

# *Belles' Letters 2*

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*Livingston Press  
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## Introduction

This volume is *Belles 2*, so of course there was a *Belles 1*.

In 1999, Joe Taylor and Tina M. Jones of the Livingston Press at the University of West Alabama, collaborated on a volume of twenty-one short stories and five excerpts from novels by Alabama women. In her foreword, Jones writes that, as a girl, she, like many others, had thought that Scarlett O'Hara and her many manifestations were "the epitome of Southern womanhood."

Eventually she realized that Scarlett—and her plantation life—represented only a small segment of Southern culture. Jones' hope was that the volume *Belles' Letters* (a playful southern version of *belles-lettres*) would help showcase the enormous range of the Southern female experience.

And, she said, these Alabama women writers would be "allowed a voice all their own. They do not have to share their pages with anyone but themselves. They are free to tell their stories."

*Belles' Letters* was a big success and, startlingly, eighteen years have passed since then, and hundreds of new stories have been written. Writers new at that time are veterans now, and there are of course voices being heard for the first time.

A couple of years ago, Joe Taylor decided it was time for another collection. Although it has probably become easier over the years for women to publish their work, we believe there is still room for a volume that contradicts any lingering stereotypes of how women write and what they write about.

To serve as editors of this new volume, Joe asked Don Noble, who keeps up with new Alabama fiction by way of a weekly book review on Alabama Public Radio, and had edited two volumes of Alabama fiction for Livingston: *Climbing Mt. Cheaha: Emerging Alabama Writers* (2004) and *A State of Laughter: Comic Fiction from Alabama* (2008), and Jennifer Horne, herself the author of a volume of fiction, *Tell the World You're a Wildflower* (2014), editor of a poetry anthology, *Working the Dirt: An Anthology of Southern Poets* (2003), and the co-editor, with Wendy Reed, of two volumes of essays by southern women on spirituality, *All Out of Faith* (2006) and *Circling Faith* (2012).

*Don Noble & Jennifer Horne*

With Taylor, Noble and Horne set the ground rules:

Every contributor had to have a strong Alabama connection.

There would be no stories repeated from previous Livingston Press collections.

Each story was to be of some length—no flash fiction— but not so long as to qualify as a novella.

We favored short stories over excerpts but made a few exceptions in order to include some stand-alone sections from longer works by established Alabama writers. For reasons of space, this volume by no means includes all of the extraordinary women writing and publishing today.

The stories were to be only from living authors, and each author was asked to contribute a few words on the origin or “inspiration” for the story and some biographical information. The one deceased author included is Elise Sanguinetti, to whom this volume is dedicated.

The stories included here were chosen by Horne and Noble, either from work solicited from established authors, some previously printed in volumes or literary journals, or from entries in response to a call, online and in print, by Joe Taylor for story submissions.

Where other things were somewhat equal, we chose stories set in Alabama or with a strong Alabama connection in content.

The resulting volume boasts a rich assortment of subject matter, themes, locale, tone, and style.

As might be expected, a number of stories are love stories—first loves, lost loves, strange loves, from the most transient, feckless, grotesque, even abusive, to the permanent and heartwarming. We even include a send-up of the romance novel.

Likewise, there are many stories of family relationships, especially mother-daughter, mother-son, and wife-husband. Communication between generations is, as always, an issue.

It would not be Alabama without a number of treatments of religion, from angels to ghosts to snakes and a little magic.

Although many of the stories are contemporary, some reach back as far as the Depression; a few focus on race relations, but in a gentler, less violent vein than would have been the case in the past. We are in

the twenty-first century and there will be stories of drug abuse as well as alcohol.

The stories range geographically from the Gulf Coast to north Alabama, from the inner city to the countryside, but with perhaps fewer outdoor and hunting stories than would be found in a volume of male writers. Several stories are set in small towns. The social/economic classes and their often humorous, sometimes sad interactions are all represented.

As in all Southern fiction, a number of dogs make their appearances.

The editors and publisher wish to thank the Alabama State Council on the Arts for the grant which enabled us to offer each contributor a small honorarium. We also thank all of our contributors, many of them truly distinguished and well-established, not to say famous, writers, such as Pulitzer Prize winner Shirley Ann Grau, Harper Lee Award winners Fannie Flagg, Carolyn Haines, and Sena Jeter Naslund, and best-selling authors such as Gail Godwin, Lee Smith, Nanci Kincaid, and Michelle Richmond, for graciously accepting these small honoraria and for taking the time to compose the short introductory pieces that give readers insight into the writing process.

We hope that, like the first volume, this collection will make readers aware of the great variety and quality of fiction being written by Alabama women, that it will stimulate, engage, entertain, and move its readers, and that readers will seek out other works by the writers they particularly like.

Putting together an anthology is an inexact science, and editors are always aware of potential omissions and lapses of taste. Let us close here by quoting somewhat tongue-in-cheek from the preface to a 1931 volume, *The New Yorker Scrapbook*: “This is a singularly straightforward book, designed to hurt the feelings of all writers not represented in it, without materially adding anything to the happiness of those who are. We knew long ago that such a book would some day be compiled. Luckily it contains only prose, and its pages are arranged in no particular order. A book of poems arranged in order of merit will be what will eventually throw us out of business.”

## *Elise Sanguinetti*

Over the years Elise Sanguinetti's novels and my acquaintanceship with her have given me a great deal of pleasure, and it has always been my belief that Sanguinetti was deserving of a lot more public attention than she received. I hope dedicating to her this book of stories by her peers will redress this balance in some small way.

Elise Sanguinetti was a true daughter of Anniston and Calhoun County.

Born January 24, 1924, she attended public school through eighth grade, then Ashley Hall School for girls in Charleston, graduating in 1942. She had her freshman year at St. Olaf College in Minnesota but, due to family finances, was forced to leave and return to Alabama.

Sanguinetti transferred to the University of Alabama and graduated in 1947 with a degree in French and English.

Sanguinetti had already decided on a career in writing while at Ashley Hall; at UA she studied under the famously successful creative writing teacher Hudson Strode, who was the mentor to a collection of novelists: Babs and Borden Deal, Helen Norris, Harriet Hassell, and Winston Groom.

Sanguinetti was close friends with Nelle Harper Lee, and the two collaborated in editing the school humor magazine *Rammer-Jammer*.

These two small-town Alabama girls had a lot in common, especially their dedication to writing, but were in some ways very different: Elise Ayers was a Tri-Delt with little irony and Nelle Lee a most reluctant and ill-fitting sister of Chi Omega.

Over the decades, the two would correspond, with Lee offering encouragement and advice to Sanguinetti on work in progress. In a letter of Lee's which came up for public auction in 1990 she wrote: "And speaking of Alabama writers, to my mind the finest we have is Elise Sanguinetti. If you don't know her novels, read them."

After graduation, Sanguinetti, who had always had a powerful interest in her Scandinavian roots, especially Norway, instilled by her Norwegian-born mother, Edel Ytterboe Ayers, studied for a term at the University of Oslo, Norway.

She and her mother kept up a strong interest in St. Olaf's, and Elise was awarded the St. Olaf "Distinguished Alumna Award" in 1993.

From the time of her graduation in '47 until about 1955, Sanguinetti wrote innumerable articles, features, and reviews for the *Anniston Star*,

which she and her brother H. Brandt Ayers later inherited in 1977, after the death of their mother.

Married to Phillip Sanguinetti in 1950, Elise travelled with Phil as his work as a chemical engineer took them to St. Louis, Pittsburgh, and even Germany, before returning to Alabama.

It was in Pittsburgh that Elise wrote and had published in *Mademoiselle* magazine in 1960 her first fiction, “To You, Frère Twig,” preceded in the magazine by this “Editor’s NOTE: Elise Sanguinetti— a MLLÉ discovery—has that rare sense of humorous perception about adolescence which made *Catcher in the Rye* a classic. Here, with one of the funniest stories we’ve ever read or published, her first fiction appearance anywhere.”

The story is comic and poignant. Narrated by Felicia Whitfield, twelve years old, herself moving into a confusing adolescence, we watch young Arthur, fourteen, modelled of course on Elise’s younger brother, Brandt, sent away from home to prep school in distant Connecticut. At first terrified and a long way from home, Arthur not only adjusts, but in only three months develops a Yankee accent and Yankee attitudes.

It is perplexing to consider that Sanguinetti, in spite of this triumphant debut, never published another short story. It is believed she wrote many, but declined to submit them.

The answer may be that “Frère Twig” immediately inspired *The Last of the Whitfields*, which would be published in 1962 and enjoyed good sales and a warm critical response. McGraw-Hill’s cover for *The Last of the Whitfields* speaks volumes. The publisher inserted the subtitle “A happy (but significant ) novel of the South.”

Sanguinetti’s publishers understood what she was up to.

Most assuredly sensitive to racial struggles in the South and in her own hometown of Anniston, where there had just been the famous Freedom Rider bus burning, Sanguinetti nevertheless believed that a wide swath of Southern life was being ignored or misrepresented to the rest of the country in the Southern novels of her era. In Erskine Caldwell’s *Tobacco Road*, for example, we see poor white Southern families, ignorant and even depraved. In Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury*, the white family is depicted as dysfunctional, even mentally unbalanced; in *Absalom, Absalom!*, the Sutpen family is enmeshed in racial strife, injustice, miscegenation, and violence.

Sanguinetti also thought the northern press was misrepresenting Southern life and the Southern family. In *Whitfields*, a Yankee writer, Mr. Bob Hopper of *News Review*, comes to fictional Ashton, Georgia (based on Anniston, Alabama). He stays with the family, interviews people around town, gets to know them, but he never truly understands them.

Dominated by his preconceptions, he makes the white Ashtonians into caricatures, benighted in their thinking, with heavy drawls. Hopper can see only what reinforces the ideas he already held, missing the deep goodwill the Whitfields and their friends hold for their town and for African-Americans, however paternalistic it may seem to us now.

The Whitfields are not bigots. Their town is experiencing a most difficult time, with demonstrations and the turmoil of integration, but the novel is just as much about family life and its stresses. Young Arthur, like any teenager, has his growing pains. His mother and father may be perplexed by his behavior but their affection triumphs and Arthur grows up.

The shifting of subject and setting demonstrated in Sanguinetti's work would be carried through by writers such as Walker Percy who, in *The Last Gentleman* and *Love in the Ruins*, moved the Southern novel out of the swamp and into the country club.

Middle-class life in the Deep South was not all grim. Sanguinetti's novel was widely praised for its refreshing humor.

*Whitfields* was followed by three more novels, *The New Girl* (1964), *The Dowager* (1968), and *McBee's Station* (1971).

These novels, in their different ways, are most assuredly Southern fiction, but Sanguinetti was working a different field from most of her contemporaries. In *The New Girl*, Felicia, like her brother a small-town child, must learn to navigate the ways of a sophisticated, not to say Machiavellian, girls boarding school in Charleston.

*The Dowager* follows the travails of Cousin Winky as she deals with the labyrinthine complexities of Charleston society, and *McBee's Station* portrays Letitia Graham McBee, an older woman coping with societal change as she tries to hang onto the comfortable ways of the past.

Sanguinetti, after this astonishing blast of productivity—four novels in nine years—published no more fiction, devoting her efforts to the *Anniston Star* and civic work in Anniston. She was inducted into the Alabama Academy of Distinguished Authors in 1982.

Elise Sanguinetti passed away on Sunday, November 16, 2014. She was ninety years old.

There are plans for the reissuance of her four novels, and one hopes that a new wave of readers will come to enjoy and admire this fine writer.

—Don Noble

# To You, Frère Twig

*Elise Sanquinetti*

Last year my brother Arthur changed, and Mother doesn't say that about the "twig" any more. The twig has been with us for ever so long, ever since Arthur's first day at school, when he came home with a drawing of a red and blue apple; on the red side he had written "blue" and on the blue side "red." I remember Mother sadly showing this to Father and in that strange, far-sounding voice saying, "You know, Allison, 'as the twig is bent, so is the tree.'" She had looked at Arthur, and then Arthur, a blond, frowning boy with glasses, had looked up at her almost wonderingly. But she only shook her head and sighed a sigh that somehow seemed to last through all those terrible years Arthur crept his way through the Ashton Grammar School. And the great "change" occurred.

Actually, I don't suppose it happened overnight, this change. It just seemed that way. But I think I knew from the beginning, when I first heard what they were going to do to him, that something tremendous would happen. I'm the girl, you see. (This means things, I've found out.) But I knew first—even before Arthur did—that they were going to send him away. I heard them talking, Mother and Father. This was after that school play when Arthur embarrassed us so by forgetting all his lines and just standing up there in the middle of the stage staring at everybody. Of course, everyone laughed—everyone except us and we had to sit there, tall and straight, listening to the laughing and watching Arthur all red-faced and wide-eyed. Later I heard Mother saying that "something has *got* to be done about him now." And Father said he guessed so too. Then Mother started talking about that school in Connecticut.

I listened to them and I was almost afraid. It seemed a terrible thing they were talking about. My own parents! Doing away with Arthur! If only he'd made better grades, I thought. Or got some "interests," like Mother had wanted him to. Still, I must say, I rather enjoyed some of Arthur's troubles; it gave me a sort of warm feeling, knowing I was thin and quick and different from him. Even so, it seemed a dreadful thing they were planning to do—sending him away, abandoning him more or less. So one

night after dinner I told him what they were going to do to him. “You’re gonna get sent away, Arthur,” I said. And I remember the look of him, standing there in the middle of his blue-striped room—his face moonfaced and his spectacled eyes looking back at me, unblinking and round. I knew how afraid he was. And I felt closer to him then than I ever had before.

Arthur was fourteen when he finally got sent away. Connecticut is a long way away from Georgia, but my mother said “a change of atmosphere” was good for a child. So on a crisp blue September day we went down to the train station and saw Arthur, all name-taped and dressed in his new brown suit, off to the unknown spaces of Connecticut. He sat down in the green Pullman seat beside the window and I looked at him up there, bundled up in his suit and still chubby, and I thought how small he seemed and how tremendous the train was. Somehow I felt that Arthur, alone and unarmed, was going off to be killed. As his hand waved timidly good-bye and he tried to smile, the train began to move and I looked up at Mother; her eyes were filled with tears, but she was trying to smile too. I thought, Oh, Arthur ... and sadly watched the great black train until it had rounded the bend, carrying Arthur away, I thought, forever.

Naturally, we missed him those first few days. To me it was as if someone had died and there were pathetic reminders of the person everywhere—a shoe, Arthur’s cub scout uniform, an old rope. Mother, I think, missed him more than anyone else did. After the third day she started waiting for the mailman, hoping to hear “some word.” But it wasn’t until the end of the second week that some word finally arrived. It was written in pencil and on slick theme paper, and since it was the first time Arthur had ever written a letter home, there was something sad to me about the “Dear Mother and Dad.” In a jerky scrawl he had written:

*I got here alright. I had five cheese sandwiches on the train and nearly missed the other train in New York. But I didn’t.*

*My roommate’s name is Bob Leyden and he comes from a place called Marble Head, Massachusetts. It’s real hard here. We have to wash windows on Saturday—everybody does. Mr. Sykes said window washing can be fun, but it isn’t. I’ve gotten to know a lot of the other boys but I don’t like my roommate. Wish I was home and there only 84 days until Christmas. They think I talk funny up here. I gotta go.*

*Love,  
Arthur*

Arthur hadn't been in school long before we starting receiving slick little envelopes from Mr. Sykes, the school's headmaster. Mr. Sykes never used the word "I" but always "we." And it seemed every letter began either "We fear" or "We are sorry" or "We believe." Anyway, Mr. Sykes and "they" quite soon decided Arthur had to go back a grade. "...Arthur just doesn't seem to have had the fundamental training some of the other boys have had," wrote Mr. Sykes. This caused no end of talk at home and Mother said: "He just can't keep up that's all! I told you. I've always said: 'As the twig is bent, so is the tree!'" And she kept saying this, over and over, as other letters from the headmaster arrived those first few weeks. That was all we ever talked about—Arthur and *school*—Arthur and twigs.

I thought Arthur's next letter home would have been a poem of gloom. But it wasn't at all. It was almost jubilant, for Arthur.

*...Now I got this new roommate. His name is Knox Campbell and he's from New York City and goes to night clubs all the time. I think his folks are real rich because he's got this picture of his house and it looks like a castle. He says his father makes those things like that one you've got Mother, up in the attic—that kind of dummy thing you used to fit clothes on when Hattie would come in and so. He's in all my classes and we go around together all the time. He doesn't like Mr. Sykes either. Well, I gotta go.*

He signed his name "A." And Father wanted to know why he'd signed his name like that. Mother said it was just probably something he had learned.

But Arthur seemed to be learning strange new things all the time. Suddenly we received a letter from him and his handwriting was completely changed—and unreadable. It was more of a printing than anything else and I'm sure the letter had taken him a long time to write. He asked us how we liked it. And he said he hoped we did, because this was the way he was going to write all the time now. Knox, his roommate, wrote that way, he said. Knox also said everybody at Harvard wrote that way. And Father

said if they did he didn't understand how anybody ever got out of Harvard. Mother said she thought Arthur's new handwriting was "quite interesting."

Yet it was Arthur's next letters that seemed to interest Father, and I'm sure this was because every one of them had some mention of money in them. We were all quite shocked and, I must say, hurt when Arthur wrote us his clothes weren't right. "They don't wear the same kind of things up here as they do down there," he wrote in his new handwriting.

*...Knox says some of my suits are kind of hicky and he said when you get to be almost fifteen it's stupid to wear ties that have scotty dogs all over them. He says his mother knows this store in New York City and if you'll just send me the money she can charge and I can pay her back. I can get my shoes here all right. They call them white bucks but they don't have any down there in Ashton so don't go around trying to find them. Knox says he guesses I'll need about hundred dollars for all this. Well, I gotta go.*

Love,

A.

Mother read this letter out loud and because of Arthur's new handwriting she read white "lucks" instead of "bucks." And when Father heard this he stood up and in a loud voice said: "White 'lucks'? What in the world has come over that boy? White 'lucks,' my eye. A hundred dollars to make a sis out of my boy. Nothing doing!"

Nevertheless, Arthur was happy with all his new clothes. He wrote us he was really glad he'd got them because Knox had asked him to visit him in New York for Thanksgiving vacation and that they would probably be going to a lot of night clubs and he didn't want to look "hicky." He said he'd write us and tell us how much he'd need. Father said Mother could sell that dummy up in the attic and then send the money to Arthur. But Mother said to remember that it was Arthur's birthday and that it was interesting, she thought, for young boys to have "experiences."

"Like night clubs?" Father asked.

"Now, Allison," Mother answered. "You know better than that."

"Well, I don't know," Father said. "That Knox boy doesn't sound too bright to me. White 'lucks'!" And he shook his head and left the room.