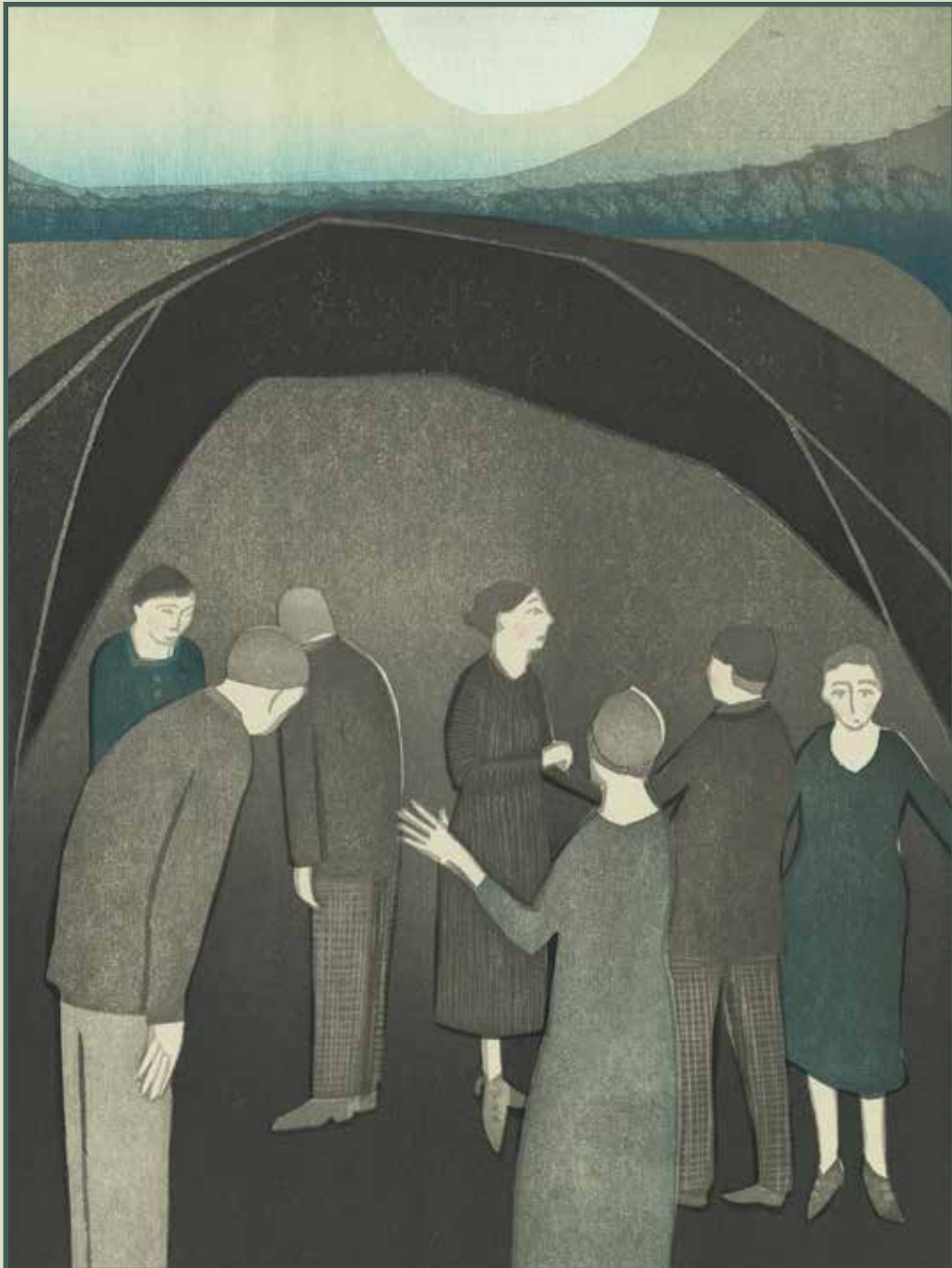


Alabama voices, American stories

Roy Hoffman on the power of sharing our stories

by Roy Hoffman



"The Dance" (woodblock, 2015), by Katie Baldwin.

Each of us has a story to tell. Here's an outline of mine: Born and raised in Mobile, Alabama, in the 1950s and '60s, Jewish, novelist and journalist, lived in New York City for twenty years before returning to Mobile Bay with my wife and daughter, sociable, optimistic, a curious journeyer, politically engaged.

There's much more, of course, and not just about me. "I contain multitudes," as Walt Whitman wrote — we all do — the generations that gave rise to us, the people we love, the stories in our DNA.

Sharing those stories — both to tell and to listen, actively, empathetically — is a moral act. "You never really understand another person until you consider things from his point of view," Harper Lee's Atticus tells Scout, "...until you climb in his skin and walk around in it." We do that through stories.

Exchanging them is freeing, too. There's the "I," "me," "mine" — the eternal confines of self — then there are the eight billion other people on the planet. Who *are* they? Listen up!

I've been privileged, as a writer, to hear countless stories from some of our best voices.

In Albert Murray's Harlem apartment, in 1997, in conversation about his memoir, *South to a Very Old Place*, I was swept away by his tale of growing up in Magazine Point, Alabama, along the Mobile River in the community known as Africatown — the juke joints that propelled his love of blues, the books, including Faulkner, Mann, fairy tales, and mythologies, that inspired him. With letters from Ralph Ellison on the desk — they'd corresponded since becoming friends at Tuskegee, and he was organizing a book — Murray told me how, before ever leaving home, he'd traveled far: "When I got to third grade and had a geography book, I could see it. It wasn't like I was outside of the world. I was part of the world."

In Sena Jeter Naslund's study in Louisville, Kentucky, with the manuscript of her 2001 civil rights novel, *Four Spirits*, stacked on the table, she recalled when she discovered story magic. She'd been ten years old in Birmingham, 1953, on a sweltering afternoon, shivering as she read Laura Ingalls Wilder's *Little House on the Prairie*. "I realized I was trembling," she recalled. "I thought, 'It's these words that make me feel this way. I'd like to do that one day.'"

In 2024, over a seafood lunch in Fairhope, Alabama, near my home, Howell Raines spoke to me of his family-rooted Civil War history: *Silent Cavalry: How Union*



Dauphin Street, Mobile, around the turn of the 20th century.

Solders From Alabama Helped Sherman Burn Atlanta – and Then Got Written Out of History. Throughout his stellar career — Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist, former executive editor of *The New York Times* — Raines had "saved string," an old-school reporter's term, determined to "keep searching, keep seeking," the facts that told of Alabamians who had supported, and fought for, the Union, including forebears from Winston County. These soldiers, who did not fit into the mythology of the Lost Cause, as he explains it, were erased. "History is not what happens but what gets written down, shaped by who's holding power," he said. *Silent Cavalry*, a combination of memoir, history, and archival sleuthing, is intended to "show the rest of the story ... a big piece of rounded Alabama." Raines reminded me how stories can unearth secrets, empower and galvanize us, to reconsider long-held beliefs.

Stories are democratic. We all have a big, overarching one to tell — and countless others, perhaps about the time a hurricane thrashed our home, or when we felt spiritually uplifted, or shook the hand of a hero.

There are celebratory stories. In Mobile's Toulminville community, Herbert Aaron Sr., many years ago, showed me a display of trophies awarded his son for his baseball prowess, and told how Henry — soon known to the world as Hank Aaron — came of age at the playground across the street. "When Henry was a boy," he told me, "I couldn't keep a ball out of his hands."

Traumatic stories reverberate with their own terrible force. In 2010, I sat in a coffee shop in Eight Mile, Alabama, while a mother, Mildred, wept to me about her Air Force son, David, killed in Afghanistan when a Taliban rocket-propelled grenade hit his helicopter. I wrote up the details of David's young life, his valor and sacrifice, and the news-obit appeared on the *Mobile Press-Register's* front page. Mildred sent me a note of gratitude that her son's story, however fleeting, had public recognition.

As the grandson of Eastern European Jews who opened a store in Mobile's downtown in the early 1900s — with their neighbors speaking Yiddish, Polish, Arabic, Spanish, and Greek — I'm attuned to the global South, the profoundly American stories within the Southern ones. In my novel, *Chicken Dreaming Corn*, inspired by my grandparents' world on Mobile's Dauphin Street, memories from Romania to Lebanon to Cuba press in on the hard-working dreamers intent on providing an unbounded future for their children. "Read this novel to find, from Europe and the past," said Harper Lee of this book, "some of the best aspects of our Southern heritage."

In much of my fiction, largely rooted in Alabama or the Gulf Coast, characters are often, in their hearts, caught between places, as in *The Promise of the Pelican*, set on Mobile Bay but stretching far beyond. Hank — a child Holocaust survivor from Amsterdam, retired Alabama lawyer in his 80s who just wants to fish on Fairhope Pier — is entreated to defend Julio, a Honduran worker at a bayside resort, accused of murder. The men's stories, increasingly intertwined, are shaped by flashbacks of childhood traumas, what it means to be an immigrant, perceived as "the other," and the quest for justice. Stories are rich everywhere, but returning to the South

in my forties, after residing in Manhattan and Brooklyn since college, attuned me to those of my birthplace, transported by the stories of my father, Charley Hoffman, above all, then all those unfolding around me.

In fractious times, the optimist in me believes stories can even bring us back together as a culture. "The key," I wrote in an essay on politics and civic discourse, is for folks "to try to engage ... with people with other points of view. We might not share common ground, but we inhabit it, often for generations."

Narratives, after all, are part of our legacy.

As I wrote in my essay book, *Back Home: Journeys Through Mobile*: "When buildings are leveled, when land is developed, when money is spent, when our loved ones pass on, when we take our places a little further back every year on the historical timeline, what we still have are stories."

Roy Hoffman is the author of four novels and two nonfiction books, and has written for outlets such as the *Mobile Press-Register*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *The New York Times*.

AHA's own storytellers

Back in 1987, Alabama Humanities coordinated the state's commemorations for the U.S. Constitution bicentennial. One of our ideas at the time: Enlist scholarly experts on Constitutional history to travel the state and speak at different festivities.

From that seed was born the Alabama Humanities Speakers Bureau, better known today as Road Scholars, our longest-running program. Today, the Road Scholars Speakers Bureau boasts some 35 scholar-storytellers. They are professors, poets, artists, authors, musicians, historians, archivists, folklorists, and professional storytellers. They travel to libraries, museums, historical societies, and community centers — offering more than 100 presentations on everything from state history and culture to sports, music, art, religion, film, and more.

"There is not just one single kind of human experience," says Dolores Hydock, a storyteller, an actor, and a Road Scholar for more than two decades. "If we hear different stories from different voices across different moments in time, we can begin to sense the larger story of what it is to be human. I once heard a wise

storyteller say, 'All stories have the same message: You are not alone.'"

Peggy Allen Towns, one of AHA's newest Road Scholars, agrees. A historian and author, she's conducted extensive research on the African American community in her Decatur hometown.

"My hope," she says, "is that by telling our stories, we are not only informed about where we've been; but united, inspired, enriched, and empowered to spark flames of hope, to value the contributions of all, to engage in constructive dialogue, and work together to improve the lives of all Alabamians."

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