sister started, in a book that is part etymology, part social commentary and mostly all dictionary (with stories) — at least in the sense that it is a compendium of words (with some phrases and names thrown in) arranged in alphabetical order (as opposed to muomegical order, which, Blount cautions, is what we would be stuck with had *mu* and *omega* happened to be the first two Greek letters, rather than *alpha* and *beta*).

The intellectual playfulness of the book is best summed by its subtitle, perhaps one of the longest to be published in English since the 18th Century: *Alphabet Juice: The Energies, Gists, and Spirits of Letters, Words, and Combinations Thereof: Their Roots, Bones, Innards, Piths, Pips, and Secret Parts, Tinctures, Tonics and Essences; With Examples of Their Usage Foul*