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## Everybody Has a South: Grit Lit

By Daren Dean

(Key Words: *Grit Lit, Southern Gothic, Realism, Blue Collar*)



Abstract: The Louisiana Center for the Book in the State Library of Louisiana is proud to present the **19th edition** of our free, world-class literary celebration of the Louisiana Book Festival ([louisianabookfestival.org/index.html](http://louisianabookfestival.org/index.html)). Come join the fun on October 28, 2023, in downtown Baton Rouge at the State Library of Louisiana, the State Capitol, the Capitol Park Museum, and nearby locations. The Grit Lit panel consisted of writers who exemplify this subgenre of Southern (though not exclusively Southern), blue-collar literature: Frank Bill, Daren Dean, and Meagan Lucas. Schedule: **10:00 am to 11:00 am**, Capitol Park Museum Auditorium *Everybody Has a South: Grit Lit*, with [Frank Bill](#), [Daren Dean](#), and [Meagan Lucas](#).

### Panelists Discussed Their Work in Terms of Qualities and Influence of Grit Lit Authors from the Past and in Their Own Novels and Short Stories



"Grit lit" is a subgenre of literature that typically features dark, gritty, and raw portrayals of life in the American South, particularly in rural or working-class settings. It often explores themes of poverty, violence, crime, and the struggles of the working class. Grit lit is characterized by its unflinching and sometimes bleak depiction of the human condition, often focusing on the harsh realities of everyday life and the challenges faced by its characters.

Prominent authors associated with Grit Lit include William Gay, Larry Brown, and Harry Crews, among others. This subgenre shares some commonalities with Southern Gothic literature, as both delve into the darker aspects of the American South, but grit lit tends to be more rooted in contemporary realism and often lacks the supernatural or grotesque elements that are common in Southern Gothic fiction. Paradoxically, it can be associated with dirty realism, minimalism, rural writing, as well as southern literature.

While "grit lit" is a term typically associated with the American South, the themes and characteristics of grit lit can be found in literature from other regions, including the Midwest. The Midwest, like the South, has its own share of rural and working-class communities, and authors from this region have explored similar themes of hardship, struggle, and the human condition.

In the Midwest, you might find literature that shares the gritty, realistic portrayal of life's challenges, as seen in traditional grit lit. However, it may not be referred to as "grit lit" but rather as "Midwestern realism" or something similar to describe the regional context. The key is that the core themes and characteristics of grit lit can transcend geographic boundaries and be applied to various settings and regions, including the Midwest. Grit Lit tends to be about issues of class rather than issues of race. This panel was represented by authors from diverse places such as Indiana (Bill); Missouri, North Carolina, Louisiana (Dean); Canada, North Carolina Appalachian mountains (Lucas).

Panelists discussed the continuing influence of Grit Lit on their work, touched upon several key points and insights. They emphasized the importance of portraying the authentic, unvarnished realities of life, often in working-class or rural settings, and discussed how their own experiences or research had shaped their ability to capture the genuine essence of their characters and settings. Grit lit often explored themes of poverty, violence, addiction, and personal struggle, and panelists talked about how these themes resonate with readers and how their work continued to shed light on these issues. They discussed how their geographic background had influenced their work, whether they were from the South, the Midwest, or elsewhere, explaining how regional culture and history had played a role in shaping their narratives.

They addressed how the genre had evolved over time to address contemporary issues and social changes and discussed how the classic elements of grit lit had been adapted to contemporary writers, keeping the genre relevant. Grit lit sometimes features complex, morally ambiguous characters, and panelists discussed how they created and developed such characters, as well as the challenges and rewards of doing so. Mississippi writer, Larry Brown, once characterized it simply as, "People in trouble." Some panelists explored how Grit Lit had influenced or intersected with other genres, such as crime fiction, rural noir, or even literary fiction, discussing how the boundaries between these genres could blur and how that influenced their writing. They shared their experiences with readers who connected with their work, discussing the emotional impact of their writing on their audience and the reasons readers were drawn to grit lit. Finally, the panelists speculated on the future of the genre, talking about new voices in grit lit, emerging trends, and how the genre was likely to continue evolving and influencing literature.

Overall, they provided valuable insights into the genre's enduring appeal and the ways it continued to inspire and challenge authors. A brief Q&A followed afterwards.

### **Panelist Biographies**

**Frank Bill** is the *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Ravaged*, with Norman Reedus; the novels *The Savage* and *Donnybrook*, the latter of which was turned into a film in 2018; and the story collection *Crimes in Southern Indiana*, one of *GQ*'s favorite books of 2011 and a *Daily Beast* best debut of 2011. He lives and writes in southern Indiana.

**Daren Dean** is the author of *Far Beyond the Pale, I'll Still Be Here Long After You're Gone: Stories*, *The Black Harvest: A Novel of the American Civil War*, and *This Vale of Tears*. His short fiction has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize three times. His work has been nominated for the Pen/Faulkner, the W. Y. Boyd Literary Award for Excellence in Military Fiction, Midlands Author Award, and shortlisted for the Missouri Author Award. He is currently an Assistant Professor of English (Creative Writing Specialist) at Lincoln University of Missouri.

**Meagan Lucas** is an award-winning author, editor, and teacher. Her debut novel, *Songbirds and Stray Dogs*, was North Carolina Center for the Book's selection for the Route 1 Reads program. Lucas teaches Creative Writing at Robert Morris University and in the Great Smokies Writing Program at UNC-Asheville. She is the Editor-in-Chief of *Reckon Review*. Lucas lives in the mountains of Western North Carolina.