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Book Review - Tales from Georgia's Gnat Line

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Off the SHELF

Tales from Georgia's Gnat Line by Larry Walker
(Mercer University Press, 2019: ISBN
9780881466980, \$17.42)

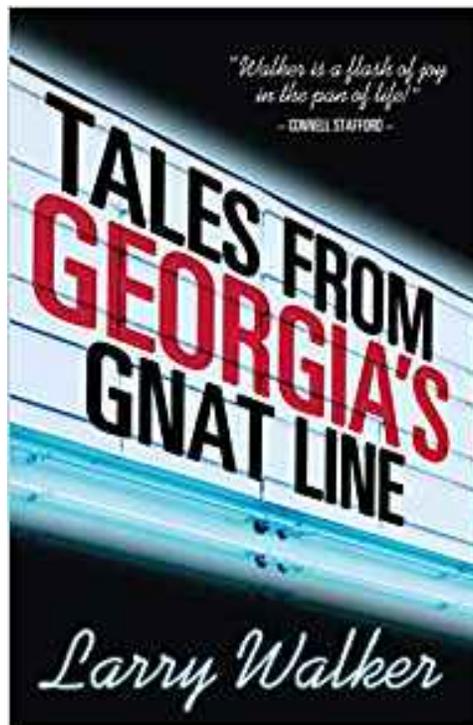
Larry Walker is a lifelong resident of Perry, Georgia who served in the Georgia House of Representatives for 32 years, the State Board of Transportation for two and a half, and the Georgia Board of Regents for over seven. He is currently a founding partner of the Walker, Hulbert, Gray, & Moore law firm in Perry.

In its foreword and preamble, *Tales from Georgia's Gnat Line* makes two main promises: it will provide insight into the culture and history of the Southern way of life from an insider's perspective, and it will show both the good and bad facets of that history. Although the prefatory sections of the book make it seem as though it will be some sort of memoir or, at least, Walker's reflection on his long life in the South, *Gnat Line* is merely a compilation of news columns that Walker has written. The book also contains two works of Walker's short fiction.

Gnat Line is divided into seven sections, organized by topics such as "Politics" and "The Way We Are." These section headers are faithful to the columns they contain, but that is about where the organization ends. Within each section, the columns do not follow any sort of chronology, and in fact, there are no dates provided with the columns at all. The names of the publications the columns are from—

Macon's *The Telegraph* and *The Houston Home Journal*—do not appear until the "About the Author" section at the end of the book. Because the columns are divorced from their source material, some of them lack essential information to help contextualize what Walker is trying to say.

Gnat Line is written in an easy, conversational tone, but it is a conversation Walker is having with friends who have already heard his stories before or were there themselves. Anyone wanting to learn about the culture of Georgia will likely feel as though they are walking in mid-conversation. The fact that the columns were all written separately rather than as one cohesive whole also leads to frequent repetition. Stories are retold several times throughout the book, and the reader is reintroduced to characters again and again, often with the exact same words.



Most of the columns fall into a few different categories: stories about his life growing up in the South; reminiscences about people he has known, dead or alive; topics he has seen in other news columns that have inspired him, such as his "These Things I Believe" column; and his general perspective or advice on various facets of life. *Gnat Line* is at its strongest when Walker is recounting stories about growing up in the South in the mid-20th century. Stories such as "You'll Never Get Out of Perry," which recounts Walker and his friends' journey hitchhiking up the Eastern Coast to Folly Beach,

offer the most insight into what life was like during that time. Unfortunately, these types of accounts are few and far between, and many of them are cut short before they can reach their conclusion. Sometimes, this is due to the word constraints that Walker is under while writing for a news column, but other times, he will state that experiences in his life have been integral to shaping the person he is today without expounding upon what those experiences were or why they were so important. For instance, when recounting his time working with cotton pickers, he says, "...I learned lots from listening intently to the others who picked with me as they talked and sang. I won't write about what I learned, but it was very beneficial. Very." This lack of detail—as well as the narrative's tendency to dissolve into tangents about the deterioration of modern society—will often leave the reader feeling unsatisfied.

As far as *Gnat Line's* promise to depict Southern history in its entirety, its only substantive delve

into the South's dark past is during the column entitled "Speech on 'The Flag.'" In this section, Walker recollects a speech he gave to his fellow Georgia House representatives to encourage them to pass a bill that would remove the rebel battle flag from the state flag, so that Georgia might heal the wounds of its past. Other opportunities to explore how his experience as a Southerner differed from those of minorities, however, are often glossed over. Walker brings up a memory in which Mr. Hoss, a black man who worked with his father, tells "the little white boy some things he had never heard before" but never elaborates as to what those things might be.

Due to its lack of critical analysis and historical documentation, *Gnat Line* is not recommended for academic libraries. It might, however, be appropriate for the local history section of public libraries in Middle Georgia.

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