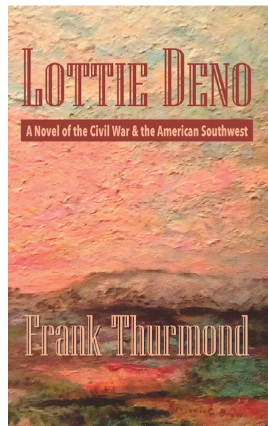
Reviews

***Lottie Deno: A Novel of the Civil War & the American Southwest.* By Frank Thurmond. (Marion, MI: Parkhurst Brothers Publishers, 2024. Pp. 240, $17.95, paperback)**

"I was later accused of 'running a disorderly house,' but that is of course nonsense, the kind of thing men always want to say about a woman who happens to be successful in her own right," says Lottie Deno about her thriving business enterprise as she reflects on her life in Frank Thurmond's novel Lottie Deno. Now in her 80s, as she recounts her story, Lottie appears a remarkable character, brilliantly developed from the historical figure who led an adventurous life during the Civil War and the turbulent decades that followed. The novel, subtitled *A Novel of the Civil War and the American Southwest*, chronicles the Civil War's impact on a young girl's growth and the life-altering choices she makes in its aftermath. The novel vividly captures her evolution from an innocent girl in Kentucky into a formidable and unconventional woman, while also capturing socio-cultural upheavals of the post-Civil War South.



Charlotte J. Tomkins, known as Carlotta and later as Mysterious Maud and Lottie Deno, grew up in Gallatin County, Kentucky, where her family home became a Confederate recruitment hub when the Civil War began. After her father's death in the war, she is sent to Detroit, partly to separate her from Johnny, a Jewish boy she loves. Despite their separation, Johnny manages to meet her and they plan to move West. As things don't go as planned for Johnny, Carlotta falls for Frank Thurmond, an outlaw who changes the course of her life, again. Carlotta's journey across the chaotic post-war frontier is one of adventure and resilience. She defies societal expectations, survives kidnappings, befriends saloon owners, and makes her own money and way in a lawless world, finally settling in New Mexico.

Lottie speaks as a highly transformed and socially aware woman, critical of slavery and unenthusiastic of the forces in play that fueled the Civil War. Her inclination toward equality and freedom for all is evident in her character from an early age. As her story opens, she reflects on her upbringing, recounting how her parents owned "a large number of enslaved people," and here she adds in parenthesis "though I am now terribly ashamed to admit it." She calls the "talk of the constitutional right to freedom" of the Confederate sympathizers, like her father, "hypocritical," as freedom "in their minds clearly applied only to wealthy, white (and male) landowners like themselves. Despite being the heiress of a slave-owning landowner from the South, and taken by her father to many of his business trips—from Detroit to European cities—she develops a liberal worldview, and in fact, learns to become someone the society would not expect of a girl.

Her Nanny, a black woman, becomes her confidant, and later she helps her secure freedom. Carlotta understands the price she may

have to pay for who she is becoming and what she wants to do, but she learns to take risks at an early age. Despite her family's disapproval, she is drawn to Johnny Golden from New York, a Jewish boy. "I won't have you cavorting with no Jew boy!" said the father to her, and she recalls, "I did not understand what I had done wrong." She was also strictly forbidden to socialize with "darkies," but she always rises above the social norms of the time, and throughout her life she affirms her humanity despite being a lady gambler, often accused of cheating and manipulation, through acts like buying freedom for Mary. She even names her child "Mary" after her black maid. The historical figure Charlotte Tomkins Thurmond is known as a "notorious lady gambler" and has become a subject of many other books and articles like Edgar Rye's historical fiction *The Quirt and the Spur: Vanishing Shadows of the Texas Frontier*. This novel by Thurmond does a fabulous job highlighting her humane aspect despite the kind of life she was forced—or chose—to live. When we first meet her on the farm, she is an innocent farm girl. But very quickly, when her family loses it fortune to the new system, she begins to gamble out of necessity. Quickly, she grows into a "notorious" gambler, but readers will easily forgive her, and they will continue to sympathize with her, given the conditions within which she functions.

The novel paints a vivid picture of the frontiers in the aftermath of the Civil War. The untamed frontiers are havens for outlawed rebels and criminals and kidnappers seeking to make fortunes by any means possible. Gambling and saloon businesses thrive, and there's a constant talk of moving further west in pursuit of prosperity, particularly the gold in California. As a Western, the novel captures the spirit of suspense and adventure, immersing readers in the turbulent, unpredictable world of the era.

The expertly crafted first person narrative makes it easy for the reader to immerse themselves in Lottie's story. As the narrator of her own tale, Lottie is reflective, considerate, and at times humorous. We know all first person narrators are unreliable, but that very fact, that Dottie is an unreliable narrator, allows the story to rise above mere historical recounting and become a chronicle of a woman's courageous journey to her selfhood and identity amid adversities. Thurmond keeps her grounded to the historical times. Her language, especially the dialogue she recounts, clearly reflects the time period. However, he brilliantly imbues her with modern sensibilities. Her shame over her family's history of keeping enslaved people, her choice of words ("enslaved people" instead of "slaves," for instance), her treatment of her maid, Mary, all reflect those sensibilities, and I find this aspect of the novel particularly intriguing.

The novel has become a beautiful tribute to the strength and resilience of a woman who was forced to chart her own path amid uncertain and unforgiving conditions during and after the Civil War. Readers may also find it interesting to know that the author, Thurmond, is related to the historical figure and a major character in the novel, Frank Thurmond, and his curiosity about Frank led him to Lottie Deno, whose story he couldn't help telling.

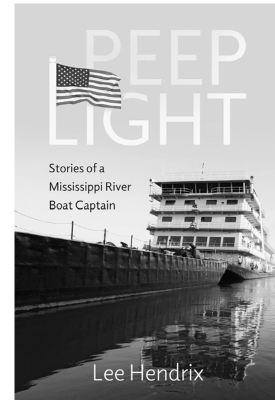
~Khem Aryal

***Peep Light: Stories of a Mississippi River Boat Captain*. By Lee Hendrix. (Jackson, MS: University of Mississippi Press, 2024. Pp. xviii + 196,**

acknowledgments, riverboat glossary, prologue, epilogue, references and credits, $99 hardback, $22, paperback)

As you have driven over a Mississippi River bridge, you have seen towboats pushing their barges up and down the Gathering of Waters. You might mistakenly refer to both the towboat and the tow as a large barge. A river boat captain will set you straight. A barge is one of the main vessels attached to a tow. The towboat pushes the barges, and the crew members eat and sleep on the towboat, not the barge. Captain Lee Hendrix sets these kinds of misconceptions straight in his witty and vibrant collection of reflections, essays, short stories, and reminiscences of half a century of life on riverboats. Rather than imagining what life is like on a towboat, Hendrix brings you down from your car into his wheelhouse where he seats you on the liar's bench and relates wonderful stories. The book blends genres as many of the chapters work as memoirs, but he also includes short fiction, eulogies, essays, and other forms of writing. The peep light refers to blue steering light that pilots use for navigation. It is an excellent metaphor for the book's content, and Hendrix's personable style of writing gives readers luminous experiences with stories and accounts of captains and crews who work the river.

After college, Hendrix began working on the barge lines in 1972 as a deckhand. Personal experience narratives relate the challenges of working on a barge as well as the excitement of learning the occupational practices and folklore within this working community. Some of the most fascinating writing gives readers a great appreciation for the skills of deckhands. Hendrix and other crew members worked six hours on and six hours off in all kinds of weather, and the work is often dangerous. Lines can break and cables can break free. A loose barge is dangerous, and a snapped cable or line can be deadly. Hendrix conveys his appreciation for the deckhands' skill, and his prose illustrates the respect and camaraderie between captains, mates, and deckhands. Stories of events that he experienced as well as the accounts of others include original text that is new to this book as well as entries published in *Big River Magazine* and other publications.



Within a few years, Hendrix began training to become a river boat pilot. His description of learning the requisite skills evokes the writing of Samuel Clemens and other cub pilots. He gives readers an understanding of both the direct continuity to time-honored ways of training pilots as well as new developments within the past half century that have influenced the education and certification of river boat captains. His own work is diverse and fascinating. He piloted towboats for the barge lines on the Mississippi and other rivers. He worked as an outdoor educator who taught students about the importance of waterway ecosystems. He piloted excursion boats, including the steamers the *Mississippi Queen* and the *Delta Queen*. His accounts of serving as a captain on a casino boat in Davenport, Iowa, during the 1993 flood offer a unique insider's view of one of the worst floods in American history. As he gives us accounts of his range of experiences, readers gain a microcosm of the history and culture of those working on river boats, with an excellent blending of vivid descriptions with

engaging reflections on the changes in the industry. His career concluded with his work for the US Army Corps of Engineers prior to his retirement in 2014. He continues to write and speak on the river, and *Peep Light* is a culmination of his skills as a writer and raconteur.

There are numerous ghost stories and legends associated with the river. It is not uncommon to hear tales of ghost ships and supernatural occurrences. "Chapter 10: Jimmy Dan" stands out a bit differently from the rest as it is his fictionalized reworking of a legend of a ghost ship that he mined from the writing of Benjamin Botkin. As do other legends, his story begins with a realistic narration that sounds plausible. The narrative shifts and becomes an exciting account of a huge tow that became unmanageable. The resolution to what could have been a major disaster shifts his realistic writing into the fanciful. Hendrix's work of short fiction, here, works well as he blends accurate description with his artistic license. He also gives readers more prosaic versions of riverlore and legends. One of the most widely believed ones is the account that Louisiana Governor Huey P. Long purposely restricted the height of the Upper Baton Rouge Bridge to less than 110 feet of clearance above the Low Water Reference Point. Those crossing the bridge have wondered why it is 62 feet lower than the nearby I-10 Bridge, located four miles down river. The story goes that Long limited the height to prevent ocean-going vessels from going beyond the port of Baton Rouge. The story sounds good, and even folklorists have believed and told it, but it isn't true. Hendrix debunks the tale and suggests why it persists within the wider context of Louisiana's political history.

Hendrix includes this type of engagement with perceptions about river life. There is an incredible amount of in-group knowledge and argot that is part of river culture. Some of this knowledge is fodder for jokes and pranks. The author describes being sent on trips for non-existent equipment like keys for locks and ratchet stretchers that are also part of other groups' occupational folklife. These accounts index other elements of the depth of the culture of those who work the river. One of the most salient examples, here, is his response to a seemingly intriguing question from a member of an audience who asked which Mississippi River bridge he thought was the most attractive. His answer turned into "Chapter 13: Ain't No Such Thing as a Purty Bridge." Although he does acknowledge the architectural appeal of numerous bridges, Hendrix gives us towboaters' perspectives. Namely, each bridge poses numerous challenges in navigating and maneuvering vessels underneath them. He explains how the bridge in Vicksburg, Mississippi, is especially hazardous. Challenges in navigating through it include dangerous currents, lack of visibility, and a wide variety of obstacles known only among seasoned members of the community. This chapter vividly illustrates one of the main elements of piloting a river boat. Forty-barge tows are not uncommon, and the size of the complete tow can be larger than most freighters crossing the oceans. Whereas captains of ocean-going ships may only have to steer through bridges when leaving or entering a harbor, river boat pilots are constantly working to navigate numerous bridges, locks and dams, pilings, and other obstacles throughout a twisting and turning river course. *Peep Light* takes readers out of our view from atop the bridge and into the decks and wheelhouses of the vessels plying the inland waterways. His memories expressed in his excellent storytelling serve as a lively entrance into a view of this world from the perspective of life on the river.

–Gregory Hansen

A pooka in Arkansas. By Ed Madden. (Washington, DC: The Word Works, 2023. Pp. 81, $19.00, paperback)

The pooka of the title is a borrowing from an Irish folktale work by Yeats, according to whom, quoted in the front matter, the creature "seems essentially an animal spirit" and a sort of shapeshifter. (The Irish variant is *púca*.) Madden appropriates the term to signify queerness while growing up in a home and community hostile to a healthy self-awareness of it. The volume is roughly chronological, from boyhood to college and later, suggesting a verse memoir, though all poetry is by its nature fictive. The poems mine experiences and bravely reveal aspects of them to readers. Although they may be especially helpful to those living in similar situations—there is more than one pooka in Arkansas—they have a common humanity for anyone interested, as the poems adeptly place readers in the speaker's shoes.

In the tradition of such poets as Jo McDougall, most of these poems are set in the Arkansas Delta, where Madden was born and raised. They lend credence to the famous Flannery O'Connor idea that anyone surviving childhood has enough experience to fuel a writing career. Scattered poems take readers elsewhere, including Ireland and Brazil, the setting of the beautiful ode "Horses," but the Delta poems hit hardest. The opener, "When I was a young animal," both links the shapeshifting pooka with the speaker and establishes the family rice farm as the main setting. The speaker as a young animal learned, as we all do, from watching others. There is no guarantee the things any of us learn when we are young will be positive, humane, or true, and throughout the volume the speaker reflects on rejection by community and, most painfully, by family. The persona slides back and forth easily between past and present to reveal consciousness in operation, the mind trying to understand itself.

Madden also follows a long tradition of poetry about farm work extending back at least to Hesiod, who was raised to be a shepherd, and Seamus Heaney, in whose "Digging" the narrator-son concludes he will not follow his farmer father but dig instead with his pen. This collection is a tribute to Madden's father, whose final days and death are central to *Ark* (2016). The title poem represents the speaker's merged identity as he pauses in caring for his father by walking alone near his family's house to speak with his partner on the phone. Some of the poems are set in a deepening dusk as fires of various sorts, as large as an entire field and as small as his father's cigarette, blaze in the dark and evoke a vividness with which the reader can almost smell the smoke. The poems expose wounds but also, as a book-length narrative, reconcile the past with the present. The volume suggests that some wounds have healed or scarred over, while others remain tender. The therapy session of "Eclipse" draws this idea forward by employing a snippet from poet Mary Oliver: "*this, too, was a gift*."

These poems show how familial wounds cut the deepest and remain the longest. Some of the complexities of familial relationships unfold sequentially. For example, while the father in

"Unless thou get a son" is a "god," the mother, in the next poem, "Fairy Tale" (the first of three), is "a mortar and pestle, / grinding her children as she sees fit" (pp. 8, 9). In a later poem, she tells the speaker, "*You know deep down you're really ashamed*" (p. 49). In the subsequent poem, presumably in another session, the therapist urges him to stop "doing your family's work of shaming you" (p. 50). A prose poem follows beginning with "I am not the son you wanted" and is filled out with an extensive list of additional "I am nots" (p. 51). A later poem suggests a possible open lane for improved mother communications: hurting words cannot be undone, but "now / we're trying to say it different" (p. 62). *Not* ashamed, many of the poems affirm and celebrate sexuality. "Instructions" (subtitled "*on meeting the Púca, 1*") states, "Some of us were made to be ridden, riddled, riven" (p. 12). In the second "Instructions," the speaker is in a forest as a wolf, though there is never just one: "You are no longer a child / You are no longer a boy / or a girl" and you "[s]wallow what you don't yet know" (p. 25).

Most of the poems are brief, direct, and employ unembellished language fitting for bare thoughts—the technique and content are well paired. (Against this grain slightly is the second "Instructions," which references Deleuze and Guattari's "Becoming Animal": "Becoming is always of a different order than filiation.") The language is unfussy, unadorned, and unpretentious. It is easy to overlook the strong versification here, the poet's exploration of free verse, including surprising enjambments such as

> . . . biscuits big as a cat's
> head, threaded with cheese. (p. 71)

The lines also tend toward brevity and ellipsis, but the longest and perhaps central poem, "Burning the fields," stretches out the lines and employs one of many light/dark settings in the volume as an extended poetic excavation of family relations. Communal judgments enforce family ones, as the poem invokes an Arkansas law against sodomy, death for black men, prison for whites, though "[i]n 1873, the racial distinction was removed." This reads like a punchline, but it is sheer horror. Here, as in the other poems, Madden uses nouns to evoke ideas and does not rely heavily on adjectives to do the lifting or create the images. A white bowl turned face down on a table in a blue kitchen resembles a moon to create an image reflecting a sad childhood. Such rich images enforce memories of rejection, though a small boy cannot know about sexuality in a context so hostile to self-realization. Many of the poems are variations on the shapeshifting pooka, but the theme does not wear thin, and the word count is perfect. Other surprising images and phrases unfold, e.g., a gar, "slick, prehistoric, its eyes gone dead," on his father's trot line (p. 46). He makes the difficult look easy.

One tornadic evening in late March 2023, Madden gave a reading at the A-State Delta Symposium, as he has previously. Having grown up in the area, neither he nor extended family members at the session seemed alarmed. That afternoon the supercell threatened his hometown of Newport as it proceeded southeast to destroy much of Wynne. I told Madden I enjoyed his book, which I read that day with one eye on the local TV weather, that I admired its cover (artwork by self-taught Michael Krajewski), appreciated the humor of the poems, and cited some of the Irish writers he teaches regularly. (He teaches Irish literature, queer studies, and creative writing at the University of South Carolina.) One example is derived from a therapist's statement, on which the narrator reflects: "All you can do is the best you can do," though the narrator cannot keep the phrasing straight—lesson lost? The recur-

ring "Fairy tale" poems are other examples, as is "Sometimes it's all I think about, too," which states, "Every time I masturbate / I am rethinking hegemonic masculinity" (p. 44).

Having grown up in a devout Church of Christ family and written about it, it's unsurprising that religion plays some role in the poems, though the references are mostly in passing. Elsewhere, Madden has written that for him, religion is "something going if not gone" (*Arkansas Review* 50.1 2019, p. 6). Near the first of "Burning the fields," a line suggesting the narrowness that sometimes accompanies religious faith provides its own key: "A man stands, his head encased by a tiny church—as if the church were a vise, a mask, a hood" (p. 30). Quite differently, the first "Psalm" refers not to the Old Testament poetry but to "porn revelations," a phrase that surely applies to many (all?) people at some point in their young lives, perhaps earlier and more graphically in today's "information age." The poem praises the magazine ads of Orioles pitcher Jim Palmer, "whose underwear ads were holy writ of adolescence" (22). The poems show how levity is a sort of comfort in almost any situation and suggest a healthy ethos.

By the end of the volume, the speaker has realized a strong sense of satisfaction in a home with a loving husband—a scenario less imaginable in late twentieth-century Northeast Arkansas—as in the collection's beautiful final poem, "My husband who is not my husband." The title character is at the stove tending to "slabs of meat / skittering in grease"; he is the speaker's "hot water bottle," and in moments of tenderness, he does not wish the speaker to see him crying at the Dublin airport (pp. 71, 72). So concludes this slim volume, which merits a large audience everywhere. Arkansans should celebrate the art of a local son who has, for better and worse, not forgotten his roots. He has developed his talents and given them back to us in his poetry.

--Bryan L. Moore