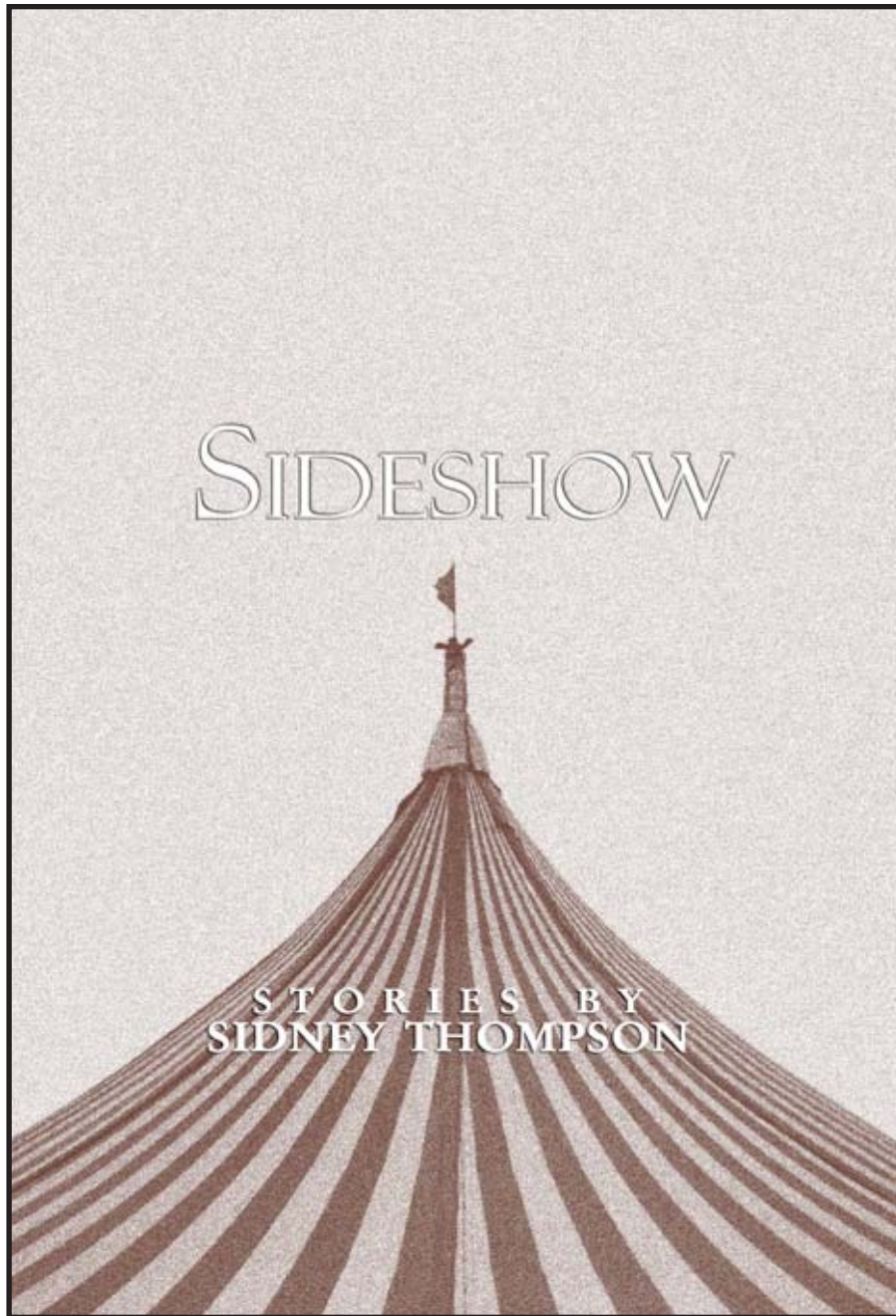
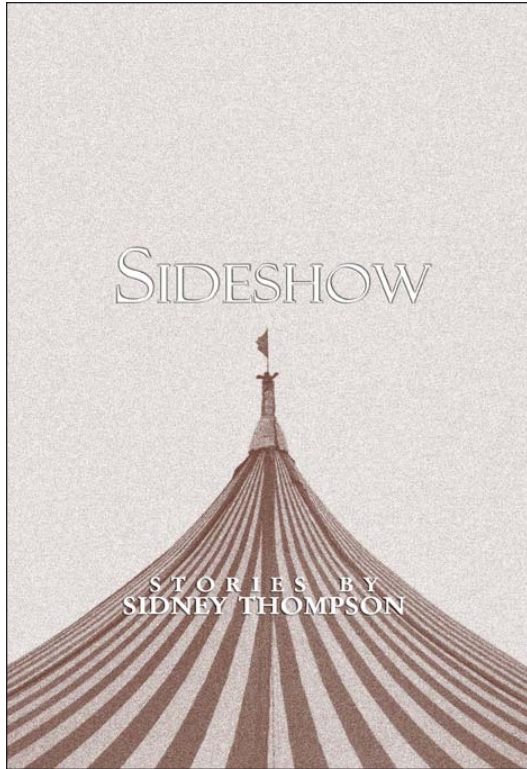


Media Information



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About River City Publishing

Like the nearby Alabama River that flows through the heart of the South, literature sustains us, transports us outside of ourselves, and brings us home. River City Publishing, a literary press located in Montgomery, Alabama, is dedicated to discovering the books that do just that.

Carolyn Newman
Publisher

Praise for Sidney Thompson

“Thompson’s wonderful stories prove that often the best way through to the meaningful anarchies of this world is classical restraint. It’s beautiful to see the short story hanging tough as a bright form beneath Thompson’s hands. *And* we get to see the famous story bounced from the *Atlantic*, when it was learned the author was white, victorious now in its resurrection.”

—**Barry Hannah**, author of *Airships* and *Yonder Stands Your Orphan*

“An eye for color, an ear for language, a sense of motion and a heart for the human condition—that’s the fine writing of Sidney Thompson.”

—**Robert McCammon**, author of *Boy’s Life* and *Speaks the Nightbird*

“Sidney Thompson’s wonderfully desperate and obsessed characters swarm from the page like locusts out of earth. *Sideshow* offers us both funny and frightening glimpses of the human psyche, of moral and amoral behavior. Unlike a county fair’s sideshow wherein viewers get a salacious peek for five minutes then return to the relative safety of an outside world, Thompson’s characters linger closer to the reader than a noon shadow. This collection deserves celebratory gunshots into the air, over and over.”

—**George Singleton**, author of *Novel* and *Why Dogs Chase Cars*

“In the defuncting and corrupt sideshow that’s become the contemporary American South, Sidney Thompson stands yawping there on the corner like a mad preacher, reminding us who the real freaks are. These ten stories—bold, bawdy, sometimes shocking and always hilarious—are so good they ought to be proclaimed though a megaphone. The question might pop into your head as you read: Can he *do* this? The answer, ladies and gentlemen, is *Hell yeah*.”

—**Tom Franklin**, author of *Smonk* and *Hell at the Breach*

“The [*Stories from the Blue Moon Café, Volume I*] anthology has a solid representation of heavyweights [and] contenders such as Sidney Thompson . . . who have yet to produce books but make a fine showing as well.”

—*San Francisco Chronicle*



A Synopsis

Sideshow features characters born from the rich, schizophrenic melting pot of the modern South, where urban and rural, educated and uneducated, privileged and poor, and white and black mix with surprising outcomes. A sheetrock hanger copes with the loss of his hunting dogs, as well as his recent inability to kill, by adopting a poodle with heartworms to put down himself; an airbrush artist learns to counterfeit twenty-dollar bills to prove to his estranged wife that he is a genuine artist; a teenage boy becomes a peeping tom in order to discover the true reasons for his parents' divorce; a father takes his son with him to murder their next-door neighbor as a classical lesson of logic and revenge; a manager of an apartment complex is caught in a love triangle with a beautiful new tenant and her bedridden seven hundred pound husband, whose weight is matched only by his intellect. This collection displays a menagerie of everyday misfits who serve as a reminder of human fragility and how freakish we can all become when our lives lack love or truth, or we suddenly discover it.



Q & A

1. What does the title, *Sideshow*, mean?

There is a full cast of eccentric characters featured throughout this story collection, and none of them are of the sort that you would actually find in the tents along the midway of a fair. Instead, they are the freaks who live among us—our mothers, our fathers, our spouses, our children, ourselves. Wherever there is human interaction, there are countless sideshows of desperate people hurling themselves at each other in the most unpredictable ways. My intent in writing *Sideshow* was to remind readers of their tendencies in these situations to misjudge—to misjudge others, if not themselves. Perhaps the main reason for error is that unlike *The Bearded Woman* or *The Three-Legged Man*, common freaks usually come to us without fanfare, without warning—and thank goodness! Otherwise, we might try to avoid them and miss the one opportunity we might ever have to learn something about ourselves.

2. Are you as eccentric as your characters?

I suppose to some degree, since my characters are my characters, I would have to be as eccentric as they are. Not that I have ever participated in incest or anything as felonious as counterfeiting, statutory rape, or murder. My inclination to be open-minded and honest has led me to say or write things that caused others to view me as eccentric, so maybe I am, I don't know. A teacher in graduate school once admitted that he was baffled by my appearance, saying he couldn't believe that the guy in class turning in the bizarre stories looked so much like an accountant.

3. How autobiographical is *Sideshow*?

Because of the big, outlandish characters and bizarre situations in *Sideshow*, it may seem that I am only writing outside of myself, and I have fallen under that spell at times. My work, however, is more autobiographical than my family would like for me to admit (so I won't). "Like charity," I'll just say, to quote Bruce of "The Voyeur," "voyeurism begins at home." And what voyeurism inevitably led me to was the first glimpse of the grotesque. For me, this glimpse awakened a need for art—that enigmatic vehicle of analysis and intimacy that allows you to study yourself and those around you, especially your family, very closely yet at a safe, camouflaged distance. Perhaps my family is no more eccentric, no more dysfunctional, no more freakish than others, but I doubt it.

4. How long did it take you to write *Sideshow*?

"Ernest, the Bicyclist" was the first story I ever wrote that was worth saving and revising. I wrote the first draft in an undergraduate workshop for Barry Hannah eighteen years ago, upon his insistence



that I write something he'd never seen before. Although I didn't spend every day of all those years honing the collection, I did work on the stories routinely. The newest story in the collection, "The Man Who Never Dies," was heavily revised just recently, upon the insistence of my smart editor, Jim Gilbert. So, technically, it took me eighteen years to write *Sideshow*.

5. Who is the intended audience?

Although I fully expect that some people will feel uncomfortable, if not get offended at times, by the language in *Sideshow*, and if not the language, the sex, and if not the sex, the violence, and if not the violence, the unclear lines of decency and indecency, and of right and wrong. Whom to root for? Whom to revile? What to laugh at? What not to laugh at? So the intended audience for *Sideshow*? Everyone. I know I won't get that, but that's the truth.

6. Who are your favorite authors, and how have they influenced your work?

The first quality work that I remember reading and absolutely loving (and love still) was Sartre's play *No Exit*—thanks to my older brother who introduced it to me. I was about thirteen and stunned by the fact that literature could be both seriously philosophical yet wildly fun and provocative. My brother had other recommendations: Camus's *The Stranger*, Kafka's "The Metamorphosis," Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, and everything by Flannery O'Connor. Those early experiences would, I guess, direct my choices later as a writer when developing my own characters and writing dialogue—always with a sense of humor with tragedy, and purpose with surprise. Though I have been influenced heavily by others, for other reasons: Chekhov, Hemingway, and Carver for the spareness of their sentences; Faulkner for the complexity of his sentences; and Toni Morrison and Barry Hannah for the jazz of their sentences.

7. What are the dominant themes?

One dominant theme, perhaps the most dominant, pertains to social misfits and the desperate measures they will sometimes take to experience meaningful human contact. Often these measures include betrayal, another dominant theme. Also, the arts play an important role in the lives of these lonely characters—with literature, music, movies, paintings, and sculptures serving as substitutes for human contact. Other recurring themes include race relations, class conflict, and the educational divide that persists in the contemporary American Deep South.

8. How would you answer the question that your work contains incendiary racial language and/or overtones?

The word "nigger," if that's what you're referring to, does appear in two stories. In "Ernest, the Bicyclist," Ernest uses the word, though not from malicious intent but from cultural habit and ignorance, evidenced by the fact that he uses the word in reference to his black girlfriend, whom he believes he loves, at least stands, more than his own white mother. In the other story, "The



Romanticist and the Classicist,” the word is admittedly used in a more incendiary manner, though again the overtones are less racial and more cultural, since Job, the character who uses the word, is black himself and is using it to describe and classify other blacks, specifically those who lack his own high level of education. I understand that the use of the word leaves many people uncomfortable. That’s why I use it carefully and sparingly. Sometimes, however, there is disharmony so coarse or complex that challenging diction is necessary to render it accurately and effectively. If I had made the uncomfortable situations in these stories comfortable for everyone, I would consider myself not only a liar and a fraud but also a traitor—to the people of Memphis and Mississippi, where I grew up, where *Sideshow* is set, and where open debate of race and interracial culture has been discouraged for far too long.

9. Why was *The Romanticist & the Classicist* bumped from consideration of publication at the *Atlantic*?

Let me see if I can say this without sounding bitter. A couple of weeks after I submitted the story, C. Michael Curtis, the fiction editor of the *Atlantic*, called one of my professors at the University of Arkansas, where I was going to school at the time, and asked point blank if I was white or black. My teacher says that after he reluctantly answered the question, Mr. Curtis then confessed that if I had been black, since the characters in the story are black, he would have accepted the story for publication. Mr. Curtis never called to speak to me directly. But a few days later I did receive a rejection letter, which begins, “We’ve thought long and hard about your story and have at last decided to let it go. It’s gimmicky, any way you look at it. . . .”

10. Gimmicky? Given that all plot-oriented fiction, literary or no, has a conceit or a gimmick driving the action, this seems a stretch for a rejection—particularly when it is related not to the story itself but to the circumstances of the author. In an age when the personality or backstory of an author is used as much as a selling point as the work itself, do you see this as a contradiction?

Sure, it’s a contradiction, any way you look at it. If the writer’s backstory is used to justify acceptance or even later used as proof-of-quality promotion, the editor or publisher is committing the fallacies, benign or not, of *post hoc* and *non sequitur*. And if the backstory is used to justify rejection, it’s a case of *ad hominem* and hasty generalization, and not so benign in this case because the violations in logic become perilously close to violations in law.

11. Though not genre-classifiable, your stories are very plot-oriented. At a time when the literary tendency is toward character/situation driven short stories, what makes you so comfortable in using this more classical form?

I must admit, I’m a little disappointed to hear my stories aren’t character driven. Perhaps instead, I hope, you mean that my stories are more plot-oriented than most of what is currently being



published. That I would agree with. And that, frankly, has a lot to do with my distrust of people. I need to know more than what someone's opinions and beliefs are; I need to know how quickly, if challenged, his or her opinions and beliefs might be surrendered and then how that person will gracefully or pathetically respond. Until then, I can't know where a character stands—hero, villain, or buffoon? And getting to see a character in action that tests his or her very essence has a lot to do with the reason I read fiction. If I'm not gaining a new perspective by seeing someone I've never quite seen before being challenged in a way I've never quite seen before, then I'll stop reading.





About the Author

Sidney Thompson's short fiction has been published in the *Southern Review*, the *Carolina Quarterly*, *Louisiana Literature*, and *New Delta Review* and has been anthologized in *The Alumni Grill*, *Climbing Mt. Cheaha: Emerging Alabama Authors*, and two volumes of *Stories from the Blue Moon Café*. He has twice been nominated for the Pushcart Prize, and "The Good Lie" (published in *Sideshow* as "The Aristotelian") was awarded third place in *Playboy Magazine's* College Fiction Contest. He has worked jobs as various as assembling blinkers on tractor trailers, loading and unloading airplanes at Federal Express, teaching world literature at a prep school, and selling new and used cars. Thompson received his M.F.A. in creative writing from the University of Arkansas. Born and raised in Memphis, Tennessee, he now lives in Point Clear, Alabama, with his wife, novelist Jennifer Paddock.



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