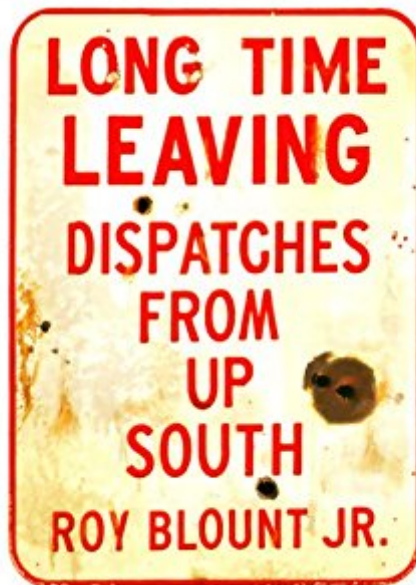


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Long Time Leaving: Dispatches From Up South (Unabridged Selections)



Synopsis

and I left the South in search of the Enlightenment. I'm pro-choice, in favor of gay marriage, and against creationism and the war in Iraq. But both my parents' people are deep Southern from many generations, and I spent a little over a third of my life, including the presumably most formative years (toilet training through college), living in the South. Mathematically, that makes me just about exactly as Southern as the American people, 34 percent of whom are Southern residents. But it goes deeper than math—"my roots are Southern, I sound Southern, I love a lot of Southern stuff, and when my [Northern] local paper announces a festival to celebrate the spirit of differently abled dogs," I react as a Southerner. I believe I care as much about dogs' feelings as anybody. It is hard for me to imagine that a dog with three legs minds being called a three-legged dog.

A sly, dry, hilarious collection of essays—his first in more than ten years—from the writer who, according to The New York Times Book Review, is in serious contention for the title of America's most cherished humorist. This time Blount focuses on his own dueling loyalties across the great American divide, North vs. South. Scholarly, raunchy, biting and affable, Roy takes on topics ranging from chicken fingers to yellow-dog Democrats to Elvis's toes. And he shares experiences: chatting with Ray Charles, rounding up rattlesnakes, watching George and Tammy record, meeting an Okefenokee alligator (also named George, or Georgette), imagining Faulkner's tennis game, and being swept up, sort of, in the filming of Nashville. His yarns, analyses, and flights of fancy transcend all standard shades of Red, Blue, and in between.

Roy on language: "Remember when there was lots of agitated discussion of Ebonics, pro and con? I kept waiting for someone to say that if you acquire white English, you can become Clarence Thomas, whereas if you acquire black English, you can become Quentin Tarantino."

Roy on eating: "The way folks were meant to eat is the way my family ate when I was growing up in Georgia. We ate till we got tired. Then we went 'Whoo!' and leaned back and wholeheartedly expressed how much we regretted that we couldn't summon up the strength, right then, to eat some more."

Roy on racism: "Anybody who claims . . . not to have a racist bone in his or her body is, at best, preracist and has a longer way to go than the rest of us."

Blount's previous books have included reflections on a Southern president (Jimmy Carter), a novel about a Southern president (Clementine Fox), a biography of Robert E. Lee, a celebration of New Orleans, a memoir of growing up in Georgia, and the definitive anthology of Southern humor. Long Time Leaving is the capper. Maybe it won't end the Civil War at last, but it does clarify, or aptly complicate, divisive delusions on both sides of the longstanding national rift. It's a comic ode to American variety and also a droll assault on complacency North and South—a glorious union of diverse pieces reshaped

and expanded into an American classic, from one of the most definitive and esteemed humorists of our time. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

I got this on audio because I don't just love Blount's writing, I love his voice and the way he says things and phrases them, I even love his pauses. His accent got me through a near 2 year exile in the Great Forsaken Flatlands (Kansas City, MO) where a kind word much less a familiar turn of phrase was hard to come by -- so I really wish I could have given this book the full five stars. But, well, I just found it uneven. Some really good stuff mixed in with stuff that felt like it was just there to fill up the page, or the time if you were listening on audio. Still and all, every essay had something worth taking away from it and that's more than you can say about most things you read. And when Blount is good, he is charming, funny and right on.

Besides being a brilliant specimen of that endangered species, The White Southern Liberal, Blount is about as funny as any humanoid on the planet. "Long Time Leaving," an anthology of some of his occasional pieces, proves a little repetitious at points (how many times do you need to remind folks that "y'all" is plural?) but it offers a fine selection of his more amusing material. Few writers are capable of more deadly similes: For example, Blount's observation that Lewis Grizzard is to Southern humor as Stuckey's pecan logs are to Southern home cookin', or that Garth Brooks songs are like Waffle House waffles "except that every now and then a Waffle House waffle hits the spot." Blount flits from topic to topic like a fly on fertilizer, but that only serves to underline his point that

Southerners aren't great abstract thinkers; they're more at home with the concrete and particular, which is their peculiar strength.

Despite being ensconced-or maybe because of-in the Berkshires, Mr. Blount casts an uneasy eye on contemporary Southern life and the larger American political scene. One gets the sense that since his Massachusetts neighbors and New York coworkers feel compelled to call upon him to explain certain Southern folkways and news events that the author has taken the time to distill his childhood and college years in the South into a bourbon that fuels his philosophizing. The book is a collection of his essays that have appeared in various periodicals from the mid 1990's and later-food, travel, covering the KKK, life in Manhattan, the blues, a pinch of this and a smidgin of that. You have to have lived a couple of decades-mid 1950s and up would help-to get some of the references-or be willing to investigate the names, dates and places Mr. Blount mentions. You can read a couple of the essays before bed or a whole section on a lazy Sunday morning-it's easy to pick up and put down without losing track, kind of like an ongoing conversation with a friend. A well read, post graduate educated, erudite friend who hides behind the visage of a good ol' boy. The porch light is on and someone is definitely at home...One caveat-the author is enamoured of a certain joke he uses to illustrate a point. Mr. Blount please get another line besides the "Do you believe in infant baptism? "H--I, I've seen one!"

OK--I'm from up North, I will admit that directly---and it is important because when I first began to read this book, it seemed as though I were wading through verbal Mississippi mud. (Thus the 3 stars and not 4: these are stylistically difficult essays & may not feel accessible to all readers.) It's obvious that Blount is brighter than most, more well-read and beautifully educated---but boy, is his writing style convoluted. It's like listening to Huck Finn all grown up! But persevere, because difficult prose or not, this Huck Finn has something worthwhile to say, and he says it with marvelous humor, candor, and charm. Oh, and while I was reading the book, my 15-year old daughter saw the back cover (which I had missed) and said the book was worth buying for THAT alone.

I have been a Blount reader since "What Men Don't Tell Women," but had not taken up one of his books for some time. In this one, Blount's characteristic tone of bemused tolerance and appreciation is sometimes subverted by the type of stock political comments by which Blount's adopted tribe -- Northeastern liberals -- identify each other. Although Blount maintains a clear-eyed balance on vexed issues of race relations, southern and northern, in succumbing to the tendency of Southern

liberals (his term) to be "more Catholic than the Pope" in matters of politics, Blount seems to be playing to the biases of his adopted region even as he seeks to dissolve biases regarding the realm of his origin. Whether that defensive reflex obscures a more considered but unarticulated approach is unclear, but Blount's resort to hackneyed derision in that context creates a sour aftertaste and raises questions regarding his judgments in areas about which a reader may be less informed. When Blount ruminates on the South without trotting out his political credentials, however, he can still offer insight and even delight. His many appreciations of Mark Twain in this volume, for instance, expand one's appreciation of the strengths and tensions Twain's Southern background lent to that most American of writers. He matches that perspective by noting the extent to which "Southern culture" is African-American as much as Anglo/Celtic, one result of which is the influence that the South, riding the coat-tails of the all-pervasive African-American culture of the 20th century, has had on the United States generally. Corresponding to related and more extensive analyses by writers that have included Ralph Ellison and Albert Murray, the import of such a felt observation is enhanced by Blount's perspective as a white Southerner. Alongside such a welcome illumination, petty political snark is an unpleasant distraction.

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