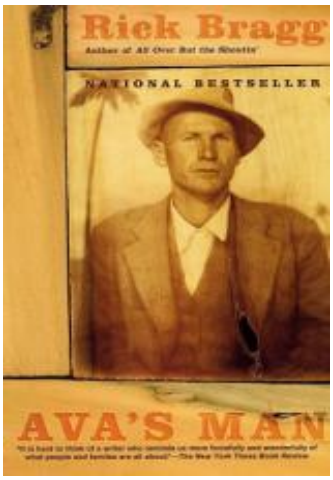
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Ava's Man

by Rick Bragg



About the Book

With the same emotional generosity and effortlessly compelling storytelling that made **All Over But the Shoutin'** a national bestseller, Rick Bragg continues his personal history of the Deep South. This time he's writing about his grandfather Charlie Bundrum, a man who died before Bragg was born but left an indelible imprint on the people who loved him. Drawing on their memories, Bragg reconstructs the life of an unlettered roofer who kept food on his family's table through the worst of the Great Depression; a moonshiner who drank exactly one pint for every gallon he sold; an unregenerate brawler, who could sit for hours with a baby in the crook of his arm.

In telling Charlie's story, Bragg conjures up the backwoods hamlets of Georgia and Alabama in the years when the roads were still dirt and real men never cussed in front of ladies. A masterly family chronicle and a human portrait so vivid you can smell the cornbread and whiskey, **Ava's Man** is unforgettable.

Discussion Guide

1. In the prologue, Rick Bragg wonders about his grandfather, "What kind of man was this . . . who is so beloved, so missed, that the mere mention of his death would make [his family] cry forty-two years after he was preached into the sky?" [p. 9] How does the book answer this question? What kind of man is Charlie Bundrum? Why does his memory evoke such powerful emotions in those who knew him?

2. Bragg says that he wrote this story "for a lot of reasons," one of which was "to give one more glimpse into a vanishing culture" [p. 13]. How does he create a vivid picture of that culture? What does he admire about it? How is it different from "the new South"? What other reasons compelled Bragg to write about a grandfather he never knew?

3. Bragg says that Charlie Bundrum was "blessed with that beautiful, selective morality that we Southerners are famous for. Even as a boy, he thought people who steal were trash, real trash. . . . Yet he saw absolutely nothing wrong with

downing a full pint of likker . . . before engaging in a fistfight that sometimes required hospitalization" [p. 53]. What kind of moral code does Charlie live by? Are his frequent acts of violence justifiable? In what sense can Charlie be called a hero?

4. Charlie is a man of great physical strength and courage, but what instances of kindness, generosity, and caring balance the violence and recklessness in his life? How does the inclusion of this kind of behavior in Bragg's description create a richer and fuller portrait of the man?

5. In speaking of his grandfather's legacy, Bragg says, "A man like Charlie Bundrum doesn't leave much else, not title or property, not even letters in the attic. There's just stories, all told second- and thirdhand, as long as somebody remembers" [p. 18]. What is the value of preserving the kind of stories that Bragg gathers in **Ava's Man**?

6. **Ava's Man** is filled with dramatic confrontations and vivid scenes. What episodes stand out the most? What do these episodes reveal about the character of the Bundrum family?

7. In considering his grandfather's drinking, Bragg writes, "I am not trying to excuse it. He did things that he shouldn't have. I guess it takes someone who has outlived a mean drunk to appreciate a kind one" [p. 133]. What does this passage suggest about Bragg's personal stake in reconnecting with his grandfather? What kind of portrait does he paint of his own father in **Ava's Man**?

8. Charlie Bundrum "was a man who did the things more civilized men dream they could, who beat one man half to death for throwing a live snake at his son, who shot a large woman with a .410 shotgun when she tried to cut him with a butcher knife, who beat the hell out of two worrisome Georgia highway patrolmen and threw them headfirst out the front door of a beer joint called the Maple on the Hill" [p. 8]. In what ways is Charlie free from the constraints of society? What is the cost of this freedom? Is Bragg right in thinking that Charlie's way of living is something that more civilized men envy?

9. Bragg writes that Ava could have had her sister Grace's life, a life of relative wealth and comfort, of fine clothes, good food, and travel, instead of a life of rented houses, poverty, and hard labor in the cotton fields. "She could have hated her life," Bragg admits [p. 153]. Why doesn't she? What does Charlie give her that other men cannot? What kind of woman is she?

10. Why does Charlie take in Hootie? What does this reveal about his character? What does Hootie bring out in Charlie?

11. Bragg writes that Charlie "could charm a bird off a wire" [p. 45]. What are the charms of Bragg's own storytelling style? Where else does he use colorful similes? In what ways is his narrative voice perfectly suited to his subject matter?

12. What does **Ava's Man** reveal about how the Great Depression affected people in the Deep South, especially those who lived in the foothills? How did it affect the Bundrums specifically? How are they treated by landlords, sheriffs, and others in positions of power?

13. For centuries, recorded history has largely been the account of those who have had the greatest impact on world events. Why is the history of a man like Charlie Bundrum important? In what ways does it offer a door into American history and culture that more conventional histories cannot provide?

14. In the epilogue, Bragg argues that when compared with the new South, Charlie Bundrum seems larger than life, because of "his complete lack of shame. He was not ashamed of his clothes, his speech, his life. He not only thrived, he gloried in it" [p. 248]. What accounts for Charlie's pride? Why is Bragg so proud of him? What does **Ava's Man** suggest about the way in which inner character is more important than external circumstances?

Author Bio

About Rick Bragg: In His Own Words

My Grandfather on my daddy's side and my grandma on my momma's side used to try and cuss their miseries away. They could out-cuss any damn body I have ever seen. I am only an amateur cusser at best, but I inherited other things from these people who grew up on the ridges and deep in the hollows of northeastern Alabama, the foothills of the Appalachians. They taught me, on a thousand front porch nights, as a million jugs passed from hand to hand, how to tell a story.

I make my living at it now, as a national correspondent for *The New York Times*>, based in my native South (Atlanta). It was my dream to do this someday, but some things even I was afraid to dream.

In 1996, I was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for feature writing, for what the judges called "elegantly written stories on contemporary America." They included stories on the country sheriff who caught Susan Smith, an Alabama prison where old inmates go to die, a Mississippi washerwoman who became a national hero, and the nightmare bombing of the federal building in Oklahoma City. I also won the prestigious American Society of Newspaper Editor's Distinguished Writing Award, for the second time. I have won more than 40 journalism awards, including several awards that might have actually helped people.

But the best thing that happened to me in 1996 was the contract for this book, which allowed me to keep a promise I had made to my mother--a woman who picked cotton, scrubbed floors and took in washing and ironing--who went 18 years without a new dress so I could have school clothes.

With the advance from this book, I bought her a house, the first house she ever owned.

I teach writing at the Poynter Institute for media studies, at National Writers Workshops around the country. I taught some workshops at Harvard, and several newspapers have asked me to do in-house writing workshops, including *The Times*.

My stories are included in several "best of" collections of newspaper writing. I have written for the *New York Times Sunday Magazine*, and others.

For good or bad, I am kind of unusual for a *Times* man. I have been at *The Times* for just three years, for the first six

months on Metro in New York, writing about the homeless, violence, welfare hotels, other miseries, then covered Haiti for more than two months during the worst of the killing there in the late summer and the fall of 1994. I came home to find that I had been promoted to the national desk. They sent me home, almost, to Atlanta.

Before *The Times*, I worked briefly at *The Los Angeles Times*, a failed experiment, and before that as a roving national correspondent for the *St. Petersburg Times*.

In 1992-93, I was a Nieman Fellow at Harvard University, the only real college I ever had. I think I was filling their white trash quota. I went just six months to Jacksonville State University, in Alabama, in the 1970s.

Before the Nieman, I was the *St. Petersburg Times* Miami Bureau Chief, covering south Florida, Haiti, the outbreak of the Gulf War, and other balmy places. Before Florida, I was a reporter in my native Alabama, at *The Birmingham News*, *Anniston Star*, *Talladega Daily Home* and *Jacksonville News*. I wrote about cockfights, speed trap towns, serial killers, George Wallace, Bear Bryant, and Richard Petty.

I was born in a small town hospital in northeastern Alabama on July 26, 1959. My momma went into labor about three-quarters of the way through the "Ten Commandments," which was showing at the Midway Drive-In. I am not making this up. I think it's in Chapter Four.

Since then, I have lived in Jacksonville, Anniston and Birmingham, all in Alabama, in Clearwater, Bradenton, Miami and St. Petersburg, in Florida, and Cambridge, Massachusetts, Los Angeles, the corner of 110th and Broadway, New York City, and now Atlanta. I spend at least a quarter of the year in New Orleans, for *The Times*.

I am seldom at home. I am not married. If I had a dog, it would starve.

Critical Praise

"[Bragg has] a true gift for great storytelling (the kind that makes you think it?s just a plain old story, until he gets to the end and you?re either weeping or covered with goosebumps)."

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