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Book Review - Crackers: A Southern Memoir

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Off the SHELF

Crackers: A Southern Memoir by Bill Merritt
(Mercer University Press, 2016: ISBN 978-0-88146-572-3, \$18.00)

Crackers is Bill Merritt's coming-of-age story. The title comes from an Atlanta, Georgia, Minor League Baseball team. His memoir begins when the Merritt family moved to Atlanta in the 1940s. The federal government seized their family land in northern Alabama. It did this to make phosgene and chlorine gas for bombs on what would become the Redstone Arsenal. As with most coming of age stories, Merritt's youth is full of innocence, and the older he becomes, the less idyllic life is.

Merritt details the white supremacy and racism of the era. The miasma of the Confederacy hangs over Merritt's memoir. As a child, he played Civil War battles, and the symbols and memorabilia of the Confederacy were commonplace. He sympathized with the Rebel soldiers and imagined their bravery when he visited state parks that had tributes to fallen Confederate soldiers. When he attended Duke University, the northern students on campus heightened his awareness of the need for social and racial justice in the South. As an adult, Merritt consciously rejected the racism that was unquestioned in his youth.

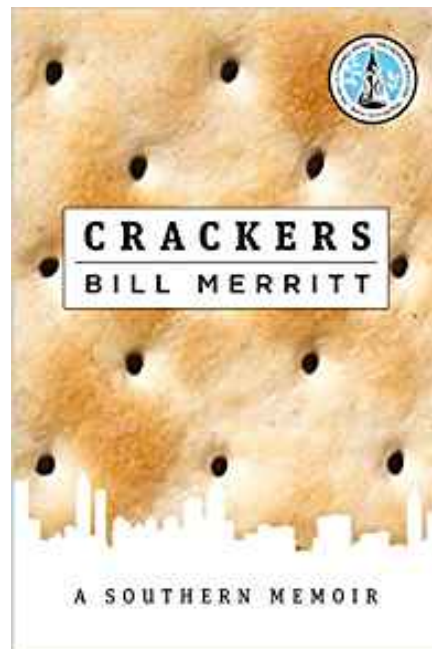
After graduating from Duke, he volunteered and was injured in Vietnam. Merritt's account of his military service is laced with cynicism. After a hospital rehabilitation stint, the book jumps to the death of Merritt's father and his

lingering suspicions that his stepmother put a "hit" on him.

Some of the individuals in Merritt's life are real life "Southern Gothic" characters, especially his stepmother, Ceci. She was a jealous, vain, over-sexed alcoholic that vomited on strangers at posh parties. She tried to help prison inmates by counseling them, which often led to sexual encounters.

While *Crackers* is an enjoyable read, and Merritt has a wry sense of humor, he cannot always

make light of the tragedies his family endures—most significantly the death of his mother in a plane explosion. He's a skillful writer, candid and unflinching. He does not seek pity or empathy.



Merritt's autobiography is useful for those wanting to understand how an "unreconstructed Southerner" viewed the civil rights movements in Atlanta. It also details how his views on race changed over time. Although Merritt benefitted from both racial and class privilege, he is less introspective about the latter. He attended

Westminster School, the oldest and most exclusive private school in Atlanta, and his family belonged to the Piedmont Driving Club. They lived on Peachtree Battle Avenue—a street in Buckhead where a Jewish temple was bombed. Although Merritt documents the events of the era, some readers will appreciate Merritt's physical descriptions of Atlanta, Peachtree Creek, Buckhead, and the Chattahoochee River during the 1960s as well.

For those who didn't grow up in the South during the civil rights era, this book is especially insightful. Merritt articulates common understandings among white southerners about race and power that were known, even to children, but seldom spoken.

This book is recommended for all public libraries and for all libraries maintaining regional collections.

Christopher Andrews is Reference Services Librarian at University of North Georgia