

There are few surprises in the political positions Boleman-Herring takes; her views are consistently far-left. More interesting in this collection of essays are those that explore her personal life, a kind of running diary or memoir. She is brutally honest in describing a personal history of lifelong sleeplessness, anxiety, and fear. Her earliest memory, she claims, is of being smothered to death in her crib by her beloved stuffed animals, and this led to continuing nightmares. "So my life began in luxurious comfort, and fear, in equal measures, with a nightmare at the end of each bright, warm day." Whatever metaphor she could imagine for herself, she writes, "and I imagined them one after another, was existentially dark. I was happy, funny, loving and beloved—and 'brilliant'; never forget brilliant—but a very depressed child."

This depression has been a lifelong affliction, nursed by therapists of various stripes and drugs of questionable efficacy. She calls depression her indigo twin. "It is as though I had been born with a twin only superficially human, and decidedly blue; a sibling who shadows me night and day, always there, always 'mine', and like me in every respect... but one. Color. She is blue. Dead. Cold. With hands of ice. And her fingers are round my neck in a loving embrace. I am alive. She is dead. And I carry her always with me, her dead, dead weight. She is my past, and my certain future. I lie down with her every evening, and pull up and away from her every morning. And one morning, we will both fail to rise..."

Her way of dealing with this bleak prognosis is to remind herself that "today is not tomorrow."—we have time before the curtain descends. "And who knows, perhaps tomorrow will bring some new approach, some new therapy, some pill that will relax the blue one's embrace; still her chilly lips in their constant hissing kiss; silence my determined twin; release me."

It is perhaps this hope for a brighter future that has permitted Boleman-Herring to lead a productive creative life, not only as an internet essayist, but as a teacher and travel writer in the U.S. and Greece. And in spite of her inner world of dark geographies—she claims her mantra is "we are a failed species" and that her muse is Cassandra—this collection is written with such verve and brio that it is a delight to read.

CLEANING OUT RATTLESNAKES

Ron Rash. *Serena*. New York: HarperCollins/ecco. 2008. Pp. 371. \$24.95 hard cover.

Reviewed by Frank Day, Clemson University

Ron Rash is a Clemson graduate, a poet, and the author now of four novels plus three volumes of short stories. With this new novel, *Serena*, besides a glowing review in the *New York Times* and the imprimatur of a short review in *The New Yorker*, he has earned a fistful of dollars for the movie rights and permissions to translate. (His Dutch translator couldn't solve "grits," and only God knows how the Chinese will work it out.) Anyway, here's how it goes.

George Pemberton owns the Boston Lumber Company up in the mountains of western North Carolina, and it's 1929 when he brings his bride, *Serena*, home from Boston. At the Waynesville train station they are met by a young woman, Rachel Harmon, who is

pregnant by Pemberton, and her father, who brandishes a bowie knife, only to have Pemberton pull a hunting knife and slice Harmon's vitals fatally. This grim opening establishes the lack of human feeling shared by Pemberton and Serena.

Serena is a strong woman, a match for the lumberjacks in many ways, and she becomes known for her intelligence, deviousness, and ruthlessness. Only a miscarriage mars her domination of life at the camp, and it leaves her incapable of becoming pregnant again. The presence of Rachel Harmon and her handsome young son, Jacob, grates on her nerves and leads to Pemberton's downfall.

The personal entanglements evolve against a background of Depression-era misery for the mountain poor and of the Pembertons' struggle against environmentalists. Pemberton's bloody fight with a bear makes for a wonderfully dramatic scene, but nothing can surpass the startling contest between Serena's Birkute, a powerful eagle from Kazakhstan, and the Komodo dragon who finds himself far from home as part of a traveling menagerie. Serena had imported the Birkute to clean out the camp rattlesnakes, and you will be transfixed by what you see on You Tube if you type in the words "Mongolia wolves eagles."



**MONGOLIAN EAGLE HUNTERS, BY COURTESY OF THE
PHOTOGRAPHER, JANELL CANON**

One of *Serena's* great pleasures is Rash's lyric evocation of the North Carolina mountains and his mastery of the inhabitants' speech and of the names and details of the minutiae of their daily lives. The feeling for landscape adds a lot as the powerful story-line gathers tremendous momentum in rolling relentlessly to its conclusion.