

### Introduction to an Address by Albert Murray

by Paul Devlin

*The following address was given at an awards dinner by Albert Murray to the Alabama Council on the Arts on May 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2003, in Montgomery, after being given The Distinguished Artist Award by Alabama's Governor, Bob Riley. Mr. Murray was born in Nokomis, Alabama, raised in Mobile, attended college at Tuskegee Institute (also in Alabama), graduated from Tuskegee in 1939, later served on the Air Force base there, and was professor of English, director of the college theatre, and Air Force ROTC Professor of Geopolitics at Tuskegee as well. Mr. Murray has lived in New York City for the past 41 years, but he is recognized by fellow Alabamians as their writer (and appreciated by many Southern intellectuals in general, such as Walker Percy and Robert Penn Warren). The award he received on May 2<sup>nd</sup> of this year was for his fiction writing (which includes the novels Train Whistle Guitar, The Spyglass Tree, and The Seven League Boots). When he was born in Nokomis, Alabama in 1916, it might have been difficult for many people to imagine that some day a black Alabamian would receive not one but three awards for literary excellence by the state of Alabama. (But for a fairy tale prince, with whom Mr. Murray has always identified, it is not so improbable an occurrence, which is not to say it is not a great achievement.) First, in 1998, Mr. Murray was the inaugural recipient of the Harper Lee Award, given by the Alabama Writer's Forum. (Harper Lee, author of To Kill a Mockingbird, is probably the most famous Alabama writer, yet as journalist Roy Hoffman has reported, fellow Alabamian Howell Raines, former editor The New York Times, places Mr. Murray's accomplishment even above Harper Lee's.) In 2001, Mr. Murray received the Clarence Casson Award for Distinguished Non-Fiction from the University of Alabama, a school he would have been barred from attending when he graduated from Mobile County Training School in 1935 (both schools being segregated on opposite lines). Although many students at Mobile County Training School were poor, it was geared toward excellence, with "a curriculum like a New England prep school", which gave Mr. Murray "the education of a young prince".*

*Without pulling punches or glossing, Albert Murray has presented in his fiction a literary statement about a brown-skin Alabama boy, Scooter, who is hip; and after a series of picaresque adventures, succeeds. Indeed, he gets some money, finds his fairy tale princess, and achieves an amount of general success, he does not succeed in the narrow Horatio Alger-sense, by moving to the front of the herd in the American rat race. Instead, he succeeds in the sense that he is comfortable with his own consciousness. He succeeds because he swings, not because he doesn't have to worry about where his next meal is coming from. Scooter, as the last few sentences may have informed you, is not Joyce's Stephen Dedalus (although he is as academically hip) or Mann's Hans Castorp or Hemingway's Jake Barnes or Bellow's Augie March and most certainly not Ellison's Invisible Man. He is, in fact, (to my knowledge) a unique character in 20<sup>th</sup> century fiction. Scooter's story is, as Mr. Murray says in this piece, a local metaphor from the outskirts of Mobile informed by the world's classic literature, and central Alabama, New York, Paris, Los Angeles, and elsewhere, rendered into the form of novels) which applies to all mankind. To hear Howell Raines tell it, "Albert Murray is the greatest living Alabama writer".*

*(The St. John's University Humanities Review wishes to express our gratitude to Mr. Murray for letting us reprint this piece. The English Department also wishes to thank Mr. Murray for speaking at St. John's University on September 30<sup>th</sup>, 2003.)*

### **"In Response to Being Awarded a Citation for Distinguished Literary Achievement by an Alabamian, May 2, 2003."**

by Albert Murray

It didn't take me very long to realize that fairy tales, fables, nursery rhymes and fire circle and fireside and barbershop lies, store porch and cracker barrel tall tales and yarns, no less than the great national sagas, epics and classical masterpieces regardless of geographical origin and cultural, which is to say, environmental variations, applied to everybody.

Because they are all a form of art. And according to Suzanne K. Langer, the author of *Feeling and Form* and other philosophical studies in aesthetic theory, what all art represents or expresses is human feeling, how human beings feel about what they are aware of.

For me, this means that local circumstances and predicaments and the idiomatic procedures evolved to cope with them may have worldwide implication and application. Indeed such is the function of fiction, which is also to say poetry which is to say metaphor. Social science surveys are really about one place at a time. But the local metaphor is about all mankind.

I want readers to identify with the protagonist in my fiction, not in terms of some social science survey-derived political ideology, but in terms of the universal implications of the hero's humanity as I hope I've been able to render it.

Scooter, the main character of *Train Whistle Guitar*, *The Spyglass Tree*, *The Seven League Boots*, and my current work in progress, is an Alabama boy who is by way of becoming an Omni-American, which is to say the personification of the definitive ideals of the nation as a whole, as promulgated by the *Declaration of Independence*, *The Constitution*\*, the *Emancipation Proclamation*, the *Gettysburg Address*, and the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments.

In other words, in Scooter I have tried to create and project what I hoped would be a captivating image of an Alabamian as an efficient protagonist whose briar patch upbringing enables him to not only cope with, but also to transcend the inevitable obstacles in the contemporary world at large.