An Interview with Stephen Hundley, Author of The Aliens Will Come to Georgia First

Melissa Lockaby

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An Interview with Stephen Hundley,
Author of The Aliens Will Come to Georgia First

By Melissa Lockaby, University of North Georgia

The Aliens Will Come to Georgia First
Stephen Hundley
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Are the aliens visiting Georgia because there is such a variety of interesting people? Or are the aliens the people living in Georgia, surviving and making their way through their lives as best as they can? Hundley’s The Aliens Will Come to Georgia First is the author’s first foray into short fiction. If there is an overarching moral to the stories in Hundley’s collection, then it is that the truly difficult, probing questions come from inside a person, and not all answers are clear or even desired.

I had the opportunity to sit down with Stephen Hundley at the Dahlonega Literary Festival this past March.

ML: Are you from Georgia, originally?
SH: Yes, I grew up in Richmond Hill, but whenever we wanted to do anything exciting, we’d drive to Savannah, which was just 20-30 minutes away.

ML: So that’s why you set this collection of short stories in Georgia.
SH: Yes. You write what you know.

ML: And you are wrapping up a PhD?
SH: I’ve spent a lot of time in school! I received my undergraduate degree from Georgia College & State University in Milledgeville (Creative Writing and Literature) but ended up teaching Environmental Science in Charlotte Public Schools.

ML: But you have an undergraduate degree in English?
SH: I somehow passed the science qualifying exams that allowed me to teach science, which is where the school system needed teachers the most. I then spent a couple of years teaching English to pre-K and kindergarten students in Korea. When I came back, I went to Clemson to get a Master’s in English, then an MFA from the University of Mississippi, and am now wrapping up my dissertation at FSU in Tallahassee.

ML: What’s next?
SH: I’d like to find a position with a university in an English Department. And, of course, continue writing.

ML: So, let’s talk about writing and your current book, The Aliens Will Come to Georgia First. For those who have not read the book, I don’t want to spoil anything. These are short stories.

SH: I’ve read lots of short stories; however, it isn’t a form that is completely popular, especially for an author starting a career. I was told by one publisher to bury this in the backyard and come back with a novel first. Once I had a couple of full-length books, then I could dig up this book and get it published.

ML: Obviously you didn’t do that. Do you prefer short story form to novels?

SH: I used to be anti-novel and was obsessed with short story form—1,800 to 2,000 words is my preference. It keeps the story moving quickly. However, I’ve changed my mind and am looking toward novel-length books.

ML: Yes, more on your upcoming book. When you write, do you start with the setting? The characters? The plot? Or can you separate the three?

SH: I like starting with the setting. Typically, I start with an image. Here’s a place, what’s the problem, form the plot, then develop the characters. That doesn’t happen all the time. In the short story “Elsohn,” I created the character and then
put him in a situation and place.

**ML:** I like great character development. How do you do that in a short story?

**SH:** In-depth character development is great for novels. Characters can carry the book. In a short story that moves quickly, actors must also keep pace with the story. My characters in *The Aliens Will Come to Georgia First* make mistakes. You’ll see children dealing with issues that they shouldn’t have to confront at such a young age. You’ll read about people who are flawed. I like characters who make mistakes and base decisions on things they think are right based on their own morals, even if they are wrong. They are people who are alienated from their family, community, and life.

**ML:** How many of your characters do you know or are actual people?

**SH:** I don’t like to make my stories autobiographical, but I do know some of them. “Valhalla, Georgia” hits closest to home and was intense to write. It was an indulgence and cathartic to base a character like my father into the story. I was worried it might be too personal for him—after all, the son in the story tries to kill his father (who has a history of alcoholism) with poisonous snakes. When my father read it, his reaction was “good story,” and that was the only response he gave. I almost left the story out of the collection, but friends said that it struck a chord with them, so it stayed.

**ML:** Speaking of snakes, you include a lot of animals in your stories, most of which come to a violent end in cringeworthy ways.

**SH:** I include animals to represent vulnerability and how they are used for emotional and manipulative purposes. It isn’t meant to promote animal violence. Degan in “Godbomb” uses a cat in an effort to feel something—anything—but it’s meant to show progression in his emptiness and illness when nothing else has brought any reaction, positive or negative.

It’s also about proximity to power—characters who fight atheism, death, bad habits—and the human capacity to engage with the environment (power) regardless of their own safety.

**ML:** Pencil, ink, or keyboard?

**SH:** I might scribble notes on paper, but I compose on a computer.

**ML:** You mentioned earlier that you sometimes start a story with an image. Do you draw?

**SH:** [Laughing] I can sketch, but I am definitely not an artist. I do sometimes sketch an idea which leads to a written story.

**ML:** The Aliens Will Come to Georgia First published in 2023. You have a new book that is soon to be released?

**SH:** Yes. It is a novel, *Bomb Island*, which is about a small community of people living on an island that was an old hippie community. It is a coming-of-age story where the protagonist grapples with the decision to stay on the island or grow up and leave behind what he knows. It also includes his pet tiger, which is the underlying power-struggle (proximity to power that I already mentioned).

**ML:** Do you have other stories hidden away in your desk drawers waiting to see the light of day?

**SH:** A few. The working title is *Rodney the Destroyer*, and it is a speculative, eco-horror novel in verse. Then there is *The Lay of Linda*, which is a modern romance where love extends beyond death.

**ML:** Finally, what does it mean to be a successful writer? Is it money, fame, or the one person who understands what you are trying to do as a writer?

**SH:** [Laughing] Oh, absolutely about the money! No, it is knowing that people are reading my books and getting something from my stories that matters.

“And when [the aliens] come, they will float through the clouds with their toes all long and reaching for the tops of trees and the roofs of houses. They’ll latch on to whatever they can…” (p. 140). An assortment of characters facing vultures, weathering storms, and battling inner demons are the aliens that can be found in Hundley’s *The Aliens Will Come to Georgia First*. This compilation of short stories would fit well in a public library or in an academic library collection that supports the short story form.