

# Wilmot Irvin and New Southern Literature

By Michael Miller

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It's a mighty curious little book, this *Chronicle of the Life and Times of Fletcher Lowe*. Little in size (5X7 inches) and length (not quite 20,000 words), it's billed as a novelette by author Wilmot B. Irvin, who makes a special point saying it's unlike anything he's ever written.

"For readers of my earlier works of fiction, *Chronicle* will stand apart, for better or worse," he writes in the preface. "Perhaps those who read me here for the first time will find this story disquieting: amusing at times, aberrant at others. It is emblematic of our postmodern American culture."

That's one way of looking at it. You might call it a Dr. Seuss tale for grown-ups, a series of vignettes starring the deranged good ol' boy you better not tick off. Think Neil Gaiman writing about grown-up Huck Finn who's slightly touched in the head. OK, more than slightly touched.

And yet there's something distinctively down-home about Fletcher Lowe's story. You could call it Southern Gothic, if it weren't for the references to Wal-Mart, Krispy Kreme, and Applebee's. But that's one of the oddly compelling aspects of this little tale, how it jarringly returns readers to the real world just as they are ready to dismiss the story as a simple surrealistic fantasy.

Then there are the sublime, provocatively rendered illustrations by Rob Barge. More than a dozen full-page drawings depict the antics of Fletcher Lowe, providing visual insights that nicely enhance Irvin's words.

A practicing attorney in Columbia, Irvin, who is 61, received an undergraduate degree in English literature and a law degree from the University of South Carolina. He began writing fiction 10 years ago. He's published four full-length novels that "explore the depth and vitality – and often the fragility – of human relationships," he says.

Now comes Fletcher Lowe, a uniquely drawn, tragicomic character whose depth and vitality might be best left unexplored any deeper. Yet this little hardback book is a pleasant reminder of the days when words and pictures combined to tell a clever story. Fletcher Lowe might be hard to figure, but his creator has a firm grip on the artistic process.