

September 8, 2015

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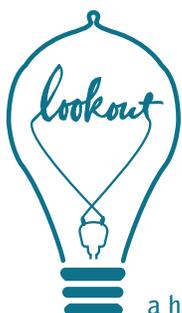
\$18.95, paperback original, French flaps
5½ x 8½, 264 pages

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Included in *Kirkus'* list of Nine Books You Shouldn't Overlook and Literary Hub's Great Booksellers Fall Preview * Excerpts in *American Short Fiction* and on Literary Hub * Author interview in *Tin House* * Southeastern tour * Boston Book Festival and Southern Festival in Nashville * Author website and social media * Reading group guide * National awards push

Lookout Books, a literary imprint housed in the Department of Creative Writing at UNC Wilmington, made history when its debut book, Edith Pearlman's story collection *Binocular Vision*, won the 2011 National Book Critics Circle Award and was named a finalist for the National Book Award, the Los Angeles Times Book Prize, and the Story Prize. The press aims to bring attention to works by emerging and historically underrepresented writers, as well as overlooked gems by established authors.



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“One of the most assured debuts of the year... Null’s compressed, lyrical prose penetrates every darkness and wheels through time like a soaring bird.”

—JAYNE ANNE PHILLIPS, author of *Quiet Dell*

“Rich in history, speech, incident, flora, fauna, vernacular, geology, politics... It’s hard to believe this is fiction and not the firsthand account of the spirit of a place and time long past.”

—SALVATORE SCIBONA, author of *The End*

“The real pleasure—and certainly not the only one—is in the sentences, as complex, deliberately assured, and lethal as Flannery O’Connor’s.”

—MANUEL MUÑOZ, author of *What You See in the Dark*

“Bound to become one of the most admired and influential fiction writers of his generation... Null has the chops to represent the American past in a way that is richly credible for its period and yet is stylistically daring.”

—JAIMY GORDON, author of *Lord of Misrule*

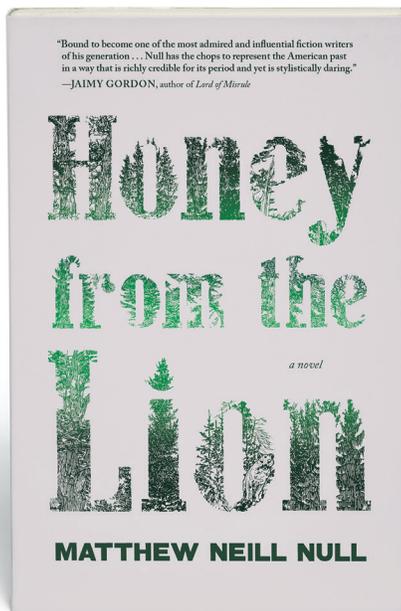
IN THIS LYRICAL AND SUSPENSEFUL DEBUT NOVEL, a turn-of-the-century logging company decimates ten thousand acres of virgin forest in the West Virginia Alleghenies—and transforms a brotherhood of timber wolves into revolutionaries.

After fleeing his childhood farm in the wake of scandal, Cur Greathouse arrives at the Cheat River Paper & Pulp Company’s Blackpine camp, where an unlikely family of sawyers offers him new hope. But the work there is exacting and dangerous—with men’s worth measured in ledger columns. Whispers of a union strike pass from bunk to bunk. Against the rasp of the misery whip and the crash of felled hemlock and red spruce, Cur encounters a cast of characters who will challenge his loyalties: a minister grasping after his dwindling congregation, a Syrian peddler who longs to put down his pack and open a store, a slighted Slovenian wife turned activist, and a trio of reckless land barons. Cur must accept or betray the call to lead a rebellion—and finally reconcile a forbidden love.

A startling elegy that establishes its author as a tremendous new literary voice, *Honey from the Lion* evokes the ecological devastation and human tragedy behind the Gilded Age, and sings both the land and ordinary lives in all their extraordinary resilience.

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. This is his first novel.

Review copies available upon request: lookout@uncw.edu.



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From the Author

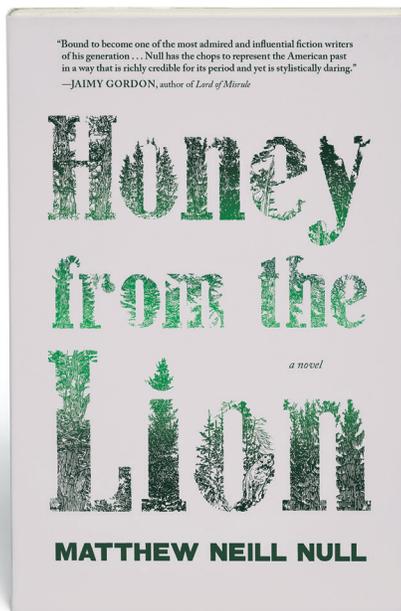
HONEY FROM THE LION RECLAIMS A VANISHED PAST—a history of daily toil and desire. It is a book of dreams, of the drifter and the clerk, of the washerwoman and the panther. I wanted to write America's shadow story—the characters popular history crops from the frame. My home state of West Virginia has produced 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.

West Virginia is a museum of failed enterprise. The landscape is marked with the detritus of bygone commerce: sealed coal mines, rusting oil derricks, shuttered banks and schools, empty towns. These aren't torn down or paved over as they would be in prosperous places; they're left to weather away. Living in that place, I couldn't help but fear their eventual disappearance, and my own. I think of the German term *Ruinenlust*, the mixed pleasure of wrecked buildings, the appeal of decay. We know the tools workers used, and where they lived, but their fear and desire, their complaints and their jokes, often go unrecorded. I've tried to create an emotional history that bridges the space between our ancestors and ourselves.

Honey from the Lion is also the story of how our landscape has been used: for solace and sustenance, for material gain and social control. West Virginians love the land and draw comfort from it, but the relationship is tenuous, always in flux, subject to the whim of external forces. Many times I've walked to fish a trout stream, only to find a mine or a well opening in the headwaters. The roads have been gated, the yellow POSTED: NO TRESPASSING signs have gone up. That access has been lost. When I was younger—in high school, in college—I kept a pair of bolt cutters in my truck and happily cut the locks, climbed the fences, and, if caught, claimed I had permission from landowners I'd never met. It's harder to get away with that these days. Surveillance cameras are cheap. Now that I'm respectable and employed, being hauled in front of the county magistrate is a risk I'd rather not take.

continued



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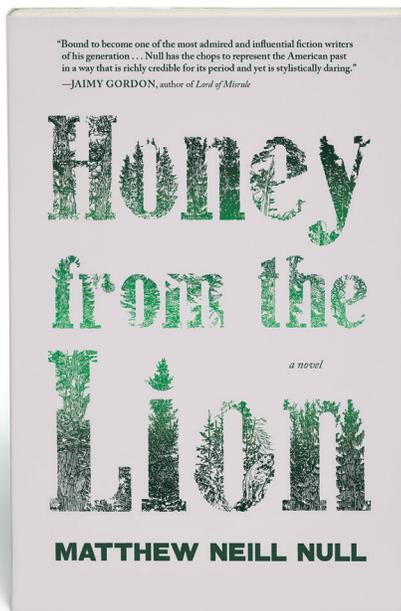
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From the Author continued

During my semi-criminal ramblings, when I wanted to see all of the state the human eye could behold, I went to Randolph County, walked miles on the abandoned tracks, and followed the Cheat River to the ghost town of Spruce, where hundreds of loggers had lived, enough to need a commissary, post office, blacksmith, cookhouse. All that's left are the scorched foundations and the odd rusted pile of peavey heads, slicks of spilled coal, the dynamited river, the rails, the lone switchman's shack. It was such brutal work, such a brutal enterprise, but no one was buried there. The dead were hauled back to bigger, more permanent towns. There, at nineteen, I decided to write a novel about that place and the people who once inhabited it. I would let my daily struggles—for friendship, money, security—fall to the wayside in order to try to write theirs—to give the dead their due.

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.



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Selected Advance Praise

“Lyrical, quietly powerful debut novel....Against a backdrop of labor unrest and the growing destruction of the old-growth forest, Null weaves a morality play of many threads: who will betray whom and at what price? The writing is exact and assured, the story complex and rewarding. Fans of John Sayles’s film *Matewan* will find this a kindred work and just as good.”

—KIRKUS

“Beautifully written in fresh, lyrical prose, *Honey from the Lion* brilliantly creates a land and a people experiencing tremendous change. Null successfully and engagingly presents the consequences of this change for both humans and the environment, leaving readers feeling like witnesses to it all.”

—BOOKLIST

“Frankly no first novel has the right to be this good—and yet, Null succeeds.... *Honey from the Lion* is essentially a love song to the Alleghenies. Both the novel and the author love the flora and fauna, the poetry of the voices, the faces and bodies of the people, but especially the mountains themselves, looming overhead.”

—THE MASTERS REVIEW

“Beautiful prose, vivid characterization, and meticulous research make *Honey from the Lion* an exceptional debut. Matthew Neill Null is a gifted and serious writer we need to pay attention to.”

—RON RASH, author of *Serena*

“This novel is a master performance. Industry, capital, religion, class, race, and unionization are all rendered through the fully realized loggers, vigilantes, industrialists, and preachers that Matthew Neill Null conjures so utterly and empathetically. You will be awed and emptied by this book, and the truth and humanity within it. *Honey from the Lion* isn’t just beautiful—it’s important. Read it now.”

—SMITH HENDERSON, author of *Fourth of July Creek*

“*Honey from the Lion* is a magisterial achievement, suffused with the Faulknerian values of love, honor, pity, pride, compassion, and sacrifice, concerning nothing less than the cohesion of an American civilization. Matthew Neill Null is a brilliant writer, and his first novel is a gift.”

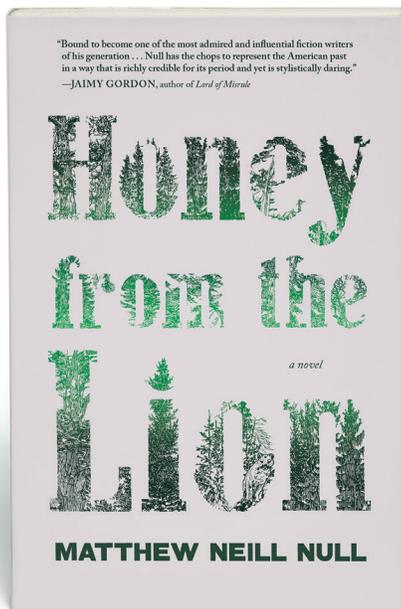
—ANTHONY MARRA, author of *A Constellation of Vital Phenomena*

“*Honey from the Lion* is provocative in its exploration of transgression and redemption and exhilarating in its lyric evocations of this rugged American landscape. Matthew Neill Null establishes himself as a perceptive seer of haunted souls and as an astonishing stylist. *Honey from the Lion* is a debut to celebrate.”

—LAURA VAN DEN BERG, author of *The Isle of Youth* and *Find Me*

“Matthew Neill Null recreates a time and place in our nation’s history in which the trajectory of progress seemed limitless and the wilderness and its resources inexhaustible. With exquisitely wrought characters, including the land itself, he takes us into the souls of the unremembered underdogs whose lives were ultimately the price of that progress. In this powerful novel, Null gives us a starkly vivid American story that is, at its dark heart, nothing less than the story of America.”

—LYDIA PELLE, author of *Reasons for and Advantages of Breathing*



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Media angles and suggested questions

Honey from the Lion is set in West Virginia, your family's home for many generations. Could you talk about your relationship to the place?

The logging of virgin timber in turn-of-the-century Appalachia is the centerpiece of this novel. How do you see that legacy reflected in contemporary environmental issues in the region?

You've described West Virginia as a "museum of failed enterprise." Could you elaborate?

Where did the idea for this novel come from, and why was it important that you tell this particular story? Why write it as fiction instead of nonfiction?

What have your research and experiences in West Virginia taught you about the relationship between environmental and social justice?

Could you talk about the novel's ensemble cast of characters, and especially the fraught meetings of characters of different races and nationalities?

Much of the novel's setting is now protected by the Monongahela National Forest and Canaan Valley National Wildlife Refuge—nearly a million acres of public land. Could you speak to the importance of public land and efforts to protect it? What are the threats to this landscape?

What are your hopes for the book? Do you see it becoming a catalyst for engagement with issues of land use? How might interested readers become active in protecting and documenting the stories of their communities?

What are the challenges of writing about a place where you no longer live? Why did you leave? What are your hopes for the future of Appalachia?

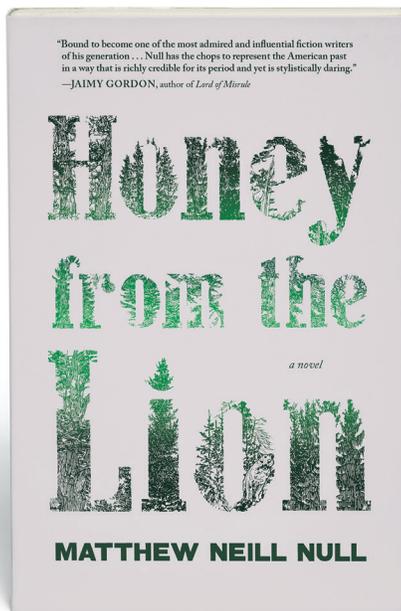
What books and authors influence your writing?

How did you decide on the novel's title, *Honey from the Lion*? What is the significance of the epigraph?

The epigraph, taken from the Book of Judges: Then went Samson down, and his father and his mother, to the vineyards of Timnath, and behold, a young lion roared against him. The Spirit of the Lord came mightily upon him, and he rent the lion as he would a kid, and he had nothing in his hand. But he told not his father or his mother what he had done. And he went down and talked with the Philistine woman, and she pleased Samson well.

And after a time he returned to take her, and he turned aside to see the carcass of the lion. Behold, there was a swarm of bees and honey in the carcass. And he took the combs in his hands and went on eating, and came to his father and mother and gave honey to them, and they did eat. But he told them not that he had taken honey from the lion.

Lookout Books, the literary imprint of the Department of Creative Writing at the University of North Carolina Wilmington, is the publisher of *Honey from the Lion*. According to their mission statement, they seek out emerging and historically underrepresented voices. Can you talk about the experience of working with a small, independent press?



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Excerpt from *Honey from the Lion*

A MAN WITH DROOPING LIDS AND A BIG JAW told Cur to follow him. He seemed to know the way, but once they were out of sight of the railcut, Cur trembled like a compass needle. The others fanned out into unseen places. The earth smelled of rain and ferns. Riggings of grapevines hung and animals skittered over the branches. Hemlocks and red spruce strained above him and vanished into a green oblivion. Sunless dark and the odd javelin of light. The forest was old here. He heard the bite and sigh of crosscut saws and, further on, the staccato cadence of men notching tree boles with ax and sledge.

Here a wild cherry. Young Shelby Randolph had leaned against it decades ago and felt the scalloped bark through his Federal blues. A bear had raked it in the night, red gashes through the purple rhytidome. But Neversummer led Cur past it, to an even bigger tree, a spruce.

How to knock one down without killing yourself was the puzzle. Cur whistled. "I didn't know God made them that big."

The man spat on his hands. Cur didn't see how that could help at all. He took a moment to consider this new partner: over six feet, with an unsightly Habsburg jaw and auburn hair cut too short, to Cur's eye. Not a scar on him besides, no lost fingers or any of the typical wounds.

A felling notch had been cut into the tree's base, tall enough for a child to stand in, crescents of wood littered about. Cur ran his fingers over the raspy grain. The man motioned him around to the lee side and Cur took the other end of the briar. This man took famous care of his saw. When Cur touched the blade, his fingertips left glowing wormtrails in the verdigris.

The handle warmed Cur's hand and drew blisters within the hour. The man said hurry up. Dust was spitting all over. It hung in their noses, brows, and hair. Cur tried to wrap a bandanna about the handle, but sweat and pitch made it hard to hold—it tried to jump from his hand. He cursed and finally stuffed the bandanna into his pocket. Occasionally they dribbled kerosene on the blade. Wolves called the crosscut saw the misery whip, a name understood by anyone who's ever used one. Finally, Neversummer said quit, for if they cut anymore the tree would fall of its own choosing and that's the last circumstance you want. When Cur let go of the saw, its rhythm hummed in every finger.

"Get on my bond side," Neversummer said. Shoulders straining, he swung the ax, hollered a Jericho shout, and gave it nine licks. When it began to wince, he flushed out of there and cried gamely, "You ought'er run."

With a metallic groan the tree twisted and fell—so fast, so slow, the drizzling molasses, as they all do. It parted the forest like a blade, the world shook and blurred with its percussion. Branches snapping, birds flaring. Like a courthouse coming down.

In a moment, the forest was as still as the day it was born. The spruce had torn a hole in the canopy and let down the light. Tons of timber, a tree that took 212 years to grow and kept rain off generations of deer. Its absence was more powerful than its existence.

from *Honey from the Lion*, Lookout Books

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