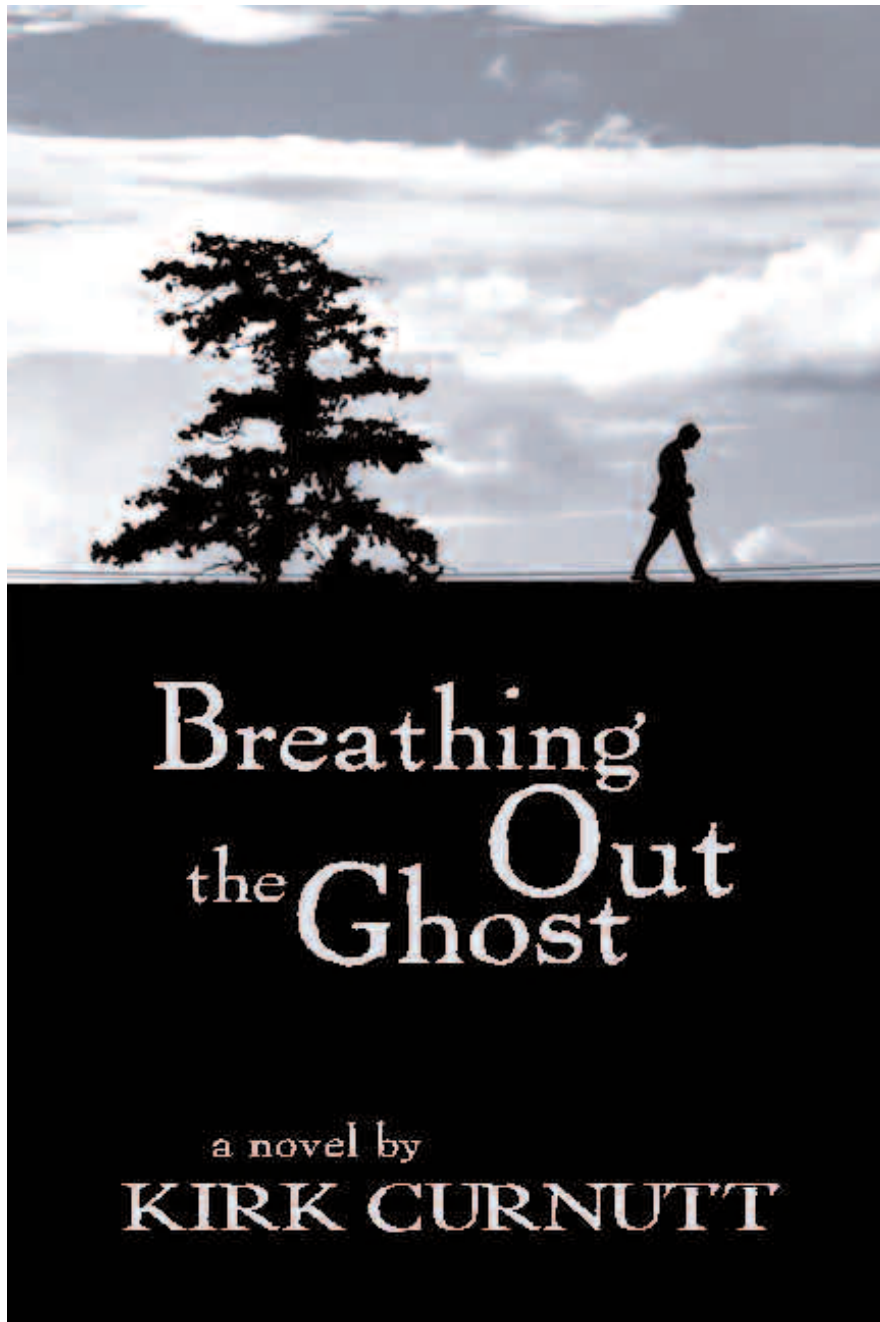
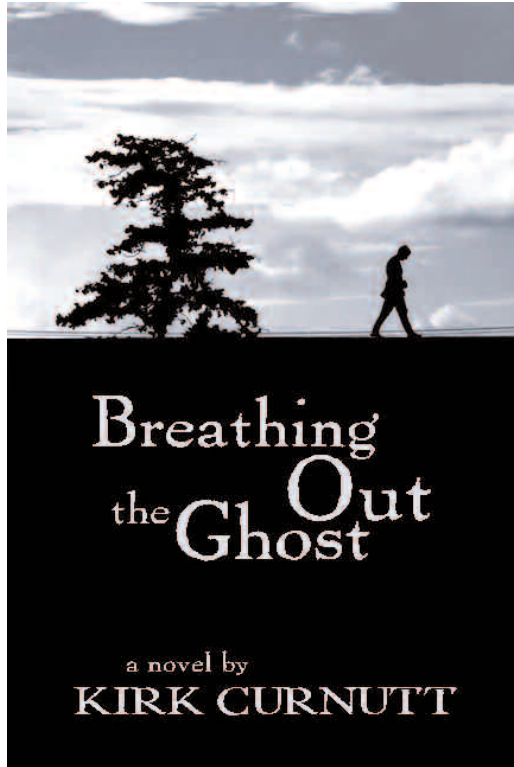


Media Information



River City Publishing





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About River City Publishing

Like the nearby Alabama River that flows through the heart of the South, literature sustains us, transports us outside of ourselves, and brings us home. River City Publishing, a literary press located in Montgomery, Alabama, is dedicated to discovering the books that do just that.

Carolyn Newman
Publisher

Praise for Kirk Curnutt

“Curnutt is bold and resourceful. The pain in these stories is tempered by the kind of playfulness and wry acceptance that most of us have come to trust in the face of life’s hard knocks.”

—Donald Anderson, author of *Fire Road*

“These stories are so well crafted that you almost don’t notice—but they are not merely well crafted; their depth of observation and emotional range raises them to the level of art. A very impressive debut.”

—Marlin Barton, author of *Dancing by the River*



A Synopsis

Colin St. Claire is on a dangerous mission. His young son is missing, and he is on a self-appointed quest to find the boy, or at least find the man he believes is responsible. Fueled by uppers and a profound lack of sleep, Colin's road soon becomes an uncontrollable spiral of blurry white lines, of fleeting forms in the night, ghosts of memory as intangible as vapor . . . Assisting him is Robert Heim, a former private investigator who lost his license in the line of duty—and it is a sense of warped duty that still ties him to Colin, though his own family, a loving wife and children, beckons him back home . . . The answers for both men may lie not with the man they believe is the perpetrator, but with a long-suffering farmer's wife, Beverly "Sis" Pruitt, whose own daughter was claimed by violence, years prior.

In the shape of a noir thriller, Curnutt fashions a gripping tale of the consequences of unchecked grief, of painful truths hidden as though they were dark secrets, and what salvation remains possible for good men who enter the darkness and become the ghosts they are chasing.



Q & A

Where does the title *Breathing Out the Ghost* come from? What does it mean?

Years ago I came across a line in Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*—Book II, Canto VII, to be exact, when Cymocheles is killed by Prince Arthur: "He tombling downe on ground / Breathd out his ghost, which to th'infernall shade / Fast flying, there eternall torment found, For all the sinnes, wherewith his lewd life did abound." On a literal level "breathe out the ghost" is simply a synonym for "give up the ghost"—meaning death—but there's something evocative about that juxtaposition of *breathe* and *ghost* that makes the phrase mean so much more meaningful to me: it refers to the breath of life, obviously, to the spirit, but it's also a metaphor for all the ephemeral things beyond our control that we have to live with, memories of the past, memories of the lives we should have led, basically whatever griefs and regrets haunt us. I've always been a title man when it comes to books; I love ones with names that make me work to figure out their relationship to the plot and the characters—*The Sun Also Rises*, *Light in August*, *Tender Is the Night*—so basically, I filed the phrase *breathing out the ghost* away for two decades until I felt I had a storyline worthy of its connotations. Initially when I started writing this novel I thought I would call it *Superman Blue* because I had a line in it about a baby blanket colored Superman blue. Then I decided to call it *The Ahab of the Interstates*, but an agent told me all my *Moby-Dick* allusions were pretentious, so I cut as many as I could. In the end, *Breathing Out the Ghost* gave me what I love most in literature, which is ambiguity. The title doesn't have to mean one single thing to readers.

The storyline of the novel is very topical. We seem to read everyday about missing children. Most are found at some point, some alive, but many, unfortunately, not. Then there are others that are never recovered, Etan Patz being the most famous. It's been nearly thirty years now since he vanished, and while there is a great deal of speculation about what happened to him, the case has never officially been solved. Were you influenced by that particular story?

I remember reading a *Vanity Fair* article about Etan and his parents in 1991, which I suppose can be credited as the genesis for this novel. The character of Dickie-Bird Johnson is based in part on Jose Antonio Ramos, whom in 2004 a New York judge declared responsible for Etan's disappearance twenty-five years after the fact. I'm certainly not the first writer to be intrigued by the Patz case. Beth Gutcheon's *Still Missing* (1981) is the first and probably most famous fictional treatment of it. Most novels about missing children are very plot-driven, though; like Gutcheon's, they're interested in solving the mystery, whereas as I started thinking about what parents of the missing go through I was more curious about character, about the way their grief and anger shape their daily decisions. What I've always wondered is at what point a parent accepts that loss and reassumes the daily, humdrum rituals. When do you let go and move on? When do you go back to work? When do you make love again? When do you decide it's okay to be happy? At heart, *Breathing Out the Ghost* is really less about crime than about emotion. It's about rage and the



ways that our culture glamorizes the self-destruction that comes with it. That's why the monologues in which the father, Colin St. Claire, addresses his lost son, are so allusive and literary. St. Claire claims his moral authority from a tradition of a literary anguish and anger—as pretentious as it indeed sounds, he imagines himself a modern-day Captain Ahab.

St. Claire is only one character in the book, however. Some would say the sympathetic heart of the story is Sis Pruitt, the mother whose life intersects with St. Claire's. Others might say it's the private detective, Robert Heim, who sets out to save his friend and former client from destroying himself. You even have the presumptive kidnapper, Dickie-Bird Johnson, narrate a key chapter. Why the multiple perspectives?

I no sooner wrote the prologue, "Idiot Wind," than I knew I would need other characters' points of view to balance St. Claire's. It was simply too hard to write in the voice of someone on amphetamines, which is a drug that makes you hyper-chatty. Part of St. Claire's problem is that he can't shut up; his grief is both voluble and viscous. The thickness of his narrative style made me realize what the book needed was a woman's perspective, not because I was pandering to female readers but because I thought Sis's story presented an opportunity to describe a quieter, less melodramatic sort of suffering. I imagined Sis on a slow boil as opposed to St. Claire's eruptions—she resents the fact that everybody thinks she's handled her daughter's death nobly. Her anger reminds us that even twenty years later people still experience their pain with fresh, devastating intensity.

Why Heim? What does he bring to the story?

The more I experimented with the contrast between St. Claire's and Sis's voices, the more I thought it would be interesting to add a third narrator (and then a fourth, and even a fifth...). There's a risk to putting a private detective in a story like this because you can turn your plot into a "procedural," a story about the solving of a crime. To avoid that I made Heim a disgraced detective whose genuine desire to save St. Claire—as much for his own sake as for St. Claire's—puts him in danger of losing his job, his wife and kids, everything that's important to him. Plus his presence allowed me to experiment with a more *noirish* sort of voice. I was very self-conscious when writing the Heim chapters like "The Goner" about giving his sentences the classic cadence of a Dashiell Hammett or Raymond Chandler character.

That's another distinctive feature of *Breathing Out the Ghost*: you give each chapter a short title.

When you present the story through multiple perspectives, you narrate at right angles instead of linearly, and it helps the reader understand the thematic progression if you give them little billboards along the way. That's all chapter titles are. It's an old technique, but it's not terribly fashionable right now, which is probably when I liked it. [*Laughs*].



Why set the story in Michigan and Indiana? Aren't you a Southern writer?

I'm not Southern by birth; I'm a Midwesterner who twenty years ago landed in the South. I was born in Nebraska, but I grew up in Michigan, not far from Bay City, which is where St. Claire's family is from. As for Indiana, all my people are from there—it's where my mother and father were born and raised. Where Sis and her husband, Pete, live is basically my grandparents' farm outside of Franklin, which is a little town about twenty miles south of Indianapolis, and there is a lot of my mom in Sis. My mom even grew up being called Sis. There were times when I was writing the book that I toyed with transplanting the setting closer to where I live here in Alabama, but the characters didn't fit this landscape. Sis in particular never could have been a Southern woman. Southern speech, even in rural areas, is too baroque and expressive. The Midwest is the land of stoic humility. You don't speak your grief; you just take your licking and keep on ticking. That's especially true in farm communities—or it used to be, anyway, before technology homogenized us all. There's a sparsity to the Midwest of my childhood that's very much a theme in the book—it's what St. Claire envies in Sis but what Sis hates in herself.

One of the more intriguing supporting characters is Sis's 104-year-old grandmother, Ethel, or "Grandma Brandywine" as locals call her. She's based on someone in your family who is fairly famous, isn't she?

She is indeed—with a lot of literary liberties taken. In January 2007 my great grandmother, Edna Parker, who lives near Franklin in Shelbyville, Indiana, became the oldest person in the United States. Then on August 13, 2007, she became the oldest person in the world when the previous record holder passed away. She was born April 20, 1893, which means she's lived in three different centuries. I had to make Ethel a little younger because a 114-year-old character would have been distracting. [*Laughs*]. The amazing thing about having a conversation with my great-grandmother is that she lives according to her own time; she has no sense of chronology anymore. When I visit her, she may mistake me for one of her sons born in the 1910s and 20s, or maybe my uncle, who's sixty. She might mistake my son for me or for one of my cousins.

I've wanted to base a character on my Grandma Parker since we celebrated her centennial in 1993—fourteen years ago now! Her inspiration was mostly stylistic, though; Grandma Brandywine gave me a chance to jump around in time, to shift between moments that should be separated by decades. The actual story of Ethel and Horace that's woven through Sis's chapters is actually based on my *other* great grandmother, Vivian Eberhart. Unfortunately, she only lived until her late nineties. She was infamous in Shelby County for living with a man without benefit of marriage after her husband, my great-grandfather, died of tetanus. She was with this second man for decades: 1928 to 1964 to be specific. My mother was pregnant with me when he passed. See, I have a checkered family history....



The genealogical strand in Sis's story presents quite a contrast to St. Claire's background. It seems like Sis is trying to preserve that family history, which isn't surprising given her daughter's murder, but St. Claire wants to escape his. Why is he so haunted by memories of his father?

It's a man thing. Freud had it half-right, I think: at some point a man must kill off his father to ensure his own identity. St. Claire thought he had done that until his own son disappeared; now, however, he must come to grips with how he is following in his father's footsteps by destroying himself.

You seem to write about fatherhood a lot. There are several stories in your short-story collection, *Baby*, *Let's Make a Baby*, about fathers. Why is that?

I suppose it's because I was a father at a relatively young age, as was my own father. I was born on my dad's twenty-second birthday. My son was born one month after I turned twenty-two. That sort of pattern makes you think when you're a writer. Even though my father passed away fifteen years ago—I'm not that much younger right now than he was when he died—my son and I have had many of the same ups and downs he did, whether we like it or not. St. Claire's struggle with his father is autobiographical only in the sense that I've had to live with my old man's ghost for what feels like a long time now. And some day my son will do the same with mine. It's very simple, and—again!—very *Moby-Dick* (and therefore very pretentious): the search for the father is the search for God. As St. Claire reminds us at one point, Ahab himself had a young son. That's how we men experience our coming of age: we chase the white whale of our patrimony.

So what's ahead for you?

There's always a new sentence in the smithy. Sometimes it's fiction, sometimes it's scholarly—it just depends what publishing opportunity presents itself next. I've finished a second novel called *Raising Aphrodite* that's about ... well, not surprisingly I suppose ... it's about fatherhood. Only this one's about what happens between fathers and *daughters* when the daughter comes of age. On the surface, it's a much lighter book than *Ghost*, a comedy even, although there's a somber tint to it. There are other books in the hopper, too: a collection of essays about my lifelong infatuation with Zelda Fitzgerald, maybe another story collection a few years down the road, hopefully a nonfiction book about Nat King Cole and Alabama. Ideas are easy as rain, of course. It's the inking of the paper that's work.





About the Author

Kirk Curnutt is the author of several scholarly works, most recently *The Cambridge Introduction of F. Scott Fitzgerald*, and *Coffee with Hemingway* (an entry in Duncan Baird Publishers' series of imaginary conversations with leading historical figures). He is also the author of a collection of short stories, *Baby, Let's Make a Baby*. He is a former finalist for both the Tennessee Book Award/Peter Taylor Prize and the Dana Literary Awards. Mr. Curnutt is a three-time consecutive winner of the Hackney Literary Award for short stories.



Contact Information

River City Publishing
1719 Mulberry Street
Montgomery, AL 36106
Telephone: (334) 265-6753
Toll Free: (877) 408-7078
Fax: (334) 265-8880
www.rivercitypublishing.com

Publisher:
Carolyn Newman
carolyn@rivercitypublishing.com

Editor:
Jim Gilbert
jgilbert@rivercitypublishing.com

Publicist:
April Jones
publicity@rivercitypublishing.com

Photos and media information are available to download from our Web site
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River City Publishing
1719 Mulberry Street
Montgomery, AL 36106