

“To have an opportunity like last night, in which our community could hear Matt read and discuss the process of writing, is so important to our cause and a wonderful treat.”

—Katrina Denza, Weymouth Center,  
Southern Pines, NC

“Thank you so much for including Main Street Books in Matthew’s tour of the Carolinas. Our event was a great success with an engaging group who really wanted to talk about his writing process and background. Matt is quite funny and obviously sharp. We’re looking forward to hand selling it this year.”

—Adah Fitzgerald, owner of Main Street Books,  
Davidson, NC

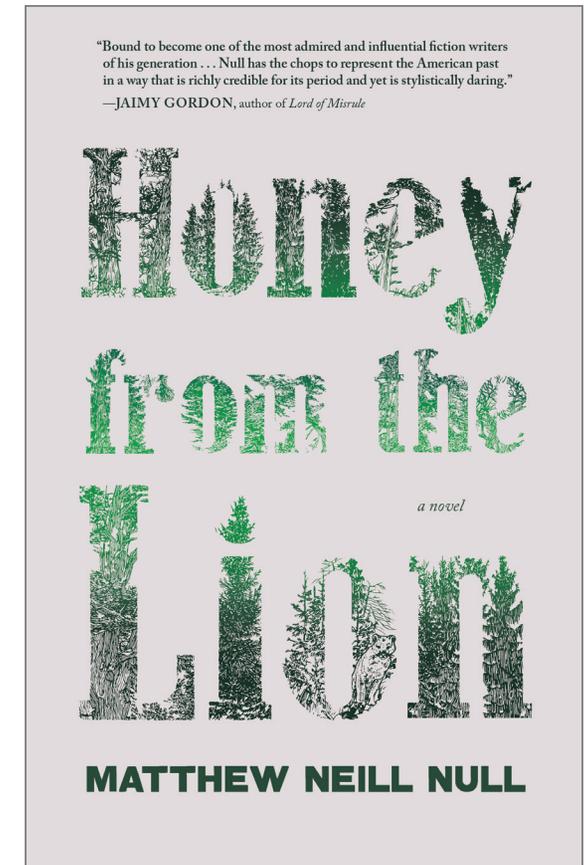


**MATTHEW NEILL NULL** is a recipient of the Mary McCarthy Prize and the Michener-Copernicus Society of America Award, and his fiction appears in *American Short Fiction*, *Ecotone*, the *Oxford American*, *Ploughshares*, *The PEN/O. Henry Prize Stories*, and *The Best American Mystery Stories*. A native of West Virginia, he holds an MFA from the Iowa Writers’ Workshop and was a fellow at the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown, Massachusetts, where he is currently the writing coordinator. *Honey from the Lion* (Lookout, 2015) is his first novel.

**Would your reading group like to Skype with author Matthew Neill Null?**

**Contact Emily Smith at [smithel@uncw.edu](mailto:smithel@uncw.edu) to set up a conversation!**

## A guide to Matthew Neill Null’s *Honey from the Lion*



## A NOTE FROM MATTHEW NEILL NULL

*HONEY FROM THE LION RECLAIMS A VANISHED PAST*—a history of daily toil and desire. It is a book of dreams, of the drifter and the clerk, of the washerwoman and the panther. I wanted to write America’s shadow story—the characters popular history crops from the frame. My home state of West Virginia has produced no great men, in the old sense of that phrase, no presidents, but hundreds of thousands have lived and died there, a rich human pageant. This novel is my bid to give them back their stories.

My dad had a good buddy on Fenwick Mountain named Brown. He was a mine foreman from Richwood, one of the boomtowns on which the novel’s Helena is based, in Nicholas County, where I was born. One summer day when I was eight or nine years old, Brown took us to visit a friend of his, an ex-coal miner. The friend was hunched over and shuffled as he walked—he lived off a disability check. After a long round of talk, he led us to what he called his museum, a cramped room in the attic of his farmhouse. Tables overflowed with shellacked hornets’ nests, shed antlers, obsolete hand tools, arrowheads and pestles, the skulls of bobcats, and stone-hard clutches of burrs from the American chestnut, gone a hundred years. But most impressive to me: on the backside of his mountain, the remains from a logging camp. He had picked his way down there and raked the earth to find what was left. He placed a spent pineknot in my palm, no bigger than a hand grenade, and explained how the loggers lit their way of a night, using the pitch as a torch. He had found their bottle dump and its wonders, like the three-sided blue bottles that once contained arsenic, bringing up visions of poisonings, of jealousies and fist fights in high mountain camps, far from the law. Last he led us to the garage, where he kept antiquated logging tools: drag chains, harnesses, the crosscut saw the loggers called the misery whip. After we’d waved good-bye to his friend, Brown spoke of the man’s

loneliness. I looked back through the window of the truck, where I sat on the bench seat between Brown and my dad. He had gone back inside. Like that man, the keeper of those things, a novelist desires objects, textures, physicality. A novelist reconstructs vanished lives.

The historical moment of *Honey from the Lion* is marked by not only environmental destruction, but also the birth of a situation West Virginia hasn’t found a way out of. Our incredible natural resources—and all that profit generated—failed to create a successful society. West Virginia is, even now, an internal colony, providing fuel to the country in which it uneasily resides. It has all the colonial troubles: corruption, pollution, crumbling infrastructure, inequality, a sclerotic political class, the unsteady lives of boom and bust. What began with timbering has continued in coal mining, and hydrofracturing of the Marcellus shale for natural gas, and will continue in some unknown and unguessed substance.

The arc of *Honey from the Lion* begins in the United States’ murky prehistory—the chaos and ferment of colonial times—and travels through the Civil War and the Gilded Age, ending as a WPA sculptor unveils a questionable monument. The New Deal coalition of 1932 is the beginning of modern America, our rise as a superpower and technocratic bureaucracy, the first moment that the country’s past becomes totally intelligible to contemporary minds. I wanted to explain this leap to myself—and the novel seemed the perfect tool to probe ambiguity and change, to tell what scholars cannot. I wanted to do so at ground level, among the anonymous and unstoried men and women who do the work, who vanish as historians fasten like remoras onto the lives of so-called great men. My forbears are not the Roosevelts and the Carnegies; they are the hands on the plow, the ax, the petty clerk’s pen.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Matthew Neill Null has described West Virginia as a “museum of failed enterprise.” In what ways do you think this idea plays out in *Honey from the Lion*?
2. What is the importance of place in the novel? Did Matthew Neill Null’s characterization of West Virginia change your perception of Appalachia and its people?
3. Why do you think the novel is titled *Honey from the Lion*? What is the significance of the epigraph, which is taken from the book of Judges?
4. How did the lyrical writing style of *Honey from the Lion* affect your experience of the novel?
5. What is the role of the ensemble cast in the novel, especially the fraught meetings of characters of different races, genders, social classes, and nationalities?
6. Did the destruction of the virgin forest in *Honey from the Lion* remind you of environmental issues or habitat loss in your community? How might the novel inspire you to protect or document the stories of your place?