Where Trouble Sleeps, by Clyde Edgerton

reviewed by Victoria A. Rebeck in the June 17, 1998 issue

Listre, North Carolina, exists only in the mind of Clyde Edgerton, but the conversation there is as real as any you'd hear at a bait shop or diner. And Edgerton's delivery is wickedly funny. His narration is concise and spare; his plots move primarily through his characters' words and thoughts.

Listre's citizenry first appeared in *Walking Across Egypt*, a rich novel with a deceptively breezy tone. *Egypt* introduced us to Mattie Rigsbee, a guileless 78-year-old churchgoer who takes the Bible literally--even the parts that other literalists take metaphorically, like "whatever you do to the least of these my brethren, you do for me." She takes this verse to heart when she meets Wesley Benfield, a teenage delinquent who tries to rob her and whom she tries to reform with some grandmotherly love. Edgerton is wry and unsentimental, yet sympathetic.

Edgerton returned to Listre in *Killer Diller* and *Raney*, and does so again in this, his sixth novel. *Where Trouble Sleeps* is a prequel; it takes us to the Listre of the 1950s, when life was slow and predictable--until Delbert Jones (an alias of Jack Umstead) rattles the skeletons in the closets. This small-time con man befriends the locals by inventing a personal history that implies he was raised not far away. He eases their distrust enough to take advantage of them--and to influence them to make some selfish choices.

While the drama works itself out, a dog named Trouble starts each morning by choosing where he will sleep for the day. Owner Train Redding has discovered that Trouble's choice coincides with the weather. Don't bet with Train on whether it will rain or not; the lethargic Trouble never lets him down.

Listre has its good families, ne'er-do-wells and just plain eccentrics. Preacher Crenshaw at the Baptist Church has learned to accommodate the town sinners. "Somehow beer-drinking out-of-doors at Train's had bled into the community so slowly it had escaped public condemnation. . . . And besides, Train's was just a little too close to home for direct lambasting. Though Lord knows, drinking was lambasted from his pulpit. But just about anybody who drank beer at Train's Place had had

relatives in the church and there was no need to go stirring up trouble close to home. Unless it got worse."

Crenshaw ponders this theme as he visits Alease Toomey, protective mother of six-year-old Stephen. A good dose of preventive medicine, she has decided, would be to take Stephen and playmate Terry Daniels to the state penitentiary to see the electric chair. ("I don't think you can start teaching them too young," she explains to her neighbor. "About . . . electricity?" the neighbor responds.) The tentative Stephen is an unlikely candidate for capital crime; the worst sin he can think of is drinking beer.

Across the street from the right-living Alease is the house of the Daniels. The parents are depressed alcoholics--the mother, Inez, sends young Terry on errands to the liquor store. The oldest daughter, Cheryl, is a voluptuous, flirtatious waitress. Unlike the pampered Stephen, little Terry has been inside the local tavern, eyed the pinups decorating its walls and overheard the regulars' earthy jokes.

Mrs. Claude T. Clark (Dorothea), the Baptist Church's secretary, has an almost romantic devotion to Christ. After injuring her ankle she decides that she cannot make the trip between her home and work and spends her nights in the church. Making up a bed for herself on a couch, "she felt within the very clean presence of the Lord Jesus." Washing herself in the bathroom sink, she hums "In the Garden."

Before settling down for the night, Dorothea prays in a familiar at-a-loss-for-words style:

> Dear Lord . . . thank You for this church, for this community, for our country, and the state, and the United States, and our North American continent. We pray for the sick and we pray for all babies without mothers. We're also thankful for our earth, our solar system, the Milky Way, everything in the universe, and the universe itself. We pray for those in hardship like Alease Toomey with her brother. . . . Be with Alease. Help us to love one another and for all of us in this church to come to Jesus and accept Him as our Lord and Saviour.

Umstead tries to befriend almost everyone he meets, but small-town denizens, though hospitable, do not easily give up their distrust of strangers. He claims to have relatives in nearby Traveler's Rest (you'll find it on a map of South Carolina), but his failure to abbreviate the name as T. R. raises suspicions. Others find his

mystery alluring. Cheryl Daniels, eager to change her life, falls under his spell, romanced by his tales of adventure.

The narrative is interspersed with vignettes detailing what is happening in various parts of town, people’s mundane activities as well as their secret shames. A thunderstorm at the end of the novel puts in motion a series of events that touches the townspeople’s vulnerable points and provokes some surprising reactions.

The book is a fast and entertaining read. It is as smooth as Jack Umstead; like the townspeople, we don’t immediately realize the significance of what’s happening to Listre, though we have an unsettled feeling all along. Don’t read too fast, lest you miss the deliberate pace of life in a small southern town or the universal in Listre’s particulars.