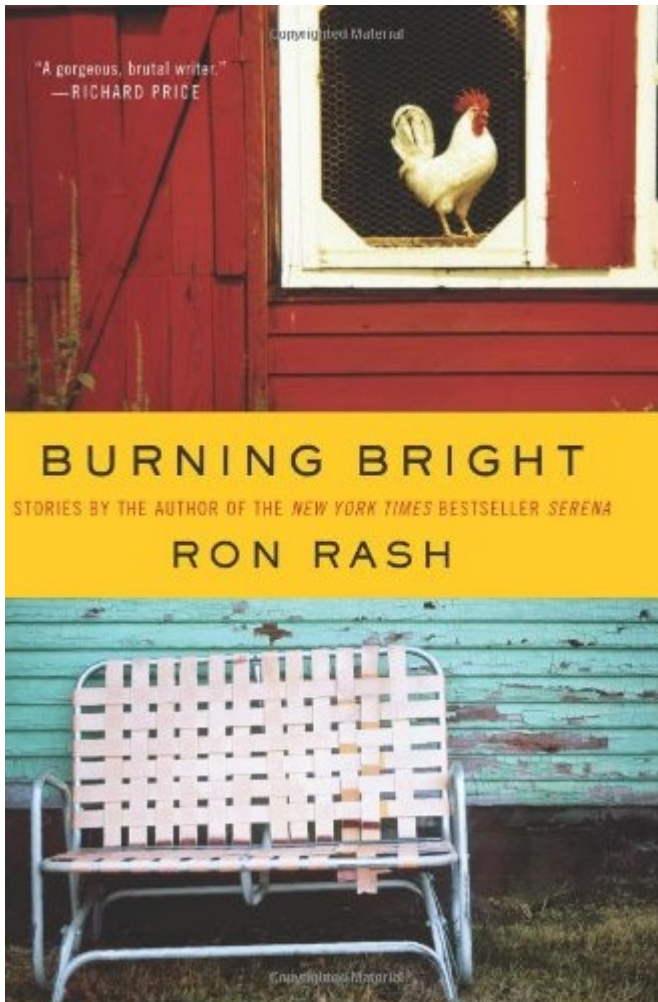


Stories of hardship

By [Debra Bendis](#)

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In Review



Burning Bright

by Ron Rash

Ecco

Ron

Rash writes stories that have as much impact as any I've read; those in this collection often left me feeling as if I'd been kicked. Rash lives in and writes about Appalachia, and his stories never leave that home, even when they're set at the end of the civil war ("Lincolnites").

But

although his home is a beautiful place with pockets of stunning wildness, Rash's characters find life there to be harsh and mean. Yes, there are kindnesses exchanged in these stories, as well as intimacies and pockets of a dark, conspiratorial humor ("Dead Confederates"), but these moments have a kind of desperation to them, planted amid the brutal ugliness of poverty, drug addiction and violence.

Poverty

seeps into everything and everyone, generating cruelty and numbing loneliness. In "Back of Beyond," an uncle accepts the pawned valuables of a meth-addicted nephew, then finds that the young man's parents have been pushed out to live in an unheated trailer. In "Burning Bright," the impenetrable obsession of an arsonist is mixed with tender intimacies between a husband and wife. In "Hard Times," a man guarding his family's henhouse confronts not a fox but a neighbor's hungry child.

Several

themes come together in "Waiting for the End of the World." It's 1:45 a.m., and incoherent bar customers sprawl across tables. A guitarist is playing, and [naturally](#) someone requests "Freebird," by Lynyrd Skynyrd. The guitarist plays the song--and customers raise their heads from the tables. Conversations stop. "Whatever it is," notes the guitarist,

They

become serious and reflective. Maybe it's just the music's slow surging build. Or maybe something more--a yearning for the kind of freedom [Ronnie] Van Zant's lyrics deal with, a recognition of the human need to lay their burdens down . . . to actually feel unshackled, free and in flight.

Rash's

ruthless clarity and spare, beautifully executed stories alert us to some neighbors who would otherwise be invisible to many of us.