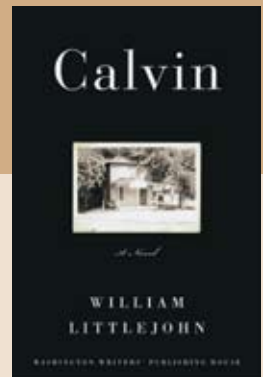


# Calvin

By William Littlejohn, published by Washington Writers' Publishing House, paperback, 317 pages, \$15.95  
<http://www.washingtonwriters.org/authors/littlejohn.shtml>



Reviewed by Frederick Baker, Jr.

A good novel transports the reader so he forgets he is engaged in the act of reading and is, instead, lost in the theater of the mind. By that measure, *Calvin*, by William Littlejohn, must be counted a good novel. Its spare, simple prose projects cinematic images that invite translation to the screen. *Calvin* vividly evokes the Depression-era Deep South that has been the setting for so much classic American fiction and cinema. Littlejohn mines the same literary vein that William Faulkner, Walker Percy, and Harper Lee immortalized in their works, exploring the familiar themes of family dysfunction, sexual repression, racism (and the unbridled brutality it spawns), and the puzzling dichotomy between the touching loyalty and the carefully controlled rage of a black man obliged to live with and serve his oppressors in a world in which any pretension to being a man invites punishment and disaster.

Calvin is a stoic who first escapes from one indentured life with his mother, a washerwoman and sometime field hand, after the death from malnutrition of his pica-afflicted sister, to another in dining car service on the Azalea, a railroad fiefdom ruled by his tyrannical, Scripture-quoting boss, Pericles Sanders. Inflicting a punishment with Biblical overtones, Sanders first extracts the starving young Calvin's eyeteeth for attempting to steal dining car slops, then treats the nearly fatal wounds he inflicted on Calvin and takes him in as part of his dining car crew, where Calvin prospers for more than 20 years. Calvin rescues Sanders from a vicious attack by a waiter driven mad

by Sanders' indifferent cruelty, but Sanders' injuries leave him broken, more in spirit than bodily, and he soon dies, leaving Calvin the "treasure box" in which the Azalea's waiters had been obliged to deposit a quarter of their tips as a sort of tithe to Sanders. In it, Calvin finds two gold eyeteeth to replace those that Sanders had extracted as punishment so many years before and \$50 for the dentist.

Calvin is next indentured as the steward of the household of Raleigh Bacon, head of the Bacon Mills, and scion of the richest family in Athena, South Carolina. Raleigh has married a slatternly mill girl, Dot Jessop, after his sexually repressed wife dies a sudden, unexplained death. Even the servants refuse to call Dot "Mrs. Bacon," and she takes to entertaining the troops from a nearby military base in her bedroom while Raleigh is off making a fortune in federal war procurement. Meanwhile, combining traditionally male and female roles, Calvin cooks and oversees the Bacon household, which includes Raleigh's grandson Billy, the son of Raleigh's willful, twice-married daughter Elizabeth, and Sonny, a chronic alcoholic who is in and out of the lunatic asylum and

unfit to care for Billy, to whose care Elizabeth had abandoned him after their divorce. Elizabeth retrieves Billy from Sonny's household and leaves him with Raleigh, who places him in Calvin's care. Thus is set the stage for the story of an extravagantly dysfunctional Southern family in the tradition of Tennessee Williams or Faulkner.

Dot has a brother who is evil incarnate. He visits the river after spring floods to be sure that someone he buried on the bank years before has not been exposed by the high water. In dialog hinting of past incest, he exploits Dot's marriage to Raleigh and his money, keeps low company, and, despite his contempt of all things intellectual, professes himself to be a loyal Gamecock, remarking, "That Clemson team is just a bunch of pansies.... They only play football so they can take showers together."

In one chapter, Raleigh travels to the Cascades in Virginia to fish, with Calvin as his driver. He makes the mistake of dining with Calvin at the same table at Arlene's Restaurant, in Bristol, Virginia, where Arlene sings out to everyone who enters, as a warning and an explanation, "That there's this here Mr. Raleigh's buck." State trooper

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Holland holds his tongue at this flouting of the rules of civilized behavior when he first observes it, biding his time until Raleigh passes through Bristol on his way back to Athena. He pulls Calvin over, handcuffs Calvin and Raleigh, takes them to the state police headquarters, and humiliates them by forcing them both to disrobe.

Littlejohn's book transports the reader to the same period, but it is no *Driving Miss Daisy*. It deals frankly with evil as shocking as a coiled snake and with lust, longing, and the strange loyalty that live in the human heart at once and rule it by turns. It is a promising first work by an author from whom we can only hope for more.

One of the most interesting things about *Calvin* is how it found its way into print. The first novel by lawyer William Littlejohn, it was the 2009 winner of the annual competition sponsored by the Washington Writers' Publishing House, a nonprofit cooperative press that limits itself to the works of writers from the Washington-Baltimore area. My first thought was, why don't we have such a press in Michigan, where the Bar has a long literary tradition? Obvious examples include luminaries like John Voelker (a.k.a Robert Traver, author of *Anatomy of a Murder*) and, more recently, former Livingston County Circuit Judge Stan Latreille (author of the well-received *Perjury*), Court of Appeals Judge William Whitbeck (author of a soon-to-be-published first novel, *To Account for Murder*, a chapter of which was the winning submission in the *Bar Journal's* first short-story contest), and short-story contest judge and Circuit Court Judge Rosemarie Aquilina (author of *Feel No Evil*), with the prospect of more to come from others, such as two-time short-story contest runner-up Robert Nelson, whose novel *We Can't Make it Here Anymore* is due this spring. ■

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