



My Southern Journey: True Stories from the Heart of the South

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A NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER

From the celebrated bestselling author of *All Over but the Shoutin'* and winner of the Pulitzer Prize, Rick Bragg, comes a poignant and wryly funny collection of essays on life in the south.

Keenly observed and written with his insightful and deadpan sense of humor, he explores enduring Southern truths about home, place, spirit, table, and the regions' varied geographies, including his native Alabama, Cajun country, and the Gulf Coast. Everything is explored, from regional obsessions from college football and fishing, to mayonnaise and spoonbread, to the simple beauty of a fish on the hook.

Collected from over a decade of his writing, with many never-before-published essays written specifically for this edition, *My Southern Journey* is an entertaining and engaging read, especially for Southerners (or feel Southern at heart) and anyone who appreciates great writing.

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My Southern Journey: True Stories from the Heart of the South Details

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From Reader Review *My Southern Journey: True Stories from the Heart of the South* for online ebook

Tom Mathews says

Update August 2016: A yer after first reading the book, I checked out the audio recording read by Rick Bragg himself. It is even better than the original, if that is even possible. I may end up buying this recorded so that I can listen to it many more times. Bragg is priceless!

Original review September 2015

A friend of mine describes Rick Bragg as a ‘national treasure’. Even if that assessment is a tad overstated it can be safely applied to his relationship with the American South. From his touching memoir of his mother, ‘All Over But the Shoutin’ to his recent biography of Jerry Lee Lewis, his works have beautifully expressed his undying love affair with the land of his birth.

‘My Southern Journey’ continues this love affair with a series of short articles, many reprinted from magazines, that describes, in his unique style, what makes ‘The South’ special. From its food to its music, from the back-country religions to the way neighbors pitched in and helped each other in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, Bragg describes them all and does in that passionately biased way that he has that imbues even the most mundane aspects of life with a vibrancy that those of us who spring from Puritan stock seldom appreciate.

As an unrepentant Yankee, I particularly enjoyed his descriptions of how the English language is spoken in the South differs from the rest of the country. Speaking of Thanksgiving, Bragg said ‘When I mentioned that we were having turkey and dressing at my house, my Yankee friends looked confused. You mean, they asked, the stuff you put on salads? It is a miracle we only fought one war.’

Perhaps my favorite line from the book is when he describes his attitude towards drinking in general and drinking bourbon in particular. ‘I am not a big drinker, but there has always been something comforting about brown liquor. After one, I always felt like I was covered in a warm quilt. The secret, across my life and my ancestor’s lives, was not to drink seven more, turn the drink into a parachute, and jump off something tall.’

Speaking of moderation, I wouldn’t describe the book as ‘sweet’ but after reading it I can almost hear some woman’s voice saying ‘Ain’t that sweet!’ As with most things that are sweet, it’s not always wise to take too much at one sitting. I found that I enjoyed the stories the most when I limited my reading to two or three stories at a time.

*Quotations are cited from an advanced reading copy and may not be the same as appears in the final published edition. The review book was based on an advanced reading copy obtained at no cost from the publisher in exchange for an unbiased review. While this does take any ‘not worth what I paid for it’ statements out of my review, it otherwise has no impact on the content of my review.

FYI: On a 5-point scale I assign stars based on my assessment of what the book needs in the way of improvements:

- 5 Stars – Nothing at all. If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it.
- 4 Stars – It could stand for a few tweaks here and there but it’s pretty good as it is.
- 3 Stars – A solid C grade. Some serious rewriting would be needed in order for this book to be considered *good or memorable*.

- 2 Stars – This book needs a lot of work. A good start would be to change the plot, the character development, the writing style and the ending.
 - 1 Star - The only thing that would improve this book is a good bonfire.
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Laura says

Enjoyable collection of stories that Bragg shares with us about growing up and living in the south. Lots of the stories are a reflection of my own story of growing up southern. Some are quite funny and others are a little emotional. Highly recommend the audio version where Bragg himself reads.

Snotchocheez says

3 stars

I've been a Rick Bragg fan for well over five years now and cannot (nay, will not) stop singing the praises of the homages to his family, warts and all (particularly the stunning *Ava's Man* and *All Over but the Shoutin'*.) If you're even remotely interested in hardscrabble life in the South (the Tennessee River Valley region of Alabama to be exact), as relayed by a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist, those two books are absolutely essential reading.

My Southern Journey, while unmistakably Rick Bragg, feels very choppy and 'Chicken-n-Dumplings-For-The-Soul'-esque. Roughly 75% of these stories were originally printed in *Southern Living* Magazine, a *Better Homes and Gardens* knock-off for the moneyed Mint Julep and Faux-Plantation set, obligatory reading in doctors'/dentists' offices down here. If you get bored enough waiting for your appointment leafing through the decorative kudzu articles and pecan creme brulee recipes, you might stumble across Bragg's "Southern Journal" column on the last page. These dinky columns do provide an essence o' Bragg (if only provide goo-ily written "There's No Place Like Home"-ish bromides) and any Rick Bragg (even ADD-length Bragg) is better than *no* Bragg at all, but dinky articles about "snow cream" (the homemade "ice cream" you make when it snows down here in the South), lazing on the porch, and the differences between "piddling" and "loafing" (each with their own article) are all fine and dandy, but don't *really* give you much insight as to Bragg's "Southern Journey".

The best stories were those few *not* culled from *Southern Living* Magazine (perhaps not coincidentally because they're longer than a page in length), like one taken from the dubiously-named *Garden & Gun* Magazine, "The Lost Gulf", about the 2010 eco-disaster wrought in the Gulf of Mexico by BP and over-zealous gulf drilling practices; a few pretty great articles on Southern Cuisine; and a dated (but still plenty interesting if you're at all a football fan, and who in the South is not?) *Sports Illustrated* article "Nick of Time", when Nick Saban in 2007 took over the legacy that is the University of Alabama football program, still in 2016 one of the perennial powerhouses in college sports today.

The rest, though, kind of a mixed bag: nothing terrible, but nothing really you couldn't glean from his outstanding memoirs. Read those first; read these stories when you've got some spare time to "piddle around" with.

Killian says

"[...]I felt a comfort in that room, and in that company, I have seldom known. Maybe that is because by taking me into their past, they took me back to my own."

Ahhh, Rick Bragg. I have read bits and pieces of his work for years, mostly when I was going to Bama and traveling the circles that talked about every new work he produced. This book is a compilation of his articles centering around the southern way of life that he grew up surrounded by, and I pretty much loved every story.

When I was younger I wanted nothing more than to run away from all things "Southern". I didn't want to be part of a culture that was known for so many awful things, and ridiculed for being unintelligent and stuck in the past. As I've grown older I've ended up growing more and more proud to have grown up here. Bragg's stories hit the heart of that love, and his introduction alone expressed so many of those feelings.

He shares stories about the deep family roots we cling to here. About our suspicious nature when it comes to "Yankees", especially concerning their alarming tradition of making "stuffing" instead of dressing. Our shared love, not religion, of football (there are several Bama-centric articles, fyi). He devotes an entire section to the food of the south and the bonding experiences it creates throughout our entire lives, not to mention the act of "saying grace" that must happen before one bite is touched. He delves into the architecture and landscapes of the coast, beaches, farms, and small towns we cherish.

Just to cherry pick a few of my favorites, I would have to say that "Red Dirt" is right at the top. Bragg's descriptions of the pervasiveness of the stuff and how ground in it becomes struck a real nerve though I haven't had time to fully process why yet. "Bad Slaw" made me want to start a campaign to bring greater awareness of the travesty being perpetrated to this most essential of southern foods. "Why I Write About Home" was a beautiful expression of exactly what the title states. "Stuck for Good" was just hilarious. Especially his impression of call-ins to radio stations. Spot. On. Roll Tide.

I don't know that someone not from the south would completely enjoy this collection, simply because this is our culture and I could see it being hard to enjoy it the way someone with shared experiences would. But I would like to hear a take on it from someone in another region. I love where I'm from, no matter the opinions of those who have no idea of our true culture, and reading Bragg's work put that love into words.

Copy courtesy of Time Inc. Books, via Netgalley in exchange for an honest review.

Diane Barnes says

It is a testament to how much I love this man's writings that I did not skip over the essays on football, but read every word. Some of these pieces made me laugh, and some made me cry, but they all made me proud of my southern heritage and upbringing.

Suzy says

I loved these stories told with laugh-out-loud humor and tear-inducing poignancy. Bragg, a southern boy from Alabama, hits all the right notes whether he is writing about family, food, pride of place, being an outsider in northern cities, romance, break-ups, his step-son or holiday traditions. And did I mention food? He is especially funny when talking food; one essay on cole slaw had me rolling! And another story about cast iron pans and how his mother saved hers from the ashes of a house fire tugged at my heart.

I'm so glad I listened to Bragg telling his own stories. I'm also glad that I listened to this an hour at a time between other books. I think there is so much similarity among the stories that listening straight through would have diluted the effect of individual essays.

Recommended!

Melora says

I enjoyed these essays very much, though some, of course, were better than others. I particularly liked the ones about food (and that's a *lot* of them) -- tomorrow night I'll be pulling out my long-neglected cast iron skillet and frying some chicken, and I'm even planning to try to make hush puppies (from Martha White's mix, because ten years in North Carolina haven't been enough to turn this Floridian into a proper Southerner, but Mr. Bragg has inspired me to *try*, anyway!). The one about being a donkey farmer was also a favorite (I don't plan to try this myself, though), as was the one about his efforts at home repair. Really the only section that dragged for me was the football section, and I don't think anyone could write about football in a way that would hold my interest for long. If the "down home country boy" thing got to be a bit much from time to time it was more a result of the format -- these are short pieces from various publications, written over a period of, I think, about fifteen years -- than of any heavy handedness in the writing. Ideally I'd have read these over a period of a couple weeks, but the library wanted their book back so I gulped it when it would have been best enjoyed read a couple essays at a go. Anyway, this is a funny and affectionate view of southern living, and I enjoyed reading it.

John Behle says

I had to give up on this "aw shucks--we just eat our our troubles away" collection of southern lifestyle stories.

Tale after fat filled episode, this book was giving me a stomach ache reading about foodie attacks.

I ditched this bag of doughy doughnuts. After a few accounts of the author scheduling his day around access to fried food, enough.

Connie says

Rick Bragg describes this book as "a kind of love story to the South". The book is made up of around

seventy articles or essays, most from his column at "Southern Living". They range from the humorous to the heartfelt. It's the type of book that you can pick up when you have only a few minutes to read.

The stories about his family are some of my favorites. His love for his mother and other family members is evident. He grew up in a red clay area of Alabama filled with working class people. Life was a struggle, and he has never forgotten the sacrifices his mother made as she raised her sons without her absent husband. He's included a cute story about an old dog working his way into his mother's heart.

Stories about Thanksgiving dinners will leave the reader hungry. He also has a humorous story about coleslaw past its prime. Who can forget the first time they tried an oyster? Bragg's reaction was that the first one tasted like river mud.

Bragg is a master at storytelling, but his carpentry skills are severely lacking. He includes a funny story about sticking his fingers to the wall with Gorilla Glue when making home repairs--while his cell phone is too far away to call for help.

Other stories are about the various places where he lived. His disaster stories about a tornado, and about the BP oil spill were memorable. As a Northerner, I had to laugh at his reaction to snow in New York and Boston. He had a sweet memory of his grandmother scooping up the rare Alabama snow, and flavoring it with sweetened condensed milk, sugar, and vanilla to make "snow cream". He also included essays about Southern football.

Bragg's essays are very conversational so I checked out youtube to hear him speak. There were some lectures and readings about earlier books. I intended to watch for five minutes, but he was so engaging that I spent almost an hour listening to Bragg. Although I read the hardcover book, people may enjoy the audio version even more.

Fred Forbes says

I'm as much a New Englander as Rick Bragg is a Southerner but with clients all over the southeast, I can certainly understand his love affair with his home. Especially now, as I have made numerous trips through the area on business but with side trips to Civil War sites, my 5th great grandmother's grave site, friends in the southern states, etc. While I have now lived in Florida for 30+ years (and am not sure that counts as the south since few here are from here), I enjoy getting into the surrounding states and learning their history and meeting their people. While Rick has captured the specific Southern essence, he has also put our common humanity on display. Well done set of articles!

Kirk Smith says

Surely everyone knows about the words of Rick Bragg. Do I need to go on? I'll make my own title for this: 'Short Stories and Anecdotes'. This is a collection of articles from Southern Living magazine as well as Garden and Gun, GQ, Bon Appetite, and others. Subjects are categorized as Home, Table, Place, Craft, and Spirit. The predominant length for each is two pages, but there are several of four to six pages. There is a good deal of writing on the subject of food, so make sure to have dinner before you read! Reading this is much like listening to a friend or favorite relative tell of their adventures, travels, or childhood. There are so

many stories here I recommend reading just a few at a time to prolong the experience. The stories are short, poignant, personal, endearing, and will make you laugh a little too. A pretty dam swell collection!

Ginger says

Do yourself a favor and listen to this on audiobook. Then do yourself a favor and if you're addicted to 1.5 speed, don't. For one thing, you won't want to rush this. You'll want the full 8 hours 43 minutes. And for another thing, even though Rick Bragg's voice sounds perfectly normal at 1.5, since he speaks so slowly, that drawl is at least half of the charm.

Next time I'm finding myself a little anxious, I might just turn this on. It's really hard to think anything bad could happen in the world when Rick Bragg is talking about oysters or his mama's iron skillet or the "unshorn Kardashians" (aka the Duck Dynasty guys).

Camie says

I've always loved Rick Bragg, so it's no surprise that I really enjoyed this compilation of essays he's written as magazine articles over the years. The closer I get to age 60 the more nostalgic I become. You don't need to have grown up in the South to relate to the stories here, as the deeply rooted love he has for a memory filled upbringing and "all things Southern" shines through. It might help if you grew up watching Gunsmoke on an enormous black and white TV while eating Little Debbie snack cakes.

5 stars

Rebecca Elswick says

Seldom have I enjoyed a book like I did, My Southern Journey: True Stories from the Heart of the South! I chose to listen to this book on audible and I am sooooo happy I did! What an amazing bonus it was to hear the stories in the author's voice. Rick Bragg is a true storyteller in the "old school" way of storytellers. Listening to him read his stories was like sitting on the front porch and listening to my dad tell stories. I got the same warm feeling and had the same grin on my face long after the story was over.

Diane S ? says

3.5 Bragg's love of the South, his heritage, customs and quirks definitely shines through in his writing. Many, if not all of these articles are repeats that have been published previously in Southern Living. Many of these I loved, the old dog, his mother as the cat lady, moonshine as a toddy and others. But, there were many that I think would be better understood if one was raised or living in the South, to be honest some left little or no impression on me at all. A few made me shudder. But, as always his writing is stellar, interesting and at times quite poignant. So all in all a good read, and I am sure to Southerners a great one.

Arc from Netgalley.

