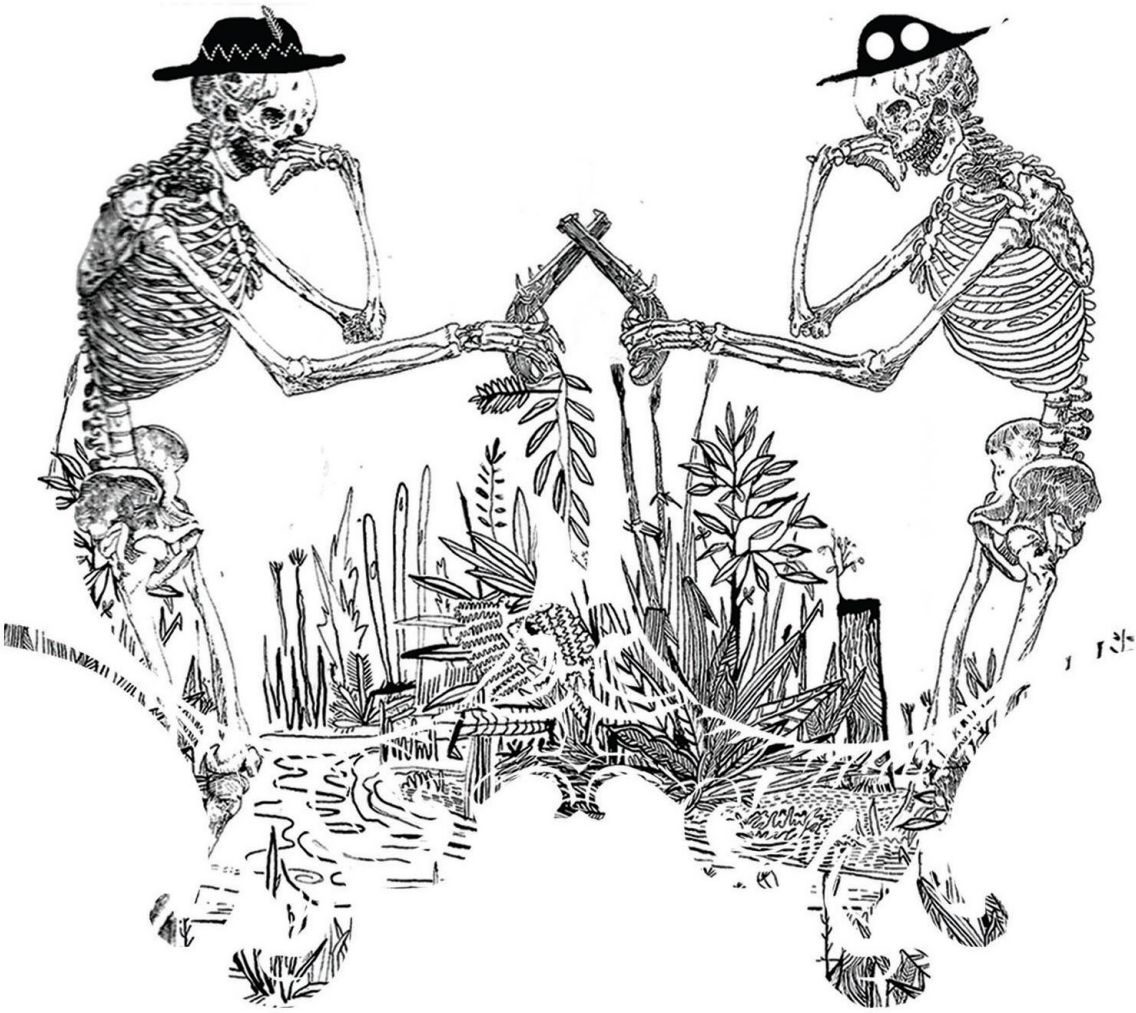
THE BOOK OF DUELS



Michael Garriga

JESSE GOOLSBY

The Book of Duels: a conversation with Michael Garriga

I.

In 2012 I was in a Pentagon conference room when an Air Force general asked a guest speaker—a Constitutional scholar—about the legality of the decision to invade Iraq in 2003. "The decision to go to war has little to do with nations or law," she said. "The decision to go to war is about people. Sometimes only two people. Laws fall by the wayside when two people want to go at it bad enough. And sometimes there's just one person. This can be the most dangerous, when one person says, in one way or another, 'begin.'"

II.

The first thing I read by Michael Garriga was "Into the Greasy Grass: During the Battle of Little Big Horn on the Crow Reservation in the Montana Territory, June 25, 1876." I was overwhelmed at finding something legitimately new in structure, in beauty, in topic and perspective. In brief first-person bursts we hear Custer, White Cow Bull (Custer's killer), and Mitch Bouyer (Custer's Chief of Scouts) relay Custer's demise. This gem begins White Cow Bull's account: "I had soaped myself in bull lard against the cool waters of the Greasy Grass where I swam this morning ahead of battle with the bluecoats and I was lying naked to the loin cloth in yucca and sage grasses when like a hawk they bushwhacked us…"

III.

You will never do anything in this world without courage. It is the greatest quality of the mind next to honor. —Aristotle

JG: Open The Book of Duels *and one reads on the inside cover: "In the seconds before gunpowder explodes or a sword is drawn, the duelist is driven by one of our simplest dispositions: kill or be killed. The manifestations of that horrible moment are Michael Garriga's primary concern." What drew you to investigate this "kill or be killed" disposition through the act of duels?*

MG: I didn't write that phrase, "kill or be killed." I'm not even sure I see these stories that way—though it is a completely understandable sentiment. There are, after all, thirty-one deaths in this book. Instead, I find that Honor informs most of these stories: If I have to kill or die in the course of saving or protecting or promoting my Honor, no matter how small the slight, then so be it. This idea dovetails with past generations' belief in an afterlife, in another world more magnificent and larger than our quick bodies, our brief lives. We don't much believe in that anymore. We pay lip service to the idea, sure enough, but our actions belie that fundamental belief, which is probably why the duels set in our current milieu are different than those set in earlier ones: a lawyer who will sue you; a couple's counseling argument; music showdowns; and so on.

Of course, a few of these duels are fueled simply by high passions—sex and lust and greed. They are immediate and so lack the formal properties of a duel. They rely on the id run amok. The great pursuit of desire and the turning away from fear. I do appreciate how many of these characters face their fears; they don't want to die—most don't even want to kill—but here they are anyway, twenty feet from an opposing gun.

JG: The prevailing modern sensibility seems to downplay notions of Honor, defending Honor, upholding familial or nationalistic Honor. Most people now, I would guess, look back at duels as some childish exercise in pride and violence, but the characters in these stories are strong believers—about property, religion, family, and most apparent, as you note, Honor. For them, protection of one's Honor is worth the duel, worth the violence, even death. There seems to be a simultaneous nobility and destructive baseness in the duel. I think many readers of The Book of Duels *will contemplate the complexity of the question, what is worth fighting for?*

MG: That's a good point. Just a few hundred years ago, if you lost your Honor, you lost your public face. If you were challenged by an equal, and failed to respond, you'd be called out—broadsides posted in the town square, full page ads or editorials in the local paper—and you'd be stript of any and all public standing. Much of our America participated in this business. I can't tell you how many newspaper editors were summoned to the dueling grounds over treacherous comments they made. Can you imagine that code existing today with our Rush Limbaughs and Bill Mahers? They'd either have to tone down that inflammatory rhetoric or be prepared to sacrifice body and blood or slink away, ashamed, never to be heard from again. Wouldn't that be something? (Though shame is now a thing we publicly embrace and celebrate even.) It strikes me just now: A third of this book is set between 1798 and 1876, a time when our American forefathers thought of things like Destiny and Fate, in capital letters. They were certain that they were embarked upon a thing most rare, the building of a Nation to bend the world to its will, and the big players had to maneuver the smaller players off the chess board. We aren't really creating an America now; we're holding on to a challenged dream. Or at least it seems so whenever I listen to our politicians and talking heads.

So, I don't know about childish. Most of these fights were precipitated by long arguments and explanations. One duel, in fact, was fought between a U.S. Senator, John Rowan, and a Dr. James Chambers, both of Kentucky. They were drinking and gambling in a tavern when an argument erupted over which man knew the most Latin. Of course, they were on opposite sides of the political aisle too. But that knowledge of Latin, that was the final straw. So, yeah, they were both childish yet sophisticated at the same time, hard for us to wrap our minds around the concept. That's how much we've evolved or devolved. For instance, what could be more childish than the anonymous comments people post in response to internet articles? How far have we come?

Another thing: a buddy of mine wrote his doctoral dissertation on spectacle of Southern lynchings. We were talking over beer one night, and he said, "*The Book of Duels* meets the arc of every lynching story ever." Someone's offended someone (a wolf whistle, a voter registration request), someone's challenged that position (protect the white woman, uphold the American apartheid), and what comes of it is a matter of satisfaction: they cower, they fight; there's a winner, a loser. He claims this is historical—this Hegalian dialectic—and that's how history moves. So, we've been fighting duels since day one, apparently. I could have written one about Adam and Eve. Or God and Adam. Or God and Satan. You can well intuit that fighting for your own Honor is passé or childish, but how about fighting over a girl at a bar

(which is a kind of honor), some finite resource, your nation's pride, your child in a divorce hearing, or your favorite football team. Athletic competitions: a boxing match, baseball game, chess. We put personal stakes up—and the higher the stakes the greater the importance of the game. Very few people are impressed by your Pac Man score. But you put personal or national Honor (or Pride) on your back and enter competition (or put your own life at stake), then the game matters more.

JG: In the book's Preface you have an incredible quote from the vice president of Iraq, Taha Yassin Ramadan, on October 2, 2002: "The American president should specify a group and we will specify a group and choose neutral ground, with Kofi Annan as referee and use one weapon with a president (Saddam Hussein) against a president (George W. Bush), a vice president against a vice president, and a minister against a minister in a duel." This seems equal parts silly and profound. The quote reads perfectly placed and expands the notion of what a duel is or can be.

MG: Well, it is absolutely silly and absurd. But it's historical too: Think of Paris proposing single combat between himself and Menelaus to end the Trojan War; the fight is theirs after all, so why bring in all of this military might and wholesale destruction. *Mano y mano* to settle the score. In the great biblical story of David and Goliath, the two opposing armies stand in stalemate. To end the battle, Goliath calls out for any one soldier to defeat him, and of course, here comes the boy-would-be-king to meet the challenge. (In a totally separate and even sillier association, it's also the climax of the Michael Jackson video for "Beat It," the two gang leaders in a knife fight in order to avoid an all-out rumble.)

The whole Second Gulf War was horrible and confusing. I still don't know why we were there. At times during the lead-up to the war, the tensions seemed to be personal, something between Presidents Bush and Hussein. I well remember President Bush's bravado: "Bring 'em on." Like he was behind the dugout waiting to duke it out with the campus bully. I hear in Ramadan's challenge a warrior calling out our president's bluff. Ramadan, though a vicious killer of his own people, was a self-made man from poor origins. How different is he from George W. Bush. I'm sure he was more offended by Bush's brashness than he was trying to save Iraq's infrastructure and the lives of innocents. So, yes, it is silly in that there's no way it was going to happen, but it's also profound in the insights it affords into both of their characters and in its implications: Don't send your boys to fight your fight.

JG: Each of the thirty-three duels is set up for narrative tension because we know someone is liable to get hurt. In this book and in your other work, how important is it to you to have something at stake from the beginning?

MG: I think in almost all works of literary art two things need to be present, among a slew of others: high stakes and precise occasions: What's on the line and why are you telling me this particular story? I think the duels are lousy with stakes and occasions, in a good way. Any time I enter the story realm of "kill or be killed," I'm listening. For instance, if I go to my local dive, and some jackal sits next to me and begins to bore me about his boss riding his ass at the Ford plant, I tune out. But if that same guy sits down and says, "Listen, buddy: I woke up this morning and there was a man standing at the foot of my bed holding a knife," well, I'll put my drink and my taco down. He's earned my full attention, and if the story's good, I'll buy him a cold beer too.

JG: Is violence or the threat of violence necessary for high stakes in literature?

MG: Absolutely not. But it is the easiest. There are high stakes in love and loss and learning. There's a moment when you learn that all living things die, and you can't un-ring that bell. There's emotional hurt and those instances that make you question big things—your family, country, values, ethics, God, and so on. Those existential crises are great to write about: "Has everything I've believed in been a lie all along?" Moments of crisis, moments of clarity. Epiphanies. These are all great topics to explore. But you put the pressure of death and violence on a character, and it's easier for them to come quickly to these epiphanies, the old "life flashing before your eyes" idea. In fiction, as in real life, you discover a great deal about a person's true character by the way they behave in moments of extreme stress.

Speaking of flash: I use the term "flash fiction" to describe these works because of the layers of association: firing a pistol (as in many of the stories); a flash in the pan (referring to something that disappoints, specifically a flintlock pistol misfire but also to those people who are quickly forgotten); flash forward and flash backward (two narrative strategies that engage the reader at the emotional level); the speed and brevity of these monologues; and the flash of an epiphany or a moment of yearning in the characters, like a flash bulb going off. That is, flash fiction, to me, connotes a moment when characters' desire for self-knowledge and -awareness meets their epiphany of who they are. If I do my job right, in one intense moment,

who a character is, at the deepest level, is revealed or made apparent to either the character or to the readers and sometimes, when I'm really on my game, to both.

JG: In a fantastic and original move, each of the thirty-three duels in The Book of Duels *provides three entry points (both participants and a witness) into this "horrible moment." Of the many successful structural elements of the book I thought this triangulation of perspective was perhaps the most powerful. Why did you decide to frame each duel with these three varying perspectives and how do you think they illuminate each encounter?*

MG: The three-narrator structure allows for something close to what Cubists try in painting: to see all sides of a single story simultaneously. It also allows three narrators to deliver four stories: each person's individual self-exploration (their interior monologues about what's going on in their lives—flash backs and flash forwards) and the actual physical event of the duel itself. The sum being greater than its parts.

The way I came to this structure is like this: I am an enormous fan of Robert Olen Butler's flash fiction, especially *Severance*. Talk about high stakes and precise occasions: In this book, each story consists of the final 240 words a person thinks after his or her head has been severed. He was my dissertation director at Florida State University and to whom the book is dedicated. I wanted to impress him by trying to write flash fiction in a similar vein, but nothing worth keeping was coming of it. One day, while reading about my home place, Harrison County, Mississippi, I came across an article that claimed people from Louisiana would often board trains along with witnesses and doctors and picnickers and so on, and they would cross the state line into Mississippi, have their duel, and re-board and go home. Sometimes with a corpse or a dying man in tow. This book, in a footnote, described the last duel fought legally in MS. It was in 1866, and the men fought—and one man was killed—over the ownership of a cow. No way, I thought, do you kill a man over one cow. Turns out, one man had fought in the Civil War and the other had refused. The old clichéd light bulb flashed in my mind: tell both men's side of the story, because both men had to think they were right in the course of their actions. (Side note: More research revealed that over 1000 duelists were killed in New Orleans, and on average, only 1 in 14 people died in duels. No wonder they banned the practice.)

So, I wrote that duel, just a diptych at the time, the two combatants' monologues rendered at this ultimate moment of conflict. To avoid looking like a fool, I read

every book about duels I could get my hands on. I read about them world-wide, all of the expectations and codes. Each country has its own take on the codified rules. However, each and every society had this one rule in common: There has to be at least one witness for a duel to be legal. I read that the poet Lord Byron's namesake killed a man in a "duel" over which man's estate contained more game birds; however, he was found guilty of manslaughter (though he never went to jail, paying the victim's family a certain sum of money instead) because there were no witness to the "duel." In a flash I knew that I needed the third monologue. Plus, this third narrator approximates an objective narrator in terms of the duelists' actions.

It didn't take long for me to understand that this "three narrator structure" also had biblical resonance: the holy trinity. So, then I wanted thirty-three stories. And for the first witness to be God, the last Satan. Plus, I felt there was a kind of religious investigation throughout the book, including the title itself.

The second duel I completely made up: the whip fight. At the time, a friend of mine was writing an article on cockfighting; he told me all about it, and that old light bulb sparked up again: Why does it have to be humans? So the third one I wrote was the cockfight.

I became obsessed with stylistic duels. But somewhere along the way, it dawned on me: Why does it have to be Code Duello-style duels? The next one I wrote was Cain and Abel, then two prostitutes fist fighting in a brothel, then Don Quixote and the Windmill, and a bullfight (we were living in Spain at the time).

JG: I find the notion of you becoming obsessed with the duels really exciting. Were you fervent about this subject when you started or was this something you discovered as the project evolved?

MG: Ultimately, as a writer, as an artist, you have to pursue your passions. If you want to write about vampires because you are eaten up with vampire lore, please do so. Good vampire stories will always be welcome. But if you're writing them because those stories are especially popular now, then you are lost. By the time you write it, sell it, have it published, it's three years later, and the zeitgeist is now calling for, what?, cannibal pirates or romantic zombies. You missed out. Follow your own obsessions. That's the old Joseph Campbell line: "Follow your bliss." All this to say, I gave over completely to the idea of dueling. I have serious notes on about forty duels that didn't make the book: a pitching duel (Haddix vs Burdette); the red baron in a dog fight; hot air balloons; and so on. But for whatever reason, they didn't command my complete attention, and so I let them go.

JG: The variety of dueling parties is nothing short of stunning: Abel v. Cain, George Custer vs. Ptebloka Ska, "Wild Bill" Hickok, v. Tutt Jr., Megan Garriga v. Jaume Garriga to highlight a few. The details and first-person renderings of the participants read so vivid and authentic, seemingly a product of painstaking research combined with spot-on narrative voice. How did you determine what duels you would investigate?

MG: I read a variety of histories for this book. It was like going back to school but slowly and at my own pace and without pop quizzes. I could linger on areas for months: Jack Johnson and Rasputin and the "Great White Hope" (and the corresponding Mann Act, passed by Congress just for Mr. Johnson, retroactively and illegally); the Storyville brothels of New Orleans (America's first legitimate red light district, closed in 1917 because soldiers, one in four, passing through New Orleans on their ways to the European Theatre contracted VD and the Secretary of the Navy, Josephus Daniels, demanded it be closed, and illegally it was); the Fourteenth-Century French Court (they'd spray a horse's mane with perfume); and on and on. I loved learning all of these things and more. I not only read history books, but also books written at the time of the event to better gather the language, the rhythms, the slang. Plus, my friends would say, "Hey, what about Genghis Kahn who killed his half-brother." So, now I'm reading about the Steppes of Mongolia....

JG: How did the research fold into the actual writing process and the compelling first-person voices?

MG: I'd wake in the mornings, lie in bed, and daydream, pretending to be whichever character I went to sleep thinking about. An image would always come to mind, and I'd meditate on it for a while until a line would announce itself, vivid as can be. I'd pace back in forth in my tiny writing room, repeating that phrase like a mantra—"my bulldog pistols come barking mad in my hand" (Custer)—until the next one ticked. Then, I'd pace and repeat those two phrases until the flood gates eventually gave way and they almost always did. Sometimes just a phrase or image, and I'd jot that down, and keep pacing, chanting. Megan, my wife, thought I had gone daffy, talking to myself for hours on end, but the process truly worked. Looking back, I can see that I was putting myself into something like a trance, like a waking deep dream, trying to lure the subconscious into words.

I half-jokingly call the process behind this book "method writing." For each story I tried to embed myself in the historical situation, the historical character (even if I invented the character completely). Then I would, as Mikhail Bahktin

says, "try on other people's tongues." Not just about the duel but also about the zeitgeist of the period—the foods, the politics, and the terrain of the place and time. This process would go on for weeks—me trying to talk like General Custer or John Henry or St. George. I most always already knew what happened in the story—these duels, a good two-thirds of them, are either legend or historical—so I was just waiting for that spark, that flash, that opened the characters to me. And it took a while to get there. But once they did, I wrote as fast as possible with just a little editing afterwards for cleanliness, some added word play, or an image or two that later occurred to me. Then, I'd start the whole process over again on the next duelist or witness. In all, it took me a little over four years to write thirty-three of these things. So, about one a month.

What I discovered in this arduous process is most certainly my own epiphany—who I think these people are at their true core—and it comes through a kind of accruing of images and ideas. What made that character tick, who is she, and why has she found herself in this place and time in her life? So it's my revelation that I give to them. Everything I say about this process sounds so dippie that I'm embarrassed, but for a small moment in time, I was truly engaged with these people in such a way that their obsessions became mine. And I guess, in turn, I put mine on them. So there's a kind of amalgamation—the historical character and me, both working together as best we can to describe the experience of being this one person in this one particular moment.

I also see the influence of The Drive-by Truckers throughout the book. They're among my favorite storytellers; they actively court the "other" point of view. So, when they tell the story of *Walking Tall*, for instance, they take on the characters of the gangsters, instead of the obvious law man hero. Their language skills are mind-blowing, the best puns ever, while remaining gritty in both their narratives and music. I use several of their lines as epigraphs.

JG: Rendering authentic multiple points of view (or even just the "other" point of view) is incredibly difficult to pull off, in song, screen, art, or on the page. You do it so well in The Book of Duels. *Is this holistic perspective something you think you'll continue to investigate in future work?*

MG: Exploring the Other is necessary to an empathetic approach to life. The novel manuscript I'm worrying over right now has POV characters who are old, female, poor, pedophilic, black, white supremacist, etc. (That is my favorite etc ever: What the hell could the next few items on this list be?) I am drawn to it. In fiction, as

in real life, everyone has to think they are right, correct in their actions, or they wouldn't behave the way they do. Or, they behave a certain way and then have to rationalize that action. I often think of how great Marlon Brando was in *The Young Lions*, creating a sympathetic Nazi. How amazingly difficult would that be! It is still arguably the most difficult role of his life (and he had dozens). I too want to understand the "enemy," the "other," and I want them to be human.

For instance, I was never a fan of Custer. I find him a borderline war criminal, and I enjoyed killing him in this book. However, once I started looking for his motives, his drive—exercising empathy—I found his love for his country, his legacy, and ultimately his ambition to be President; and I found his ultimate love: his wife, Libby. Once you find those kernels of humanity, it's much easier to understand the man. I do often wonder what kind of POTUS he'd have made. Could it have been worse than Grant?

JG: *It would have been hard to be worse than perhaps the most corrupt Presidential administration in history in Grant's, but Custer and his bravado may have been up to the task. It's fascinating to me that Grant is remembered as much for his memoirs as anything else. Is there a better way to shape history than to write it yourself? Although I must admit, Grant could write, and his memoirs hold a well-deserved place in the war literature cannon. What book of war literature has most influenced you?*

MG: I have a great friend, Sam Bowling, who was a foot soldier in Vietnam. His knees were ruined by a concussion grenade. I once asked him which Vietnam movie was the closest to having been there, and he said *Forrest Gump*, and I guffawed. "C'mon, Sam, quit pulling my leg." He said he was in a movie theater with his date, eating popcorn, and laughing at Bubba, when all of a sudden the movie portrayed a gun fight in 'Nam. The green and red tracer bullets had him sweating in his seat, and he wanted to get the hell out of that cinema. He said, "That's real, man. The fear."

Having said that, Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* scared me. It shocked me like nothing else I've ever read, opened my imagination. Sometimes you have to tell and re-tell slightly altered stories, fictions, to get at the real truths behind them. Sometimes you have to outright lie to get at the emotional truth of a thing so incomprehensible to those who weren't there. Like an inside joke on steroids. The novel was like a tangible version of Faulkner's line, "The artist's prerogative . . . is to emphasize, to underline, to blow up facts, distort facts in order to state a truth." That's what *The Things They Carried* did for me.

JG: What three books should WLA *readers put at the top of their reading lists?*

MG: First, I love the multiple points of view at play in Shelby Foote's *Shiloh*, which he wrote right before he embarked on his Civil War trilogy; it's an amazing novel. It's told from multiple first person narrators, both North and South, from multiple ranks, all while driving a linear story forward. It's remarkable. (Speaking of multiple POV: I also greatly admire, and this at first may seem silly, Max Brooks's *World War Z*. Multiple narrators give you varying and conflicting scenes in this human/zombie war. The ones from the soldiers' POV are damn frightening. I remember actually putting the novel down when the zombies overran the soldiers. It's a horrifying, if ridiculous, account.)

Speaking of horrifying, my favorite novel ever is Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*. Though it is often labeled a "Western," it is a great war book. In it, he describes, in language beyond the visceral, how outlawed Texas Rangers, who are being hunted themselves, were hired by a Mexican community to kill and scalp Apache raiding bands. No one in this book is right; they're all terrible and violent and real and right. I also love how at times the narrative, eloquent as it is, becomes boring—sand, sky, horse, sweat—and then all hell erupts, jars the reader out of any kind of complacent reading situation.

Finally, and more recently, I've been completely enraptured with Kent Wascom's *The Blood of Heaven*. The voice is like Cormac's but contains even more pyrotechnics and blood. (Recently, a book dealer in Mississippi said he refused to let an elderly costumer of his buy the book. "I just like her too much, and she doesn't need that in her head." And he loves, loves the novel.) It's set in my homeland, The Gulf Coast, and focuses on the battles around 1803—a little known place and time for skirmishes and battles, insurgencies and rebellions for The Republic of West Florida. What a chaotic time in America, beautifully rendered.

JG: You hinted at it a little earlier, but what are you working on now and do you see any connections with your current project to The Book of Duels*?*

MG: Currently, I am working on a novel manuscript entitled *Loosh* that is set in Biloxi, MS, and concerns the nonfiction civil rights demonstration known as "the Biloxi beach wade ins" and the subsequent two-day riot that burned eight blocks of the city and saw the murder of two men, the injury of dozens, and the arrests of even more. This was Good Friday, 1959. Yet it's almost completely forgotten. I took a year of Mississippi history in high school, and we never once discussed this historical

event. My mom and dad never mentioned it. Not my cousins, my neighbors, my textbooks. So, I'm blowing on those old ashes, seeing if I can get a fire going.

I do see a few connections between *Loosh*, and *The Book of Duels*: They are both damn difficult to write, for one thing. Also, I always seem to be interested in my own takes on historical nonfiction, revisiting and revamping it. It's gotta be some kind of control issue, you'll have to ask my therapist. They also cover some similar themes; in fact, a recent reviewer of *Duels* said this book's main concerns are "violence, sex, death, religion, and food." And I thought, "Yeah, you get it." I'm obsessed with these themes. But also with dark humor, a gallows laugh in the face of all of this horror. So, the new project covers these themes too, with what I hope are a lot of laughs.

However, there are some serious differences. For instance, the new manuscript is told exclusively in an objective third person POV, which means I'm not allowed access to any of my new characters' thoughts, whereas *Duels* is all interior monologue. *Loosh* is told through action alone, like one giant verb, while *Duels* is primarily memory and projection. As tempting as it is to write *Duels 2.0*, or to write *Loosh* in a series of first person narrators, as an artist I want to always be testing myself, challenging my approaches to writing, working out what small skills I possess to the best of their abilities. This POV choice forces me to exercise completely new literary muscles. I don't want to be one of those guys you see at the literary gym with giant torsos and skinny little legs.

Jesse Goolsby is the author of the novel *I'd Walk with My Friends If I Could Find Them* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt). His fiction and essays have appeared in *Narrative Magazine*, *Epoch*, *The Literary Review*, *Alaska Quarterly Review,* and many other publications. He is the recipient of the Richard Bausch Fiction Prize, the John Gardner Memorial Prize for Fiction, and a distinguished fellowship from the Hambidge Center for the Creative Arts and Sciences.

Michael Garriga comes from a long line of Creole outlaws and storytellers. He has worked as a shrimp picker, a bartender, and a soundman in a blues bar. He now teaches writing at Baldwin Wallace University, in Berea, Ohio, where he lives with his wife and two sons. His work has appeared in various journals and magazines. *The Book of Duels* is his first collection of fiction.