



## *Foreword*

John Duncan Talbird

Had I never written anything but *A Modicum of Mankind*, my place in literary history would still be assured. Many of my other novels are on reading lists for contemporary literature courses at universities, some have won awards, all are in print. I won't go into details; a curious reader can find them in any respectable literary compendium.

As I write this foreword, afternoon light prisms on the floor in the next room and chimes play over that

beveled window in the fall wind. My neighbor shouts “No!” at some animal or child. I left the coffeemaker on this morning and still smell that scent of grounds I’ve yet to clean from the pot. My wife is playing bridge with her club and the house is quiet except for the tock of the grandfather clock.

I have never written such a strong novel as the one you hold in your hand.

When *Modicum*, my first novel, saw print I was a naïve twenty-five-year-old. You never again experience that thrill: young novelist signing books, accepting awards, auditoriums loud with applause. A reader’s enthusiasm is a kind of lust. It’s a passion that should translate into something, but probably doesn’t. I’m old, doubt I’ll live to see publication of my next novel (no working title).

My wife and I seldom speak except the bare minimum.

When the morning arrives, it is time to get out of bed, make coffee and toast, write for four hours, eat

lunch, go for a walk, write for another couple hours, eat a light meal, read or watch television, go back to bed. There is so little food I find digestible these days. In addition to bread, I eat fruit (dried and natural, but mostly dried), cottage cheese, eggs and sometimes French-fried potatoes. They give me heartburn, but I do love them. Even when the temperature approaches a hundred outside, my forehead remains cool—my wife says “clammy” but squeezes my shoulder with something like love.

It may interest readers to know how I met my wife: she was in the audience at my first reading, in a Manhattan bookstore. “Would you sign my book?” this tiny brunette with eyes like blue crystal asked while I was smoking outside. I almost told her she should have gotten it signed inside when everyone else had, but there was something in the curve of her lip that was ambiguous. Smile or frown? Dementia or pleasure? First impressions are misleading though we grace them with authority. Her nails were such a dark red they

seemed ebony in that New York street.

(My neighbor just yelled “Fuck!” and there was a crash like breaking glass. When I pulled back the curtain, I could see each of my other neighbors staring from their own windows. That gray-haired hag across the street saw me and waved. Then I discovered my wife at my elbow. “Is that the new neighbor?” she asked, still holding her house key in a tremulous hand. “Do you know what happened?” she said when I didn’t respond, little excited breaths coming from her. Out in the afternoon, our neighbor—the only person on our block younger than sixty—scowled as he swept wet green glass into a pile in his driveway. When I introduced myself to him a few weeks ago, he said, “You retired?” speaking to the pile of leaves he was raking. I shrugged and he asked, “From what?”)

In those days, my wife rode a gearless, green bicycle. “Would you sign my book?” she asked again, straddling her rickety bike. The plastic basket attached to the handlebars was crowded with various products: bars

of soap, a bottle of pop, bubblegum, glasses case, a roll of toilet paper, comic books, etcetera. I, the writer, was having trouble forming words. Trying Spanish, she asked “¿Firmaría usted mi libro?” Then something that sounded like “Tarih ok ul ebrik?”

“That isn’t your book,” I finally answered.

She held it toward me, rummaged through that basket of junk with her free hand. There was an air of frenetic movement about her, those excited breaths coming from her even then. Her being vibrated and glowed as the book came toward me and away, arm undulating oceanically, plastic binding crackling in the still night. Cars honked, sirens wailed in the distance, laughter and scuff of shoes. I could see, even in that faint light, the stamp on the book’s binding: “Brooklyn Public Library.”

It was the fifties, supposedly a conservative time, but we spent the night together anyway. I walked her to the corner of Houston and Broadway the next morning so I could watch her pedal downtown toward the Brooklyn

Bridge. I could go on, but won't.

I realize this is an unconventional foreword. A promising caricaturist of Southern American bumpkins once said, "When anybody asks what a story is about, the only proper thing is to tell him to read the story."

In this Brooklyn neighborhood where my wife and I live, seagulls sit on our back fence and the smell of brine is often on the breeze. She brings me a cup of black tea and I know there will be a teaspoon of honey dissolved in it. This moment seems far from the publication of *A Modicum of Mankind*, intervening years, scribbled pages of literary critics, an increasingly hoarse voice reading the old words made new, pen scratch of "yours truly" and "best wishes" on title page, dry hand brushing a skull which, each year, becomes wispier.

