

'Small Treasons' Asks Big Questions

Written by Margaret Evans, Editor
Tuesday, 25 July 2017 13:23



Mark Powell may be southern literature's best kept secret - but not for long.

By Margaret Evans, Editor

Mark Powell is one of my favorite mysteries.

I discovered Mark through his novel *The Sheltering*, published by Pat Conroy's Story River Books in 2014. I was working as Pat's assistant at the time, and we both thought Mark's manuscript was nothing short of brilliant. Moody, complicated, and deeply disturbing, it rang with the dissonant harmonies of a profound new southern voice. Except it wasn't new.

The Sheltering
was Mark's fourth novel.

"Where's this guy been all my life?" I remember Pat asking as we sat on his porch discussing this great find. (Nothing thrilled Pat more than stumbling on a terrific new writer.) I wondered the same thing, and the unnerving beauty of *The Sheltering* haunted me for months.

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Then I met Mark. He was in Beaufort for the 'Pat Conroy at 70' Festival, and to say he



defied my expectations is a gross understatement. Based on his writing, I'd imagined this intense, brooding character - kind of James Dean meets Al Pacino - but what I encountered, instead, was a lanky sunflower of a guy, with an easy smile and a sweet disposition. He was back last year for the Pat Conroy Literary Festival, and again, I marveled at the mystery. How did the dark universe of *The Sheltering* spring from the mind of this affable boy-next-door?

And now comes book #5, *Small Treasons*. Not only does it deepen that mystery, but it confirms my original opinion that Mark Powell belongs in the pantheon of great southern writers.

Suspense novel . . . political thriller . . . psychological study . . . philosophical treatise . . . theological meditation . . . *Small Treasons* is all, and none, of the above. Ron Rash (*Serena*) calls it a "marvelous novel" about "Americans searching for meaning in a violent, fragmented world." James Scott (

The Kept

) says, "Though Powell tackles some of the big questions of our time, this is the story of people, characters who are startlingly real, and the secrets and misunderstandings that keep happiness just out of reach."

From poor rural Georgia to the posh Florida suburbs, from a politically-charged college campus to a secret ISIS training camp, *Small Treasons* leads us through shadowy terrain - both familiar and unfamiliar - where its flashes of light dazzle. The novel is nothing if not timely and relevant, yet it feels weighty and enduring, too, resonating with eternal themes, woven together in prose

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so fine it often reads like poetry.

The author has received fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Breadloaf and Sewanee Writers' Conferences, was a Fulbright Fellow to Slovakia in 2014, and received the Chaffin Award for contributions to Appalachian literature in 2009. He's a graduate of the Citadel, the University of South Carolina, and Yale Divinity School - a rare combination that may help account for the breadth and depth of his vision. But as far as I can tell, it's mostly just a gift. A mystery.

Mark Powell is heading back to Beaufort in August, where he'll appear in conversation with his fellow Citadel grad and Story River Books author John Warley (*A Southern Girl*), as part of the Pat Conroy Literary Center's Visiting Writers Series.

I recently had the pleasure of interviewing Mark for the Conroy Center's Porch Talk blog. As always, he was impeccably nice.



ME: Mark, you've dedicated your new book to Pat Conroy. What did he mean to you?

MP: Pat meant far more to me than I could ever convey. When I was in high school, his books opened the door onto a larger world, one that I knew intuitively existed even if I couldn't find it.

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ME: In 2015, you wrote in *Lowcountry Weekly*, "I read *The Lords of Discipline* riding back and forth to away basketball games my junior year of high school. A senior had given it to me - he was headed to the Air Force Academy after graduation - saying only, "I think you'll get it." I did get it, whatever - 'it' was. But more importantly I think it got me. I was a not quite bookish kid living a very unbookish life. But after reading Pat Conroy the first time I began to understand there was a larger world I could read my way into."

MP: Right. And when I got to know him I found that for all his powers as a writer (and they were great), he was an even better human being. His generosity, his kindness, his humility - reading Pat was a master class in storytelling. But knowing him was a master class in being alive.

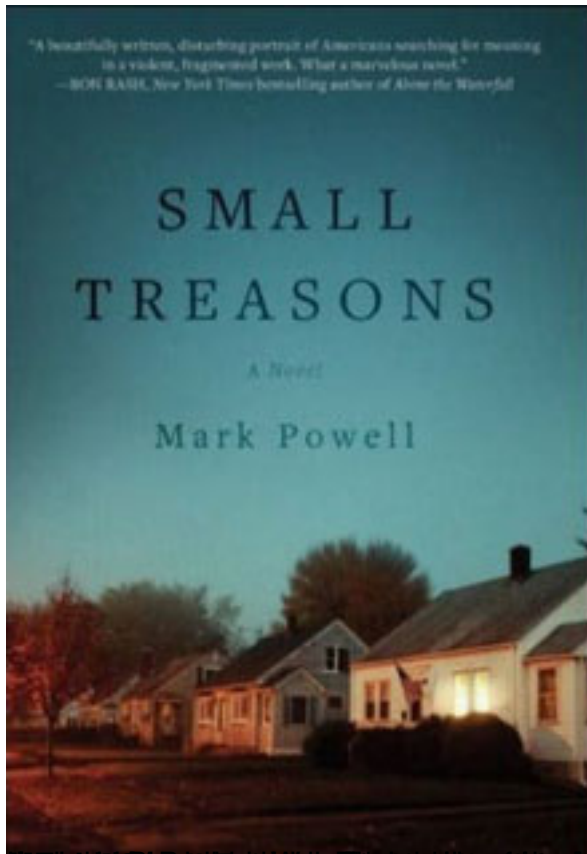
ME: In *Small Treasons*, your protagonist John Maynard is a small town southern boy turned academic - a scholar of theology who's now working as a counselor at a liberal arts college in the Georgia mountains. He describes himself as an "over-educated good ol' boy, a Bible Belt scripture whiz gone rogue." You grew up in a small southern town, have a graduate degree from Harvard Divinity School, and teach English at Appalachian State University. Is the character of John Maynard based on anybody you know? (Ha!)

MP: I'm laughing here too. Certainly there are parts of me in all my characters, but particularly

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