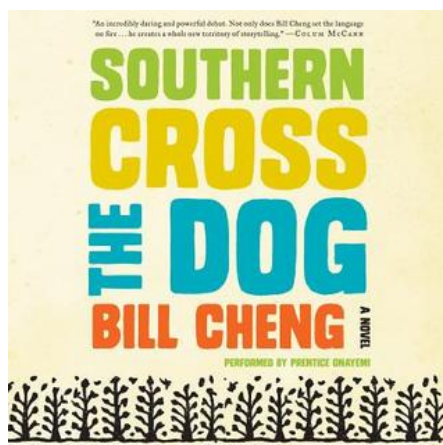




Southern Cross the Dog: A Novel

Bill Cheng

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An epic odyssey in which a young man must choose between the lure of the future and the claims of the past

With clouds looming ominously on the horizon, a group of children play among the roots of the gnarled Bone Tree. Their games will be interrupted by a merciless storm—bringing with it the Great Flood of 1927—but not before Robert Chatham shares his first kiss with the beautiful young Dora. The flood destroys their homes, disperses their families, and wrecks their innocence. But for Robert, a boy whose family has already survived unspeakable pain, that single kiss will sustain him for years to come.

Losing virtually everything in the storm's aftermath, Robert embarks on a journey through the Mississippi hinterland—from a desperate refugee camp to the fiery brothel Hotel Beau-Miel and into the state's fearsome swamp, meeting piano-playing hustlers, well-intentioned whores, and a family of fierce and wild fur trappers along the way. But trouble follows close on his heels, fueling Robert's conviction that he's marked by the devil and nearly destroying his will to survive. And just when he seems to shake off his demons, he's forced to make an impossible choice that will test him as never before.

Teeming with language that voices both the savage beauty and the complex humanity of the American South, *Southern Cross the Dog* is a tour de force of literary imagination that heralds the arrival of a major new voice in fiction.

Southern Cross the Dog: A Novel Details

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From Reader Review Southern Cross the Dog: A Novel for online ebook

Tony says

Just because someone can write – and Bill Cheng can write – doesn't mean they have a story to tell.

Here, in this debut novel, Cheng speaks through the voices of a handful of African-Americans as the Mississippi floods in 1927. If I'm reading the linear notes and the author's 'Acknowledgements' correctly, Bill Cheng is an Asian-American who lives in New York, studied writing in school, and has a very nice collection of Blues music. He lists 18 Blues musicians by name and then "all the late great bluesmen" and says "this book is for you." So, choosing this story to tell, I'm guessing, is a kind of homage. I'm not suggesting he's not allowed to do that. Just that it's ballsy, maybe risky. Are the 'voices' convincing? I'd say 'almost'.

There wasn't much to do during the day except be hungry and be sad. We hadn't saved much – just some clothes, Nan Peoria's Bible, and my Sally doll, which Uncle Reb threw into the water and ruined on account of his having a temper. What food we had, we couldn't mete out more than a week. So I read Nan Peoria's Bible and I pretended it was Bible times and we was on what they call an ark, and every bird I seen I pretended they was doves till Uncle Reb sighted one up and felled her. And so I didn't play Bible after that.

There's promise there.

This novel is plot-driven, but the plot loses its thread half-way through. The book is broken up into a Prologue, six Parts, and an Epilogue. The 'Parts' are told in the first-person narrative of different characters, in different times, switching from 1927 to 1941 and back again because . . . well, maybe that makes it more artistic.

Having read the end 'Acknowledgements' first, and thus aware of the author's expressed debt to the Blues, I read the book listening for the music. And there was music, Blues music, in the one-page Prologue and the three-page Epilogue. But I heard no alternating bass in the story itself. Even one character who was a Blues pianist didn't sound musical. And Cheng's description of *the music* he played didn't really ring true.

I don't know what it means exactly, but there are so many modern novels written now where the characters become unmoored, and they walk and walk and walk. *Zoli*, *Edgar Sawtelle* . . . and, of course, *Blood Meridian*. Cheng doesn't *acknowledge* Cormac McCarthy, but he clearly was influenced by him. But I've read Cormac McCarthy. Cormac McCarthy is a great writer. AND SENATOR, YOU ARE NO.....

(Sorry. I got carried away).

Why does everyone want to be Cormac McCarthy? Hell, even Cormac McCarthy wants to be Cormac McCarthy. (*The Road*). I remember an early book by McCarthy where he wrote that a knife *winked*. Boy, I liked that. But then I noticed that McCarthy reused that anthropomorphism over and over. All his blades winked. Reading *Southern Cross The Dog*, I felt Cheng was trying to write like McCarthy, if only subconsciously. Maybe I was just being ungenerous and overly critical. But then there it was:

*He panned the flashlight across the ground, the light sluicing along the short blades of shrub grass. It caught on some small piece of wire in the distance. It **winked** at him.* (emphasis added).

Cheng invented his own anthropomorphism, which I really liked. Bees buzz *drunkenly*. Perfect picture. I

really liked that. So did Cheng, who made all his bees and flies drunk throughout the book.

And while Cheng can write very well, he can also make a reader wince.

Sex:

She worked loose his trousers, slid down her pants, and guided him into her. The ground canted and heeled. She could feel him gripping her hips, his body rocking against her. She flexed against him. He was inside, pressing into her. He felt himself expanding inside her, and then at once, it was over. She climbed off and lay beside him, the both of them breathless and raw.

A killing:

Robert grabbed a fistful of hair. He forced it back and dragged a line across the neck. There was spray against the walls, a wet sick noise in his throat.

See what I'm saying? Cheng wants to be McCarthy. But no one kills like McCarthy. And, *canted and heeled*? Really?

Also, as long as I'm not reading magic realism, and I'm pretty sure this was not magic realism, I like the story to be credible. So I was troubled when yet another character got his throat sliced and then we read this:

Frankie had reached her hand inside his neck and pinched off the gushing artery. She had saved his life and for this he hated her. A gushing artery. In a man's neck. Here, just let me pinch that off.

It is one thing to *love* Blues music. But not everyone can *sing the Blues*.

Andy Weston says

This greatly enjoyable first novel spans much of the life of Robert Chatham who was 8 years old at the time of the great flood in the Mississippi delta in 1927. With such an impressive first novel I am left wondering what Cheng has been doing in his younger years. Dealing with issues of loss, coming of age, race, poverty and far more his writing leads to great anticipation for what will happen next. Its gothic atmosphere means it stands justifiable comparison to the great Southern novels, *To kill a Mockingbird* and *The Color Purple* to mention just two. Also it inevitably conjures up images of the aftermath of Katrina, and the wonderful film *Beasts of the Southern Wild*.

Appealingly though, the language is that of the blues, and blues music features strongly throughout the book. The title "where the Southern cross the Dog" is from the middle of a train track where supposedly blues music began; where the Southern railroad crossed the Yellow Dog line. As an adult and in the latter part of the novel Chatham is "pursued" by the Dog. Correct me if you think I'm wrong, but I assume this is Death, and not a reference to the Yellow Dog.

A fantastic first novel.

Jeanne Thornton says

This book is by a friend of mine. This friend of mine, Bill Cheng, is "the shit." So is his book. I had the distinct privilege to be around while this was being written, got to hear it come out chapter by chapter every two to four weeks or so. When you are being held captive on a rowboat in the middle of a flood by Mr. Stuckey, you will not want to wait two weeks to find out how you escape. Bill Cheng takes the blues as his starting point and reconstructs a Mississippi of the imagination, one with mirrors hanging on trees, powdered testicles in hoodoo bags around preteen necks, and the eerie power of love and disaster animating everything. It is like a quantum superposition of Robert Johnson. You had better read it!

Ms.pegasus says

Cheng's book opens in the Mississippi delta. It's the spring of 1927 and a group of children are playing, teasing, flirting at the boundaries of adolescent exploration. Yes, they are black, but playing among themselves, this is of little consequence at the moment. What is of consequence is that in a few hours, the "Fatal Flood of 1927" will destroy their homes and uproot them forever.

Look at the newsreel footage of the levees (<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexper...>). Its dramatic impact pales next to Cheng's prose: *"In the rain the men crowded the river edge. They'd worked through the night, sandbags at their shoulders, the numbness set heavy in their chests and arms. They sunk waist deep into the soft mud, hefting their bodies forward and up....The men shifted under a cake of rain and mud and sweat. Come dawn a wound of light bellied through the clouds. In the light, they could see what they couldn't before. Piece by piece, the embankment was falling away into the current, their sandbags shooting up downriver."* (p.14) These images will be amplified in the reader's mind by the imprint of Hurricane Katrina.

This is where Cheng chooses to begin, but the choice has an arbitrary quality to it. The lives of these characters were shaped by unseen events predating the flood. Chapter 1, "The Flood (1927)" is the story of 14 year old Robert Chatham. His mother is nearly catatonic, and there are uneasy references to a deceased older brother, Billy. The stories do not proceed chronologically. Chapter 5, "Etta (1927)" resolves questions about Robert's mother and his brother. The keening narrative voice is that of Robert's father, Ellis.

Chapter 2, "Hotel Beau-Miel (1932)" abruptly shifts time, place and storyline. Two main characters, Augustus Duke, a white man, and Eli Cutter, a black prison inmate, are introduced. Eli's story — the events that led to his imprisonment — is inserted only after the future arrangement between Duke and Eli has been established for the reader. The connecting link is that Robert Chatham is employed at the Hotel where Duke and Eli have agreed to meet in two weeks time.

Chapter 4, "A Shining New South (1941)" is another abrupt shift. The title of the chapter is ironic. It is a devastating depiction of modernization: A calculus of money, engineering, and abstract government largesse. *"Think. All the modern comforts of New York and Chicago. Light-bulbs. Frigidaires. Electric irons. Radios. Franklin Delano Roosevelt's voice in every hick son of a bitch living room from Podunk to Jerkwater. Imagine, at every dinner table an ice cold Coca-Cola, the Lone Ranger on the wireless, rich chocolaty Ovaltine chilling in a brand-new General Electric. Money changes hands. Businesses grow. There is solvency. Jobs. A shining new South"*.(p.164) It's the arrogance of tone rather than the men, mere tools, that sets this passage apart. The story opens with work crews draining the swamps, blasting with dynamite, and leveling with shovels and pickaxes. It is only gradually revealed that Robert Chatham is part of the work crew. Chapter 6, "Home (1941)" reunites the three children from Chapter 1, Robert, Dora and G.T. Dora and G.T.'s stories have been parceled out in previous chapters. It forms both a counterpoint and closure to Chapter 4.

The reason for this disjointed consideration of time is puzzling to me. I believe it is the author's rebuttal of the reader's impulse to apply facile cause and effect explanations to the events depicted. The hollow despair and injustices seem to cry out for someone or something to blame. Denied that comfort, the reader is forced to confront disturbing, deeply rooted forces at work. The book opens with Robert's plaint: *"When I was a baby child, they put the jinx on me."* (p.1) The events that follow seem to confirm that assessment. Racism, poverty, superstition, and alcoholism mix freely in random permutations with greed, lust, and fear. The visceral prose can be repellant even as it binds the reader to the fate of the characters.

The book's greatest flaw, in my opinion, is its oblique treatment of the idea of home. Returning to the Hotel Beau-Miel after running errands, Robert becomes disoriented. *"One foot in front of the other, he told himself. Just like that. All the way home. And at **home** the word caught and broke in his mouth, and he could not fight anymore against the wrenching in his gut. He doubled and he spasmed, and the sick rushed out in acid chokes.* (p.89) The idea of home is central to another character's story as well. Frankie's mother, Sweet Till, is sent away from her home up north when she becomes pregnant. In the swamp, her world contracts. Her plans to leave are frustrated. *"For years she said nothing. She became resigned to her place among her brother's children — sweeper, danner of stockings. Her cheeks turned wan, her eyes bloodshot."* (p.221) Although she was born in the swamp, that sense of displacement is passed on to Frankie. *"Frankie felt her mother inside her gut....This was her home and she was sick of it. She knew nothing of the world that Till had come from except that it was not here. Here, nothing moved. The mud would catch you and hold you till it dried you up and snapped you like a reed."* (p.223) What little closure offered occurs in the final chapter, "Home, 1941." In these stories there is a sense of possession, as if place claims for itself a part of each human soul. Whether that place is ruined by time or reconstructed in the imagination is irrelevant. Until there is some sort of reunion the character is cursed. Yet, the nature of that reunion is never fully explored.

I wish I could have liked this book more. Perhaps its the kind of story that's not meant to be liked in that sense, but only appreciated. Much of its power rests with the fact that the flood of 1927 was a real event. It's the anchor that persuaded me of the verisimilitude of the events. For this kind of book, star ratings hold little meaning.

Mac says

Southern Cross the Dog effectively creates a sense of place, the Mississippi Delta in the early 20th century, a world of danger, racial hatred, disappointment, and occasional hope. The descriptions of the land are vivid and often fresh (though sometimes confusing and amateurish). Overall, the creation of a southern ambiance is a remarkable achievement considering the author is a New Yorker who has never visited Mississippi.

Although I liked the descriptive power of the book, I didn't like the story telling. The narrative wanders, frays, breaks, and then suddenly is tied back together again, but the story telling didn't propel me along, and it didn't make me care what was going to happen. Yes, there is a progression toward an ending, but mostly, the characters come and go without much overall narrative force.

To summarize, the book is a descriptive achievement, but it needs a more sustaining plot to accompany its sense of place.

BTW, is the book's title explained within the novel? Perhaps I missed it. And perhaps I was asleep in America history or geography class because I had to research the title after having finished the book. I wish I had done the research before I began reading.

Jim Mcfarlane says

To appreciate this novel, Southern Cross the Dog, I think a reader needs to understand the geography and history of the setting.

The "Delta," technically an alluvial floodplain, is a broad swath of northwest Mississippi, stretching from the bluffs of Memphis to the bluffs of Vicksburg and from the banks of the Mississippi River to Yazoo River where it borders the low hills of central Mississippi. Because of periodic flooding over thousands of years, the Delta is an uncommonly flat, rich farmland devoted mostly to cotton. Therefore the population is predominantly poorly educated agricultural workers.

During the Great Flood of 1927 the Mississippi River breached its levees in more than a hundred places, flooded parts of ten states, and was 60 miles wide below Memphis. My father was a teenager in Drew, Mississippi then, which I think was barely beyond the reach of the flood.

The Southern in the title of this novel is the Southern Railroad, whose tracks are now part of the Illinois Central (and the route of the Amtrak train "City of New Orleans.") The Dog is the Yazoo and Delta Railroad, more commonly called the Yellow Dog, and runs from Moorhead (through Drew) to Tutwiler (all in Sunflower County). The Southern Railroad crossed the Yellow Dog at Moorhead. See <http://www.mrjumbo.com/contents/delta...> for pictures.

"Blues" and jazz music originated in the Mississippi Delta around 1900 and spread north and south. The first documentation of blues included a song about "about going where the Southern cross the Dog."

I did not assign a rating to Southern Cross the Dog because I don't care for this literary style of writing and quit after three chapters.

Ryan says

I read this book and I couldn't tell you the plot. First, there's barely any plot. Second, I don't care. I don't care about this book at all. I thought it was pretentious and annoying.

The author does not use quotation marks. I'm sure you're thinking "wow, that's so edgy! That's so bold!". It's neither edgy nor bold. It's stupid. It's stupid because I never knew if the lines were speech, thoughts or exposition. I also never knew who was speaking. Now, in general, this is a bad decision but for a masterful writer it could work really well. (Spoiler: Bill Cheng isn't a masterful writer.)

But Bill Cheng can write. He constructed some wonderful sentences. He knows how to write. But does he have anything to say? Based on "Southern Cross the Dog" I'd say no. This novel was like an experiment. I felt the author pulled out as many writing workshop techniques as he had at his disposal. Jumping in time? Check. Changing voice? Check. Not using quotation marks? Triple check. No matter the techniques or the actual writing, nothing happened in this book. NOTHING.

There is a part where one of the characters meet some cajuns. The author wrote the creole French language phonetically as English words. So "Rowbear" was the creole for "Robert" and instead of "c'est" it was "say". I HATED this. I thought it was so confusing and pulled me out of the story. I was so confused trying to figure out what was going on and what anyone was talking about I wanted to scream. I speak French fluently so maybe that was the issue, but I hated this section.

My other issue is that a Korean American in New York City wrote about black Americans in the Mississippi delta in the early 20th century. The author has never even been to Mississippi. I believe anyone should be able to write about any topic. However, writing about another time, place, or people can be risky, here the author does all three and doesn't do it well. I would have rather have a linear novel (sidebar: why do all these "literary" novels jump around all the time? sheesh) about the flood of 1927. I wish the author did some research and actually visited Mississippi to really get the tone of the novel right. I understand that the author loves blues music and that's great. That doesn't mean a whole novel can be written based on this.

This is a story that didn't need to be told. I didn't care about the characters or what scant story there was. I feel like this was just a failed experiment by a guy with an MFA to write as "literary" as possible.

PS. If you want another critical review, read Tony's. It's more enjoyable than the novel itself.

Shannon says

After losing everything in the Great Flood of 1927, Robert Lee Chatham ventures throughout the Deep South, settling in brothels, swamps and labor camps. His life is changed when he meets a blues piano player who teaches him to keep his evil contained. Still, wherever his journey carries him, Robert refuses to abandon his belief that the devil is close behind, marking him for death since childhood.

The world Bill Cheng has created in this novel is incredibly well developed, which is quite a feat considering its size. Spanning over a decade and dozens of locations, readers are shown a gritty, beautifully visualized landscape. Though Robert's travels jump back and forth in time and place, the imagery makes location an easy mark.

I started smiling when I read the first few lines of the prologue to Southern Cross the Dog and was almost giggling over how good it was by its end. It is Cheng's way of raising a flag, letting readers know that he has entered the genre. I imagine you'll see few reviews of Southern Cross the Dog that don't at least mention William Faulkner or Flannery O'Connor, as Cheng has written a novel that almost seamlessly fits into the Southern Gothic canon. Yet, somehow, he's branded the work with a style that feels uniquely modern - much like poppy, vibrant colors on the cover of a rather haunting story.

Southern Cross the Dog is another case where I am awed by the ambition and vision of a debut novelist. I have a feeling you'll be hearing much more from Bill Cheng.

Jerry Peace says

Best line- "Come sunset, the dogwoods blazed and the sun set moody below the western hills. Out toward Bruce, rows and rows of gabled roofs held the last of the greasy sunlight." Mr. Cheng takes a chance with each sentence, heck, with each word. Some are the moon, some point to the moon, and some are reflections of the moon broken in a pond. But his subjects-violence, geographic, meteorologic, and genetic; nature-the mother who kisses then eats her young; and the past's crippling chokehold many of us southerners embrace-pleads the brush over the pencil. So what if Mr. Cheng splashed beyond the lines sometimes or overused a color or two (I get real tired of reading dreams-seems a mite lazy). The blues isn't subtle; blues doesn't kick in until after the levee breaks, until the "what-iffers" have been swept away and the flood washes dirty and cold. So I like over-the-top. How else are you gonna write about floods?

Tuck says

a debut novel about the 1927 miss. flood and aftermath for one family and the young boy robert is given away by his parents as they are stuck on a high spot with no hope of surviving. so robert grows up an orphan. then rambles around and gets kidnapped in the pearl river swamp by cajuns, then escapes and works in brothels and honky tonks. well written, fun story and adventure. history seems fairly accurate. a bit over the top writing but could be worse. bill cheng i think you're going to be hearing about him.

Booknblues says

Southern Cross the Dog

By Bill Cheng

4 stars

pp. 324

*I works on the levee, mama both night and day
I works on the levee, mama both night and day
I works so hard, to keep the water away*

*I had a woman, she wouldn't do for me
I had a woman, she wouldn't do for me
I'm goin' back to my used to be*

*I's a mean old levee, cause me to weep and moan
I's a mean old levee, cause me to weep and moan
Gonna leave my baby, and my happy home ~ Memphis Minnie*

*Well I never will forget that floating bridge.
Lord I never will forget that floating bridge.
Lord I never will forget that floating bridge.
They tell me five minutes time underwater I was hid.*

*I was going down and I throwed up my hands.
As I was going down I throwed up my hands.
As I was going down I throwed up my hands,
Saying, "Please Lord, take me on dry land." Sleepy John Estes*

Southern Cross the Dog by Bill Cheng is set in the Mississippi Delta region in 1927 the year of the great flood which is known for refugee camps, the start of great flood control projects, migration to the north. W.C. Handy, the father of Blues was waiting in Tutwiler Mississippi, in 1903 and heard a musician singing about "where the Southern cross the Dog. This was a wild swampy country and life could be precarious and for young Robert Chatham, Bill Cheng's main character it proves to be. We first meeting him playing a game of Little Sally Walter.

We follow a wild assortment of characters and settings is Bill Cheng's mesmerizing account of the Delta from the flood through the 1940. On our journey we go down to Panther Swamp, now a National Wildlife Refuge and meet Frankie L'etang:

"And so Frankie became who she was. She learned to trap and snare and shoot and muck and tell sign on the soft earth. She could tell muskrat from coon from possum. she could read the wind and pick them all by smell. When she was thirteen, she went panther hunting with Bossjohn. She remembered his command as he rose up from the blind. His breathing was smooth and easy. The barrel swung down and spat twice, one and two. And she remembered it was she who'd come to him."

I loved this coming of age tale about all the various lives possible in the delta. Bill Cheng made it come alive for me in a magical way.

Abby Lollar says

Incredibly good. Very well-executed.

Nicole R says

Bill Cheng's debut novel shows flashes of greatness but it ultimately fails to pull everything - the characters, the setting, the potential - together into a story that I actually invested in.

Robert is a small child when the flood of 1927 hits Mississippi. His family is still reeling from personal tragedy when they are forced out of their home by the rising waters. We then follow Robert through the next 14 years - not always in chronological order - as we learn that he is separated from his family, earns his keep doing domestic chores in a whorehouse, travels with French fur trappers, and finally refinds friends from his childhood. Through it all, we get insight into the lives of a cast of characters as the author slowly builds the complete tale of Robert's life.

The backdrop of this story intrigued me but I just never got fully invested in the story. It was a pretty easy and quick read, and I kept reading because I thought something profound was going to happen. It didn't. Or, I didn't catch on to it. I felt like the characters lives were set up to become closely interwoven but instead they were more like ships passing in the night. There were loose ends in the story all over the place and just when I saw light at the end of the story and thought the "moment" was coming, the characters again just passed by each other.

Also, the setting didn't ring true for me. The beginning sounds like it takes place in the Mississippi Delta but then the French fur trapper part of the story sounds more like the Louisiana Bayou. Finally, the story goes to went-central Mississippi but the tone still sounds off. Granted, I don't know much about Mississippi in the 1920's - 30's, but it didn't seem to have any local flair.

I think it is would have been a bit more optimistic to give us some sort of hope at the end, or even more bleak like *The Road* so that we didn't have reason to hope then I think it would have been better. But it just fell into a middle place and languished there.

Matt Suder says

There are probably a few decent short stories somewhere in here, but not really sure the book captures what Cheng was going for. Trying to write about early 20th century African-American experience from a seat in

modern-day Brooklyn is certainly an idea, but this was a bit of a mess.

I do think this novel is more interesting as a thought experiment about who is allowed to tell particular stories or who can speak in a certain voice. To paraphrase another reviewer: just because you like the Blues doesn't mean you can sing them.

Andrew says

Seems like there is a lot of hate for this book, which is odd for two reasons. Firstly, this was a beautifully written tale. Cheng vividly creates a sense of place, with a very lyrical style. Secondly, I don't understand why someone would expend so much energy on reading and reviewing a book they didn't enjoy. Some readers complained about the lack of story, when really this is a series of interlinked tales featuring a small cast of characters, rather than a straightforward single narrative. Cheng switches time and perspective but keeps some persistent themes throughout. I found this an absorbing and moving read, and look forward to more from the author.

Jaime Boler says

If you are looking for a substantial read, I highly recommend two historical epic novels that may, at first glance, seem very dissimilar yet share many characteristics.

In elegant, lucid prose, fiction newcomer Kent Wascom brings the frontier, in all its violence and disorder, to stunning life in *The Blood of Heaven*. Wascom follows Angel Woolsack, from his early life as the son of an itinerant preacher to the bordellos of Natchez and the barrooms of New Orleans to the bayous of Louisiana where Angel meets schemers and dreamers. Rich with detail and characterizations, *The Blood of Heaven* revisits an early America where fortunes and men were made and great risks were taken.

Wascom is not yet 30, but he infuses his story with a wisdom, awareness, and clarity well beyond his years. As Angel and others carve out a rough-hewn existence in early nineteenth century America, we see them seizing their place and even plotting to overthrow a sovereign government. Through it all, Angel's hold on us never wavers but intensifies. *The Blood of Heaven* proves Wascom is a trailblazer whose brilliance is not a one-off but a true and rooted fact.

Chinese-American author Bill Cheng takes on the African-American existence in Mississippi in his epic odyssey *Southern Cross the Dog*. Cheng focuses his narrative lens on Robert Chatham, a black man in his 20s who believes he is cursed. He has good reason for his thinking.

Cheng contrasts the tenderness of falling in love for the first time with rising flood waters that heralded the Great Mississippi Flood of 1927, the catastrophe that destroyed Robert's home and changed his life forever.

In *Southern Cross the Dog*, Robert's journey takes him from a refugee camp to a brothel to a job clearing land in the name of progress. With an evocative setting, *Southern Cross the Dog* is a testament to a man's will to live and to the distance he will go for friendship and love as he must carve a place and an existence free of bad luck and curses.

Full of meaning, *The Blood of Heaven* and *Southern Cross the Dog* feature strong main characters who undergo odysseys and take us with them on their incredible journeys. These are magisterial and resonating

stories steeped in astounding settings and peopled by the most intriguing and charismatic characters. Equally memorable and equally fascinating, these novels put their authors on the literary map.

Rod Norman says

I was totally taken aback by this book. It was a debut novel and although the early reviews were good, I wasn't prepared for how good it was. It was very good. The thing that blew me away was how well Bill Cheng was able to capture the feel of the times and place the novel was set. Why, because the author was from the East coast and has never even been to Mississippi. This is a Southern classic and Cheng does an outstanding job of giving us colorful characters to care about as we begin our journey following the 1927 flood and leading up to the TVA's encroachment in the 1940's. I found this to be a very special book that I will treasure in my home library. I highly recommend it to anyone who loves southern literature. For fans of William Gay and Larry Brown who are looking for something to fill the void, this will suffice. In the acknowledgements it is clear the author has spent much time in following and showing admiration to the kings of southern Blues and perhaps that has shaped and given voice to this novel. Well done Bill Cheng.

Brian says

This book got some great reviews in big media outlets and big-name authors, but....I think its a pretty good first outing by a promising author and that's about it. As someone pretty familiar with that part of history and the setting, I just never got pulled in by the story. The style of writing was really good in parts but the entire narrative just didn't come together for me. Finally, I think its admirable that the author tried to cover wide-ranging groups of people, e.g. the trappers who inhabited the swamps (which admittedly I knew nothing about for that region), but those depictions just didn't seem alive to me.

Michele Weiner says

Southern Gothic with the emphasis on Gothic.. The main story is about Robert Chatham, a child when his brother, Billy, was lynched and his mother lost her mind, still a child when the flood of 1927 wiped out his world and many of the people and places he knew. The descriptions of the flood and its aftermath were among the most affecting in the whole book.

Robert and his mother and father were rescued from the roof-high waters by a man in a boat, and ended up in a refugee tent being fed starvation rations by the government. Beaten-down by the loss of a son and a wife as well as his home, Robert's father gave him to a whorehouse madam thinking he would be safer, and there he met a blues musician and "healer" who specialized in abortion-inducing concoctions which he sold to young black women in trouble. This man gave Robert a pouch full of "the devil" to protect him from life as a black man and the inhospitable country in the Mississippi swamps, and he soon began to believe he was invincible. Despite his supernatural protection, Robert was neither happy nor safe, and he began to unravel. He believed that a huge black dog was tracking him down. Robert found a degree of happiness in his life eventually, but at a great price.

A secondary theme of the story was the "improvement" of the lives of the rural poor via WPA projects involving damming rivers to prevent floods and provide electricity. Progress always costs somebody something, and in this case, the most affected (aside from the men working on the project) were the trappers. A very unsympathetic Cajun family represented the trappers, and had a significant impact on Robert's life.

The dialects and the culture were unfamiliar to me, and I don't know how to evaluate their authenticity, but I enjoyed the writing. The author is a Chinese man from NYC, who never saw Mississippi until very recently, but most of the reviews I read did not fault his understanding of the culture and language. However, this was not an uplifting story, but a tale of graphic and unrelieved misery that became very difficult to read at times. The epilogue was mysterious at first, but I figured out that Southern Cross the Dog refers to the place where the Southern crosses the Dog. I thought they were rivers, but it turns out they were railroads near Moorhead, Mississippi, and that the title of the book is a line in an old blues song.

My overwhelming feeling after reading Southern Cross the Dog is gratitude that I was not born in that time and place and circumstance. Although the white poor suffered greatly, blacks in the old Confederacy were in special danger of sudden death at all times. I also feel amazement that we've come this far this fast, but we still have a long way to go.

Will Lock says

Don't worry about the chatter regarding how a New Yorker of Asian heritage could write a book about being Black in the South. He just did it, capturing the spirit and pathos of people--African American and Cajun--for whom survival against all odds, or random death at the end of a mob's hanging rope, is the nature of life. Sure, there are times when Cheng's poorly educated, rural African American characters suddenly speak as if they just came out of an intro to psychology course, but that does not get in the way of the story, nor does it disrupt the deep atmosphere of fatalism and foreboding that filled my mind and heart as I read the novel. When I finished this book, I felt as if I had participated in something--not just read a story.
