



The Dog of the South

By Charles Portis

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Ray Midge is waiting for his credit card bill to arrive. His wife, Norma, has run off with her ex-husband, taking Ray's cards, shotgun and car. But from the receipts, Ray can track where they've gone. He takes off after them, as does an irritatingly tenacious bail bondsman, both following the romantic couple's spending as far as Mexico. There Ray meets Dr Reo Symes, the seemingly down-on-his-luck and rather eccentric owner of a beaten up and broken down bus, who needs a ride to Belize. The further they drive, in a car held together by coat-hangers and excesses of oil, the wilder their journey gets. But they're not going to give up easily.

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

Charles Portis may be the sneakiest comedian in American letters, not to mention one of the funniest. And there's no better specimen of his double-edged art than *The Dog of the South*, which Overlook Press has recently rescued from a long, cruel, out-of-print limbo. As usual, the narrator is a down-at-the-heels Southerner with an eye for the homely detail and a mission to accomplish. What Ray Midge means to do is track down his significant other: "My wife Norma had run off with Guy Dupree and I was waiting around for the credit card billings to come in so I could see where they had gone." In another author's hands, this opening sentence might lead straight to a bloody, *noir*-ish denouement. Here it's merely the excuse for a meandering, semi-pointless quest, during which the fussbudget protagonist is assailed by tropical storms, grifters, hippies, car trouble, and even an assortment of airborne trash: "I had to keep the Buick speed below what I took to be about sixty because at that point the wind came up through the floor hole in such a way that the Heath wrappers were suspended behind my head in a noisy brown vortex."

Hapless, rhetorically challenged Ray Midge would more than fulfill any novel's quota for comic creation. But Portis pairs him with another indelible nutter, Dr. Reo Symes. A font of dubious financial schemes, Symes attaches himself to Ray like a peevish, passive-aggressive Pancho Sanza, and his non-sequitur-studded riffs must be heard to be believed:

I always tried to help Leon and you see the thanks I got. I hired him to drive for me right after his rat died. He was with the Murrell Brothers Shows at that time, exhibiting a fifty-pound rat from the sewers of Paris, France. Of course it didn't really weigh fifty pounds and it wasn't your true rat and it wasn't from Paris, France, either. It was some kind of animal from South America. Anyway, the thing died and I hired Leon to drive for me. I was selling birthstone rings and vibrating jowl straps from door to door and he would let me out at one end of the block and wait on me at the other end.

The vibrating jowl straps are the kicker here, of course. But it's the overall futility of the enterprise that gives Symes his comic potency, and makes him Ray's natural companion in arms. Neither of these guys is going to accomplish *anything*: they're Beckett clowns in Sansabelt trousers, too enervated by the heat even to agonize. Still, you won't find a more delicious (or less reliable) narrator in contemporary fiction, and Charles Portis's genius for inventing all-American eccentrics is anything but futile. --*James Marcus*

Review

'Charles Portis is perhaps the most original, indescribable sui generis talent overlooked by literary culture in America' Esquire 'Hilarious and heart breakingly odd ... you find yourself laughing so hard in sections that tears run down your face' Baltimore Sun 'The funniest novel in decades' GQ

About the Author

Charles Portis lives in Arkansas, where he was born and educated. He served in the Marine Corps during the Korean War. As a reporter, he wrote for the New York Herald-Tribune, and was also its London bureau chief.

Users Review

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