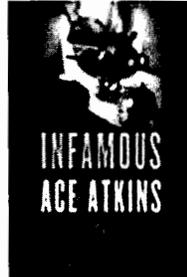


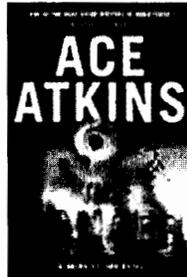
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Read of the Month: Collected Works of American Novelist Ace Atkins

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Infamous and *The Ranger* by Ace Atkins

Review by Allen Mendenhall

As an Auburn University instructor and a lifelong Auburn football fan with multigenerational ties to that school, I'm not neutral when it comes to Ace Atkins, an Auburn alumnus who lettered for the best damn football team ever (the 1993 Tigers that went undefeated under Terry Bowden). Atkins, a Pulitzer Prize winning journalist who published his first novel, *Crossroad Blues*, in 1998, has since

come out with a steady succession of critically acclaimed fiction: *Leavin' Trunk Blues* (2000), *Dark End of the Street* (2002), *Dirty South* (2005), *White Shadow* (2006), *Wicked City* (2008), *Devil's Garden* (2009), and the two novels that are the subject of this review.

Atkins is a legend, or should be. Last year, he came out with *Infamous* (2010), a page-turning account of the gangster George Kelly ("George R. Kelly, aka George Barnes, aka R. G. Shannon, aka 'Machine Gun' Kelly") and Kelly's not-so-ladylike gal, the loyal yet adulterous Kathryn. *Infamous* opens in Arkansas, at the tail-end of the Depression, with the story of Frank "Jelly" Nash, a hardened criminal apprehended by Special Agent Gus T. Jones, Jones's partner Joe Lackey, and Sheriff Otto Reed. The three officers are to transport Nash to Union Station in Kansas City, where they'll meet with the Special Agent in Charge, an unnamed youngster whose title and presence foreshadow the importance of the F.B.I. to the novel.

The F.B.I. was a new phenomenon in the 1930s, and not very understood. As Nash says, "I think a federal cop is a screwy idea." If this book is primarily about George and Kathryn, its subtext is the underbelly and growth of America's crime-fighting bureaucracy.

The meeting in Kansas City doesn't take place, at least not like the officers hoped. When Jones, Lackey, and Reed arrive at the station to meet the special agent—who is accompanied by two Kansas City cops—the criminals Harvey Bailey and Verne Miller intervene, slinging guns and letting bullets fly until Jones is the only living officer left on scene. The event becomes known as the "Union Station Massacre."

For a rough-and-tumble criminal, George gives an interesting first impression: wearing nothing but blue socks and white boxer shorts featuring big red hearts, he's drunk and frying pancakes, a bottle of Old Log Cabin bourbon at his side as he bickers with Kathryn about the arrival of Harvey and Verne. Before long, Kathryn is sleeping with another man—Detective Ed Weatherford—and Harvey and Verne have kidnapped a rich oil man from Oklahoma, Charles F. Urschel.

From there the plot gets weirder and quicker, the kidnapping clumsier and more absurd.

Infamous is comical in a twisted way—like a film by the Coen Brothers. The archetypal bad-guy, George Kelly, is not so archetypal after all. The proverbial good-guy, Jones, is only accidentally heroic. It's as if Atkins wants to flip associative registers on their heads. The bad-guys are not evil-to-the-core; nor are they masculine, Bacchanalian hard-asses with soft spots for puppies, children, and pretty ladies. Instead, they're awkward and ungainly, not all that bright, and too self-conscious to be haughty or intimidating. At some point in the novel—it's hard to pinpoint where, exactly—Kathryn becomes the villain-of-villains. Her unchecked ambition drives the book toward its unpredictable yet unsurprising end (unsurprising because the end is public record, this being a "true" story).

What makes this book worthy of reading and respect is its defiance of cliché and easy categorization, not to mention its subtle, grotesque humor. Atkins is nothing if not unpredictable, despite that his story is based on actual events—or perhaps because his story is based on actual events. It's difficult, reading Atkins, not to think of Dennis Lehane or Robert B. Parker: men who developed the overlapping crime-mystery-suspense genres. Atkins is charmingly proficient at dialogue, and his

characters speak in short, clipped sentences reminiscent of the oh-so-many villains populating John Grisham novels.

Atkins attains a measure of cunning with each new book. His latest, *The Ranger*, which came out in June, is a case-in-point. *The Ranger* is not like *Infamous*. For starters, it takes place in the present era, and its protagonist is Quinn Colson, an Army ranger who has returned home from tours in Iraq and Afghanistan to find that his uncle, Hampton Beckett, may or may not have stuck a .44 in his mouth and pulled the trigger. At any rate, ole Hamp is as dead as a doornail, and his death is clouded with suspicion. Something just ain't right.

The book is full of stock-types: the redneck, teenaged beauty knocked up by her boyfriend; the tomboy grown up to become the town's no-nonsense deputy sheriff; the young, deadbeat dad in trouble with the law; the slick, crooked lawyer. Despite representing common literary and social stereotypes, each character is carefully developed and thoroughly believable; each has more to him or her than meets the eye.

The Ranger has all the elements of a thriller: dialogue-heavy deliverance and calculated sentence fragments, to name the most obvious. Atkins moves you along, quickly but steadily, to one startling twist of fate after another, as Quinn uncovers secrets about his family and friends, all of whom he thought he knew. The book is the bloodiest thing since *Titus Andronicus*, complete with a shoot-'em-up scene that makes the gunfight at the O.K. Corral seem like child's play.

What Atkins lacks in finesse he makes up in bravado. His portrait of Quinn, who singlehandedly takes down five strangers—two of them armed—in an open field, is not only shrewd but exhilarating. This character makes you happy that the book is just the first in a series.

Atkins has established himself as a prolific writer and his latest novel is special. So special that I won't be surprised when it's made into a feature film. Atkins's writing has matured over time, and he seems in full control of his craft and his genre. Keep an eye on this man.