

Lake Charles writer explores twisted familial

BY SARAH SUE GOLDSMITH

Books editor

“Somewhere I had got the crazy notion that if you just fed them, wormed them, kept their ears fairly clean, and loved them with all your might, somehow everything would turn out okay in the end,” says the narrator of Rick Norman’s new novel, **Cross Body Block** (Colonial Press, 3325 Burning Tree Drive, Birmingham, AL 35226, \$9.95 pb.) on the subject of rearing children.

READINGS

Turns out, however, that “it ain’t Ozzie and Harriet.”

Rick Norman, a Lake Charles trial lawyer,

is a former high school coach and baseball player. His photo shows him wearing an LSU cap.

In this sequel to *Fielder’s Choice*, readers revisit the coach 25 years later. He spins his yarn from present to past, balancing the pathos with wry humor and self examination. He didn’t believe in spanking his children, so he sent them to their rooms as punishment — rooms fully outfitted with radios, weights and Playboys stuffed under the mattress. Flashbacks to severe beatings he received as a child explain his sparing the rod with his own children. In contrast, his Bible-quoting wife, Dixie, applies the rod liberally.

But something has gone terribly wrong. One son has been murdered and another son is in jail. A daughter died several years earlier of cancer. A third son, who plays ball for the Yankees, is in crisis.

This study of football, corporal punishment, child abuse and religion is thought-provoking, and Norman’s prowess at spinning a yarn draws the reader to the end of

the story in one sitting.

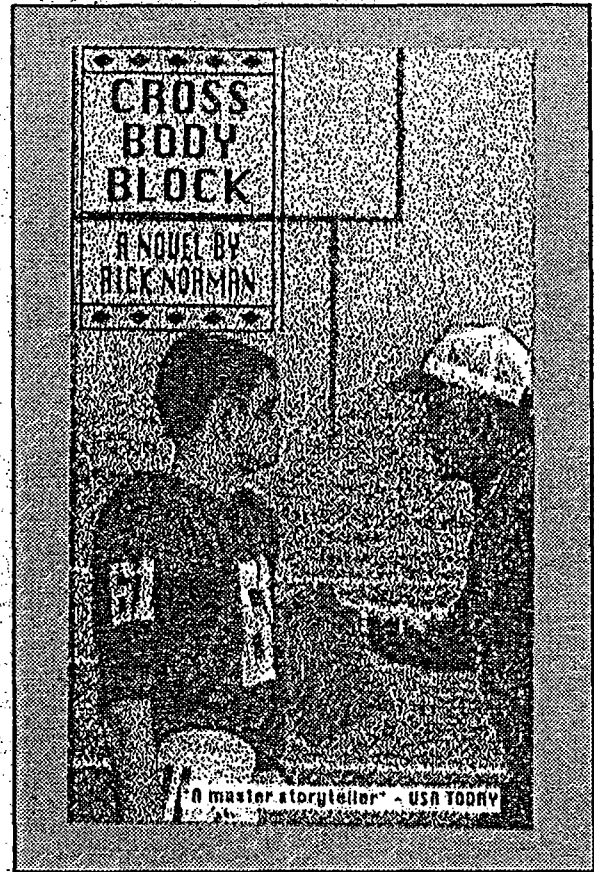
Interwoven into the disintegration of the family is a certain amount of Southern nuttiness and decadence. The climax is probably the death of Jax’s beloved horse, Gayle Sayers. Everything falls apart from that point.

Jax Fielder’s wife, Dixie, was first married to brother Jugs, who was killed in the Pacific during World War II. Her second husband was brother Jude, who graduated from beating puppies to beating little Jackson, Jugs and Dixie’s son. So

when Jax marries Dixie (husband #3, if you’re not paying attention), he takes on the rearing of his own nephew as his eldest son, trying in vain to undo the damage done by the abusive Jude.

Dixie escapes into religion and Bible quoting as a way of avoiding life. She’s been so busy teaching the children right from wrong that she’s forgotten how to be a mother.

The story is suspenseful, waiting until the characters have been sketched and the events fully delineated before arriving at the moment of revelation — the explanation of why the family has come apart at



the seams in week of viol

Book signings/re: conference:

Today — M Bensman and Metcalf will prose read in Baton Rouge Gallery, 144 Park Ave., at 7 p.m. in the Sundays at series.

Bensman, native of Poland, will stories from book, *A Glimpse of Paradise*, which describes his childhood memories of living in Poland and the Soviet Union during World War II and surviving

years in a labor camp. Metcalf was born in England and lived in Canada and Australia before moving to Baton Rouge.

Wednesday — Big Book Sale at Clearview Shopping Center, I-10 N. Clearview exit, 4436 Veterans Blvd. Metairie, to benefit the Friends of the Jefferson Public Library. Sale runs through Sunday, Oct. 6. Hours are 9 a.m. to 9 p.m. daily and noon to 5 p.m. on Sunday.

Friday — Julia Sims, author of *Mojo Swamp: Louisiana's Undiscovered Wilderness*, will be signing her book 6 to 9 p.m. at Gateway Gallery, 1291 St. in Ponchatoula. Sims will also be

Norman, Rick. **Cross Body Block**. Colonial Press, 1996. \$9.95 trade pb. 220p. 1-56883-060-2.

Jackson Fielder, middle-aged interim football coach, is also a father grieving for a dead daughter and an estranged son, and an unsuccessful husband. His wife has chosen religiosity as a consolation for her losses; for her remaining two sons she has only Biblical injunction and chastisement. Violence is the leitmotif of the novel. Fielder himself was raised by a violent father. He worked as assistant football coach for a man who used game violence as a winning strategy; he watched a neighbor's son, Andy, brutalized by his father and older brothers. The two younger Fielder boys are the final movers in this choreography. The older, Knuck, increasingly relies on violence on and off the field, and young Frances, outwardly pliant and gentle, is inwardly beset by demons. Watching his family disintegrate, Fielder is finally driven to desperate action. He benches Knuck for

deliberately injuring an opposing player, briefly makes emotional contact with his wife, and reaches out to his oldest son. But a happy-ever-after ending eludes him: Knuck is brutally killed, and Francis is charged with his murder. Concluding this powerful story, Francis is released on bail. Fielder flees with him and Andy to Canada. The charges of murder will be dropped, and Fielder is reconciled with his eldest son, but he has lost his job and his wife, perhaps permanently.

A sequel to **Fielder's Choice**, this novel stands on its own merits. Fielder seems at first an unlikely hero for a young adult novel, but the reader comes to care for him and his family. Compelling messages

about grief, violence, and personal redemption will recommend this to a wide audience of young adult readers, and perhaps to some thoughtful high-school coaches.—Rayna Patton.

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Ottley, Ted. **Code of Deception**. Bantam Starfire, 1996. \$4.50. 196p. 0-553-56754-3.

After a suspicious fire is set at his high school, fifteen-year-old Jake Carson discovers a floppy disk saved in code. Genius that he is, Jake breaks the code and the adventure begins. It seems a cruel Nazi doctor is seeking revenge on the Carson family—all based on the notion that Jake's grandfather



Cross Body Block

Sequel continues saga of fictional coach Jackson Fielder

By Robin Miller
Staff reporter

BATON ROUGE — You have to hand it to Rick Norman. He doesn't bend.

Not even when the gale wind is generated by Hurricane Polly.

That's his wife, Polly. She doesn't carry the vengeance of a storm, so it's probably not fair to compare her anger to a hurricane. She is angry, nevertheless.

Why not? No one really wants to be labeled head of the Women-Who-Wish-They-Would-Have-Been-Born-Men-So-They-Could-Be-Pope Club.

That's Women-Who-Would-Be-Pope for short.

That's also what Polly thought when she first read about Dixie, Jackson Fielder's wife in Norman's new novel, *Cross Body Block*.

It's not that she's actually head of such a club. She isn't.

It just that some of her characteristics match those of Dixie, just as some of Norman's characteristics match those of Jackson.

Polly doesn't want to be Dixie. "She isn't," Norman says, flashing a smile that will keep readers turning to the second-to-last page of the book.

That page shows Norman seated in a stadium. An LSU baseball cap sits atop his head, and he holds what appears to be a furled high school football program.

Fans of Louisiana State University sports will certainly take notice, but the hat isn't the first thing that catches attention. It's his smile.

Just as it is here. There's an aura about it, a genuine air of friendliness — something that attracts. People can't help but be drawn to him.

And no matter how angry Polly may have been, the anger couldn't have stirred too long. Not with this glow shining back at her.

Still, it hasn't been enough to attract droves to the Perkins Road location of Books-A-Million this afternoon. Perhaps the lingering threat of rain has something to do with it, or maybe it's because LSU is playing Vanderbilt in town.

It's more likely because Norman's last name isn't Grisham or Crichton or Clancy or Rice or Steel.

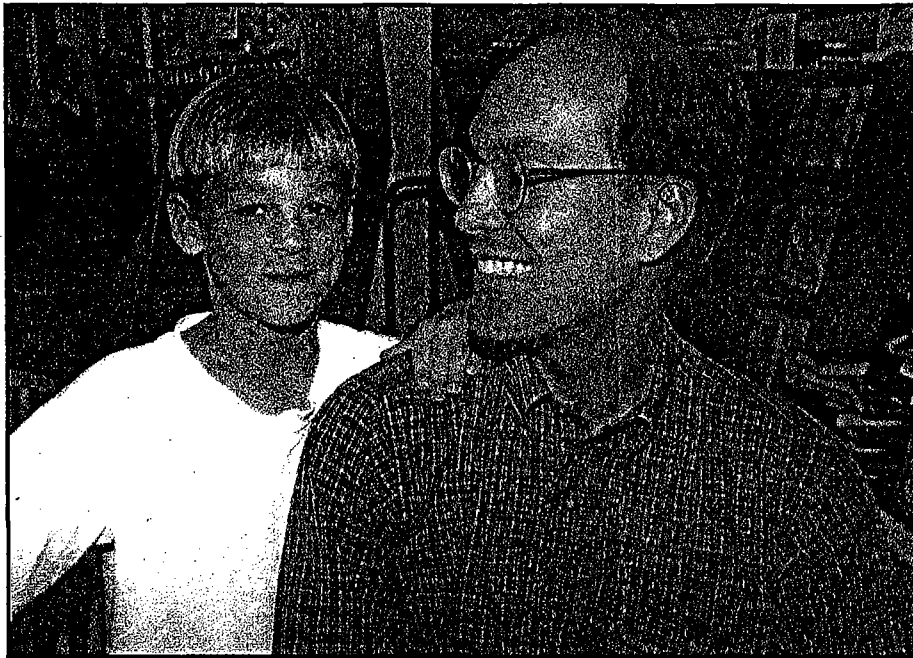
Well, Norman is an attorney, but his home isn't Oxford, Miss., or Virginia. It's Lake Charles.

His specialty isn't legal thrillers, either. It's more like Southern Gothic wrapped around football served up on a platter engraved in religious icons.

It doesn't matter. Norman isn't bothered. Sales aren't lacking because of it, either.

Schools around the state have put in mass orders for his first novel, *Fielder's Choice*, incorporating it into their curricula. Readers, in general, picked up on it, too.

Norman is hoping for the same type of success for *Fielder's Choice's* sequel, which, of course, is *Cross Body Block*, released this month by Colonial Press of Birmingham, Ala. Enter the Women-Who-Would-Be-Pope Club. It's just one of the comical things in *Cross Body Block* that intensi-



Author Rick Norman (right) shares a laugh with son Joe at a book signing in Baton Rouge for his sequel to the Lake Charles attorney's first novel *Fielder's Choice*.
Melinda Martinez — Staff reporter

fies the tragedy of it all.

Here's a once-happy family torn apart by the death of one of its members, as well as the differing personalities and beliefs of the parents heading it.

One believes in corporal punishment, discipline by way of the staff. The other believes in a psychological approach, discipline by monsters, if you will.

For instance, a kid does something bad. One parent tries discipline through spanking. The other tries to avoid violence of any type by making up a monster for the cause — "If you sneak cookies out of the cookie jar again, the cookie monster will get you."

Something like that. Anyway, the comedy is purely hilarious, but it's painted on a dark canvas of calamity, following the path of its predecessor.

Speaking of which, *Fielder's Choice* was released in 1991 by August House of Little Rock, Ark. It follows the professional baseball and World War II careers of Jackson Fielder, which lead him back home to El Dorado, Ark.

Cross Body Block picks up with Fielder and his family in Little Rock, Ark., where he has since moved his family and has started work as a coach at Nathan Bedford Forrest High School.

By this time, Fielder is head football coach, and his sons Knuck and Francis are on the team. His adopted oldest son and namesake, meanwhile, is pitching for the New York Yankees.

Little Jackson, as he is called, is Dixie's son from her marriage to Fielder's older brother Jugs. The couple named their son for

Fielder, and Fielder married Dixie and adopted Jackson after Jugs' overseas death in World War II.

There's also a daughter, Rosie, also the name of Norman's real-life daughter.

"Rosie dies in the book," Norman says, shrugging slightly, still smiling. "My Rosie didn't like that too much."

Hmmm, more family strife?

Not really. The whole family accompanied Norman on this trip. They've gone to get food, leaving him at the book store a few minutes.

"They're supposed to bring us something to eat, too," Norman says, glancing at the door.

No family in sight yet. That is, except for the faithful 7-year-old at his side.

Just Joe

Joe is his name, blond hair hanging straight on his forehead. Somewhere away from the table come whispers that Norman looks like the dad in "Calvin and Hobbes" cartoons.

"And look," the whispers continue, "he even has a Calvin to match."

Maybe so. Norman does have that calm demeanor of Calvin's dad, but Joe really doesn't act anything like Calvin. Or like Francis, the youngest son in *Cross Body Block*, either.

And who's to say Norman's 11-year-old son Jud bears any resemblance — physically or mentally — to Knuck?

"Some things are autobiographical," Norman says. "You can't write about something you don't know, but once the first book was

written, the characters took on a life of their own. They were like separate people — I knew them."

So, getting back to the story.

Fielder coaches football, his sons are on his team. Rosie dies, which is really giving nothing in the story away because Fielder, also the story's narrator, lets the reader know this virtually from the beginning.

Rosie's death is also the beginning of Dixie's religious path and the formation of the group of church ladies to which Fielder so fondly refers as the Women-Who-Would-Be-Pope.

These are the closest Dixie ever comes to friends, women whose conversations are laced with scriptures, who huddle around candles and shrines and "think they have an inside track to heaven because they've been given 'Top Sacred' clearance by the Monsignor and can go in back of the altar."

There are problems with solutions turning into more problems, creating comedic scenes and, ultimately, tragic results.

All snaps with the snap of an opposing football player's knee.

Nathan Bedford Forrest High School is one game away from the Arkansas High School State Championship. Everyone is revved, especially Knuck, who is more inclined toward violence than some people.

Francis, the team's kicker, is plowed under time after time by a linebacker on the opposing team. Fielder decides to put a stop to it by sneaking Knuck in on the kicking team.

Knuck throws a cross body block against the linebacker, thus

saving his brother from yet another tackle. But Knuck's action is something more, as Fielder recounts:

He said he was going to hit the fellow helmet-to-helmet and see if he could knock him out or, better yet, flat out kill him. But at the last minute he decided to cut the guy down low. Knuck said his helmet and right shoulder caught their headhunter's knee just as he planted and Knuck heard the boy's knee explode right in his helmet ear hole. He likened it to the sound of a broken-bat single. He said it was the greatest moment of his life. Even through all the tape on his face, I could tell he was smiling from ear to ear. Sam Huff had nothing on Knuck no more.

A small incident compared to other happenings in the novel, but such happenings usually constitute turning points.

As does this one. Fielder sees something dangerous in his son, which clarifies the potential explosiveness of his entire family situation. He isn't happy. No one in his family is truly happy. Someone must take control.

Yet you'd never know a character of such turmoil could be generated from someone with Norman's smile. He's had his own bout with turmoil.

"It was a strange process," he says. "I was working a lot, and I was at a stressful time in my work. I came down with what's called the Yuppie flu."

"When I came down with it, I was sent to a cancer doctor. I actually thought I was going to die, though it wasn't serious. So, my original idea was to make audio tapes for my kids like, 'Rosie, this is your first date. He's going to tell you that he loves you, but he really doesn't.' Things like that."

He laughs, shaking his head in mockery of himself. His daughter would probably laugh, too.

"That didn't work," he continues, "so I started writing."

He laughs again. He is clearly comfortable in his surroundings having grown up in Baton Rouge and graduating from Tara High School, then LSU. He also earned his law degree from LSU, later going into practice with his wife's father in Lake Charles.

Baton Rouge is dear to him, though. *Cross Body Block* may be set in Little Rock, but the city is Baton Rouge.

Even the Catholic church with the scary fresco of Jesus at the front of the sanctuary. It's Sacred Heart Catholic Church, found in downtown Baton Rouge.

Norman also coached high school football, baseball and track at St. Thomas Moore, a Catholic school in Baton Rouge.

"He coaches soccer now," son Joe says, shooting a quick, but proud glance toward his father.

"Yeah, I coach soccer," Norman says, gathering his son for a quick hug.

He also writes books and is true to his characters. If he had bent, even in the midst of wrath; *Cross Body Block* just wouldn't be.

Even the Women-Who-Would-Be-Pope Club would understand that.

Author

Title

Norman, Rick. Cross Body Block. 1996. \$9.95
pbk. 215pp. Colonial Press. 1-56883-060-2. (ISBN)
95-71611. Grade 9-Adult.

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Jackson "Gooseball" Fielder from Norman's 1991 novel, *Fielder's Choice*, is back. Twenty-five years have passed and Jackson is a high school assistant football coach. He has traveled many a bumpy road to reach this point, and he still struggles with his family. Because he remembers the beatings he suffered at the hand of his father, he avoids disciplining his own children. His stepson is estranged from the family, and his wife has become a religious fanatic following the death of their daughter. She either ignores the two younger high school age sons, known for their elaborate pranks, or disciplines them with a heavy hand. Eventually, one son ends up dead and the other finds himself in jail. While he does exaggerate the family's dysfunctional existence, Norman's use of language, especially his dialogue, is superb. This story encourages a re-evaluation of the importance of sports and is excellent for group discussions. The book has wide appeal for high school boys, but girls will also enjoy it. [Colonial Press, 3325 Burning Tree Dr., Birmingham, AL 35226] Recommended.
Melissa Bibbey

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A copy of this was sent to
Baker & Taylor.