About the editor
Editor, essayist, and acclaimed writer of short fiction, Michael Martone is the director of the Program for Creative Writing at the University of Alabama. A Fort Wayne, Indiana, native, Martone has published a number of collections of short stories, including the inventive and widely admired *Fort Wayne Is Seventh on Hitler's List* (1990, 1993). His most recent work is a collection of essays, *The Flatness and Other Landscapes* (2000).

Discussion questions
As you move from *Townships* to the other works in the StoryLines Midwest series, think about what being Midwestern means to you and to each of the writers in the series. Use the questions below as a guide.

What *does* it mean to be a Midwesterner? Is there a common ground of experience? "It seems to me that the metaphors linking us together as Midwesterners are few and flimsy," cautions Michael Martone in his introduction to *Townships*. "Even the simple argument about the Midwest's location is a telling one."

How do the writers in *Townships* depict their places of origin? What qualities—geographic, psychological, social, historical—mark the region? Is there enough consensus to make "Midwestern" a useful term in understanding a person's background? Is "being in the middle" or "away from the edges" a significant aspect of the region?

Politically, the Midwest has been associated with both conservatism and radicalism. Why do you think this is so? What in the nature of the Midwest might support these seemingly paradoxical points of view?

If you were raised in the Midwest, where do these essays strike a chord with you (and where not)? If you're an "outsider," what aspects of Midwestern-ness seem especially foreign to you?

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BARNES & NOBLE BOOKSELLERS

Townships

edited by Michael Martone
photographs by Raymond Bial

StoryLines Midwest
Discussion Guide No. 1

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StoryLines America

A Radio/Library Partnership Exploring Our Regional Literature

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Don't look for the gaudy attractions. Grand Canyon, El Capitan, Waikiki. The Midwest is swales, cattail marshes, oxbows, moraines, limestone cliffs, "oceanic fields of corn and soybeans," terrain "as regular as Mannington bathroom tile." It has the Mississippi, the Missouri, the Ohio, Lake Superior, the great Serpent Mound, the Duluth Gabbro Complex. It's bloodroot, wild rice, corn borers, ethanol, arrowheads. Viaducts, jackknife bridges, the Projects ("floor upon floor of poverty piled up to the sky"). It's Washtenaw, New Trier, Future Farmers of America, Shawnee, Concordia, Rhinelander; it's New Harmony and St. John's Lutheran and the Coast-to-Coast.

Townships editor Michael Martone invited two dozen writers from Ohio, Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Wisconsin, Minnesota, and Iowa to contribute personal essays for a book that would be "a kind of crazy quilt" about the Midwest. The township—as unit of measure, as community, as metaphor—struck him as a uniquely appropriate gathering point. He asked the writers first "to think of their actual townships, if they knew them at all, or to extend the notion to any bordered region of their childhoods and how those places formed them and inform their writing today."

The surveying of the Midwest into townships (six-by-six mile squares, subdividable into 36 sections of 640 acres each) began with Thomas Jefferson's passion to map the land that lay west of the original colonies. "No other feature so marks the Midwestern landscape as the signature of townships," Martone writes. "There is nothing natural about it. It is not like the Spanish moss drooping from Southern trees or the dripping ferns of the Pacific Northwest.…We know the Midwest by this arbitrary and artificial pattern that has been imposed on it."

Martone's own essay is called "Correctionville, Iowa." A "correction line" is a jog in a survey that allows a two-dimensional grid to be superimposed on a globe. The writers in *Townships*, he suggests, make their own corrections, "minute though complex attempts at location."

A number of the writers do address their "actual townships." Poet Amy Clampitt describes the well-being of living along Honey Creek in the farm country of Providence Township, Iowa; James B. Hall gives us Jefferson Township, Ohio, in a fact-laden nutshell; C. J. Hribal tells about drinking and driving in rural Wisconsin ("a recipe for disaster: drunks in tin cars wobbling and whipping around in a pea soup fog that usually starts collecting over the roadways about midnight and stays through morning").

For Ray A. Young Bear, "township" is the Mesquakie Tribal Settlement in Tama County, Iowa; Michael Wilkerson traces his political awakening to Hensley Township, Indiana; David Foster Wallace gives an affable, word-happy treatise on geography and wind and junior tennis; short-story writer Stuart Dybek talks about the streets that formed the boundaries of neighborhoods in the near-South Side of Chicago; for Susan Neville the boundary of record is the faultline beneath her feet:

Out here in the heart of the country we've rationalized every inch of earth—all the straight lines of highway and farm and township—but mystery and wildness still lie waiting deep inside every particle of the world, waiting to whirl or crack or ooze into our ordered lives whether or not we've prepared for it.

Townships is a testament to the power of detail to lodge in memory, and to the ability of good writing to bring the remembered moment forth. But reading these essays, it strikes us at some point that *Townships* is about loss. In essay after essay, *leaving* and the impossibility of return except as a visitor are undercurrents. "We're shaped by our severings as well as our attachments," Lon Otto says.

Few of these writers have remained in, or near, their home places. One exception is Michael J. Rosen. For writers who do make the pilgrimage home, Rosen says, there's "the temptation to bask in or bolt from nostalgia." Scott Russell Sanders elaborates on this issue: "The Greek roots of nostalgia literally mean *return home pain*," he tells us. He's staring at the man-made lake that flooded the West Branch of the Mahoning River, and he's angry:

The pain comes not from returning home but from longing to return. Perhaps it is inevitable that a nation of immigrants—immigrants who violently displaced the native tribes of this continent, who enslaved and transported the people of Africa, who celebrate mobility as if humans were tumbleweed—that such a nation should lose the deeper meaning of this word. A footloose people, we find it difficult to honor the lifelong, bone-deep attachment to place. We are slow to acknowledge the pain in yearning for one's home ground, the deep anguish in not being able, ever, to return.

Many of the writers in *Townships* describe losses more acute than the natural changes that collect over anyone's lifetime. Like Sanders, they feel a mixture of sadness and outrage. Here is Paul Gruchow:

The farm survives, of course. In the midlands, land does not appear or vanish in the scale of a human lifetime. But it is now a kind of desert. The fencerows are gone. The house is gone. The marsh is gone. It was drained a long time ago. The waterfowl are gone, the raptors are gone, the burrowing animals are gone, the predators are gone. . . .Last season, the whole 160 acres of our farm was planted to a single crop—corn. I was wrong to say that the place has become a desert. There is hardly a desert so barren.

As Martone intended, *Townships* is a patchwork quilt—not a scientific sampling of all the Midwest's subregions and subcultures, but a generous and lively assemblage. We leave it remembering Verlyn Klinkenborg's memory of a "sun-soaked" summer afternoon when a man on a handcar came down the rails; Mary Swander on the smell of the glue factory in town ("no one made a public stink about the stink"). We remember, finally, passages like this one on old Michigan values from Howard Kohn:

Working the land, with its insistence on slow returns, never making money near what time went into it, was the given of the place, the purpose for all seasons. It brought you to God. . . . People in the township had an understanding of life in the quantifiable, in the pitilessly literal—in acres per field, bushels per acre, dollars per bushel—but, for all of that, people had a much larger belief in the higher consciousness of living right.