

... *In the Labyrinth all deals are shady.*  
*Skullduggery holds sway. From the front door ashen*  
*Theseus puts on a good face, touts his victory—*  
*the Monster to market— while from the back the*  
*Minotaur skulks into a tepid eternity;*  
*high, the costs of living.*

Inherent in the word *myth* lurks vague notions of a time long past. Way back then, there must have been little choice but to explain the mysteries of existence by way of fantastical tales that pit humans against, placed them among, even embodied them in more powerful supernatural beings. However dubious the motivations of some of these gods, and however dubious the logic—if it's fair to use the word—of the stories, they were sufficient at explaining things. The question is, are we that far removed from the process today?

Edith Hamilton describes the Minotaur as “a monster, half bull, half human,” who was born to Pasiphaë, the wife of Minos, and a beautiful bull who had been given to Minos by Poseidon. Poseidon expected Minos to sacrifice the bull as a tribute to him, but once Minos caught sight of the rare creature, he could not bear to give him up. Poseidon punished Minos for his greed by making his wife lose her heart to the bull. Their union produced the Minotaur.

When the Minotaur was born, Minos chose not to kill him, but rather placed him in a twisted prison crafted by the famed inventor Daedalus. The Labyrinth was a puzzle of a place soon known worldwide. Within this maze, many youths and maidens met their deaths. All paths eventually led to the deadly horns of the Minotaur.

Around this time, mighty Theseus sailed into Athens, where he soon heard the tale of the hapless youths who were being offered up in Crete. He promptly stepped forward with an offer to join them. His action garnered widespread admiration, but few knew what Theseus was planning.

Soon, the day came for the victims to march to the Labyrinth. Amidst those watching the parade was young Ariadne, the daughter of Minos, who lost her heart to

Theseus at first sight. A resourceful girl, she quickly sent for Daedalus, whom she asked for the key to escape from the Labyrinth. She then sought out Theseus and promised him the secret if he would agree to return to Athens and marry her. Theseus accepted this proposal, at which point Ariadne revealed the solution Daedalus had offered: Theseus could unwind a ball of twine as he wound through the maze. He could thereby trace his steps back to whence he entered.

Thus armed, Theseus entered the Labyrinth and sought out the Minotaur, whom he found sleeping. He fell upon him, pinned him to the ground, and killed him on the spot. Then, following the thread to the entrance, he led those who had entered with him to freedom. Theseus himself went to Ariadne. The two then fled back to his ship and to Athens.

... *The Minotaur dreams the brevity of hearts in a labyrinth of days*  
*Dreams a flock of grackles settling in a field of narcissus*  
*The birds descend in unison, their wing beats cease*

#### AUTHOR'S STATEMENT:

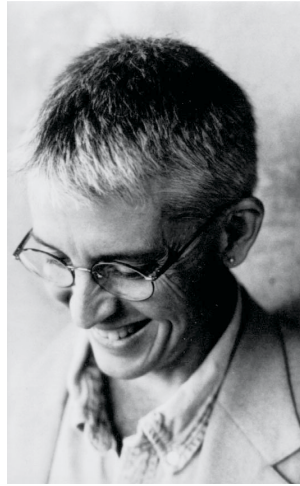
Despite the constant and increasing barrage of knowledge, information, technology, etceteras, how different is our world now? Look closely and you'll find that there is an undeniable immediacy to *mythmaking*. We still seek, often desperately, explanations for the mysteries, the horrors, and the beauties we encounter as we move through our days. We hammer, pound, wrench, and torque our experiences, our memories into (seemingly) neat packages of understanding.

Mythomania: a compulsive tendency to tell lies. I found the word in a mildewed and unraveling *Funk & Wagnalls Dictionary*. God knows I can barely get my own name out in its true form. But in the process of gathering and telling all the lies necessary to make this book, I've come to a conclusion. Our mythomania, our compulsive tendencies—drives that originate deep in our collective core, drives to find, to capture, and to hold to any truths in a world that recreates itself every moment—are so much more than mere lies. They are vital and necessary. They even pay homage to the

creative force itself. While all this comes dangerously close to being highfalutin', a lot of empty blah-blah-blah, I want to downshift here in a big way. Mostly, I just tried to write an entertaining book. I've always loved making things up. Creating worlds. There seems to be no rhyme or reason to things that have influenced me, at least none that I can see. I'll confess to an almost familial love of Flannery O'Connor, and an equally strong love for the gritty lyrics of Tom Waits. I am awestruck by the magic of Jeanette Winterson, Milan Kundera, Marquez, Rushdie, et al. I'm still fascinated by all those Bible stories I heard as a boy. I still cry sometimes over a good fiddle tune, and the way a clawhammer banjo sometimes sounds like water spilling over stones. I miss fish camps, the smell of gasoline on packed dirt, sheds, and outbuildings of all kinds. I am drawn, eagerly, to all things funky and weird. I tell stories and write poems because it's my way of paying homage. I tried to write a funny book, because I think getting life's joke is important. I tried to write a book that is honest, believable, and grounded in reality, despite having a main character with the head of a bull and the body of a man.

Moment by moment, we create the gods and monsters of our own lives; we make epic our individual struggles, tragic our most miniscule losses, and heroic our little successes. We work hard to rationalize or in some way justify our actions, to align them to often disparate outcomes. It is a dance that is at once sacred and lamentable. At the heart of all this frantic mythmaking lies a truth absurd in its simplicity and profound in its grace. Our monsters are nothing more than reflections. Intangible—if not harmless—mirror images. Without this awareness, they loom large. They stomp about and muck up lives with abandon. But when we recognize the charade, what is monstrous in us grows softer, less frightening. Grows no less eternal but infinitely more human: forever fallible, sometimes weak, and often miraculous. That beautiful alchemy of contradictions that refuses to be pinned down by mere definitions, that defies all but the most momentary containment, that thing that is life.

1. From what point of view is the story delivered? Is it constant? Are there moments or passages that occur outside the ongoing narrative?
2. How does the Minotaur resolve the paradoxical work that he now finds himself doing?
3. What roles do Grub and his family play in the book and in the Minotaur's life?
4. How do the dream sequences/chapters function?
5. In your opinion, what is the reason for placing the Minotaur in the twentieth-century American South? How does this setting resemble and/or differ from the Minotaur's original home of Crete?
6. Throughout the book, in the Minotaur's journey, he has several encounters with creatures who share his mythic past. Describe these meetings and explain their significance in the context of the story.
7. The entire book takes place in a span of less than three weeks in the Minotaur's never-ending life. What are some possible reasons for this? How does time function throughout the book?
8. Are there themes and/or images you can identify as recurring throughout the book?
9. How do the Minotaur's assorted neighbors and his life at Lucky-U Mobile Estates reflect the themes and issues in the book?
10. What, both literally and mythically, does the corn-dog trailer represent to the Minotaur?
11. How can you explain the Minotaur's appreciation of and understanding for things mechanical?
12. What are the various moments and levels of humor at work in the book?
13. The Minotaur seems to display his most human emotions in his reactions to Kelly. What is it about Kelly that evokes his feelings of compassion and pathos?
14. What of the Labyrinth that was created for the Minotaur in myth? Does its existence suggest anything about the Minotaur's future?



#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Steven Sherrill writes "I was born in Mooresville, N.C., in 1961 and continued to live in and around there for the first thirty years of my life. My formal education was rocky. It didn't begin in earnest until I enrolled in a vocational program for welding; I built myself a nice aluminum boat. A creative writing course turned things around and I ended up—more than 10 years later—in the Iowa Writers' Workshop.

While in Iowa, I met my wife, poet Barbara Campbell. Together, we collaborated on the most miraculous poem of our combined lives—Maude Eleanor Rose, born July 1996—who daily teaches me what being a man—compassionate, patient, humble, forgiving, joyous, etc.—is all about. We live together near Chicago with the most amazing Frisbee dog in the world, an Australian shepherd by the name of Glory Hallelujah."

Steven is a graduate of UNC-Charlotte and holds an MFA in poetry from the Iowa Writers' Workshop. He was the recipient of a Lila Wallace/Reader's Digest Fellowship to the MacDowell Colony. His poems and stories have appeared in *Best American Poetry*, *Kenyon Review*, *ACM: Another Chicago Magazine*, *Georgia Review*, *Mid-American Review*, and others. He lives in Highland Park, Illinois.



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by Steven Sherrill

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