

In Conversation with
**JAMES E.
MC TEER II**
author of *Minnow*

WINNER SOUTH CAROLINA FIRST NOVEL PRIZE

WHO IS THIS WITCHDOCTOR HIGH SHERIFF MENTIONED IN YOUR BIOGRAPHY?

JM: My grandfather, James Edwin McTeer, was the High Sheriff of the Lowcountry for 37 years, beginning in 1926 when he took office at the age of 22. Beaufort's boundaries were broader then, encompassing everything from wild unsettled islands to chaotic, bustling ports. Cultures were mixing in a way that didn't happen anywhere else, or at any other time in history. Voodoo was still very much alive, and it wasn't uncommon for people to come to my grandfather believing that they were under some dark spell. Having grown up on the Sea Islands, and having engaged in a life-long study of Africa and African culture, my grandfather became a confidant and counselor to those in need. In time he became known as a white witchdoctor, practicing only good or healing magic. He paired an uncanny skill in detective work with a careful attention to the various cultures within his domain. He was the witchdoctor sheriff who didn't carry a gun, and he sought justice for everyone—white and black—during his years of service.

THERE MUST BE QUITE A TRADITION OF STORYTELLING IN YOUR FAMILY.

JM: Writing and storytelling run in the family blood. On my mother's side, my great-grandmother Chlotilde Rowell Martin was a prolific South Carolina journalist and historian. She was the first female reporter to work for The State newspaper, and described writing as an incurable addiction. Along with reporting the local news, she wrote extensively on Gullah and plantation culture and published several books on the subjects.

On my father's side, there is my grandfather McTeer. He is described as a "legendary lawman, author, spellbinder and raconteur" on the plaque that marks his bridge in Beaufort. That line highlights his abilities as storyteller, and the magic of his stories. He fought rumrunners during prohibition, and hunted Nazis along the coastline during World War II. He investigated black magic curses and solved murders and poisoning. He escorted the most dangerous of criminals and protected the most innocent of men from lynch mobs. His long years as sheriff and businessman gave him plenty to write about, and he put many of those stories down in four separate memoirs. He died before I was born, but I grew up learning all about his legendary life. I grew up exploring his world: peeking into old sheds filled with bizarre voodoo relics, holding ancient idols and talismans in my hands, hearing amazing tales told by everyone who knew him. I grew up loving those adventures and those stories, and I wanted to do my own part to capture the magic of the Lowcountry.



HOW MUCH OF MINNOW'S JOURNEY THROUGH PHYSICAL LANDSCAPE OF THE SEA ISLANDS WAS INFORMED BY YOUR EXPERIENCE AS A CHILD GROWING UP THERE?

JM: Minnow's journey is full of scenes and adventures that any Lowcountry native will recognize: from bluff-side hideouts to vast marsh flats, from winding creeks to dark pine jungles. I grew up playing in the woods out in Grays Hill, hiding among the pine trees and running in the open fields. I fell in love with the beach, and the waves, and our mighty mother ocean while camping out on Hunting Island with my parents and siblings. That exploration never stopped, and I was taking frequent marsh walks with my nephews the summer that I began writing *Minnow*.

WHAT WAS YOUR REACTION TO WINNING THE SOUTH CAROLINA FIRST NOVEL PRIZE?

JM: I couldn't believe I'd won the prize. I got a call at work and had to step away from a class of third graders. We were reading scary stories at the time—an activity they voted for as a reward at the end of the year. The phone call was surreal, standing outside of my school, as it slowly dawned on me that other people were going to have the chance to go on that fateful adventure with *Minnow*. I went back into the library and probably delivered the best three scary stories I've ever told to those kids. I was over the moon. As the notion of winning settled in on me, I felt a great sense of pride. I was raised to cherish the magic history of the Lowcountry, and to win the First Novel Prize with a local story is the highest honor I could ask for.

