

What Will You Do for an Encore? by Robert Drake

reviewed by [Ralph Norman](#) in the [March 10, 1999](#) issue

*By Robert Drake, What Will You Do for an Encore. (Mercer University Press)*

Some 30 years ago Robert Drake, a professor of English at the University of Tennessee, began publishing a series of what he passed off, without noticeable objection from an ever-widening circle of readers, as "stories"--short stories with lots of authorial commentary mixed in, as if Henry Fielding had gotten inside the head of Eudora Welty. Soon these pieces were collected into books. Now comes the finest of the lot.

Almost all of Drake's writing has had to do with his home country or, as he liked to say, his true country--the unremarkable stretch of West Tennessee that runs from Memphis north along the Mississippi toward Dyersburg and Ripley and then gives way, just above Union City, to Kentucky and the Midwest. As Drake is quick to admit, this is not scenery that demands much from people passing through it. You could turn away from the car window and have a good nap without missing much of anything. But Drake country has little to with external appearance. It is a territory of the mind, and meditation is Drake's technique for exploring it.

Not that Drake's world is solitary. On the contrary, it is crowded with voices--the comfortable, quizzical, slightly amused voices of his often long-departed relatives and neighbors. These people ponder and reponder the life they live together in and around Woodville--Drake's fictitious name for Ripley, where he grew up. "Voices at the back of my mind," Drake calls them. He looks for the secret and pattern of human relationships that is sure to emerge if we listen hard and long enough, and with proper respect for the way words roll off the small-town tongue. Subjects of the faithful act of meditation, these people are anchored for all time in the abiding mind and love of God.

Are Drake's stories fiction or autobiography? In the title story, the question, "What will you do for an encore?" leads into an explicitly Christian reflection on the central theological problem of repetition. The charming story, "What Papa Said, or Sleeping Under Two Blankets Every Night," examines the conventional and often

contradictory things a small boy in 1930s Woodville would have heard from his elders about going on fancy trips to distant places or staying at home where you belong. This piece is both all fact and all fiction, showing the immense credulity and the utter skepticism a sensible child will bring away from his first lessons of whatever provenance.

The mother in "Raining Cotton" tells her son to rise above the slights he must endure; the father tells him, "Son, don't ever be little." The boy isn't sure that what his parents said makes sense. And Drake is still wondering and worrying about its applicability in the world of adulthood. Readers who see only nostalgia in Drake's meditations have missed the bracing clarity of his persistent questions. His skepticism has never lost its footing. Almost all the hilarity, of which there is a full measure in these stories, comes straight from this abiding skepticism.