



Michael Thompson

THOMPSON FAMILY TALES

With roots in Benton, this family of writers shares stories inspired by food, fun and sports

BY CHRIS PEPPE



Wright Thompson

THE THOMPSON FAMILY stories start and continue around the table. Stories about shared meals and family gatherings. Stories about life in the Delta and living on the edge of it and trips away. The tales deepen when their family gets together to cook and laugh, and then the stories become the foundation for so much more. Like Wright Thompson's new TV show, *TrueSouth*, which is about food and restaurants across the region.

Perhaps the best storyteller of the entire clan was Wright's late father, Walter Wright Thompson. Many people throughout Mississippi remember Walter as a master storyteller. He could hold a crowd in suspense for hours. And although his stories were told as verbal hand-me-downs, the trait seems to have been passed down, presenting itself in written form through Wright.

The narratives that started in the Thompson's Southern kitchens and dining rooms have led several members of their family to tap into their storytelling skills to launch their careers as writers. The creativity that flows through many generations has seen four Thompson-family men use their writing talents to take on the worlds of

sports, music, marketing, and fiction.

The eldest of these writers is Michael Hicks Thompson, born on a farm in Yazoo County. The youngest of the original Thompson brothers, he has three nephews, Wright, John William, and Puffer, who are also full-time writers.

But let's start with Michael. He enjoyed a long career in marketing, but twelve years ago moved into the world of murder mysteries—Christian fiction writing. When speaking of his second career, Michael always remembers his roots. "As for my family, we're a clan, and we fight for each other," Michael claims. "For some odd reason, our family ties are bound through the experience of God and food.

Our family has always enjoyed discussing Him and our cooking, grilling, experimenting with food. We love to gather around the table and share a good meal and a buzzing good story. It has to be true, though; no fiction is allowed around our table, or you'll get called down for it. Shyness does not exist in our households."

The Thompson "Super Bowl" of feasts is Thanksgiving, with the location alternating between Yazoo City, Clarksdale, Oxford, and Memphis.

According to Michael, the family's creativity is easily traced. "We all know where we came from. Small town Mississippi. And guess what? We all have very creative mothers in our genes. My



John William Thompson

mother was a self-taught artist. She painted and sculpted whenever she could. My father built a kiln in our back yard for her to fire her clay works.”

Michael grew up in a rough and tumble, male hormone-laden environment. “I got caught up in twenty-three serious fist fights and I remember each one,” he laughs.

To his career credit, he used his creativity to start a one-person advertising agency that expanded to two cities—Memphis and Nashville—and eventually employed eighty-seven team members. His firm, Thompson & Company, won numerous national and international creative awards. After selling the firm in 2011, Michael knew he couldn’t walk away from his passion of writing; he just changed what he wrote.

He first novel used his fascination with the biblical story of David to write and publish a two-volume graphic novel titled *DAVID—The Illustrated Novel*. His new career proved successful as he brought home various awards including best graphic novel and best interior design from the International Book Awards.

“Then I sold my advertising agency, and knew I was ready for another career,” Michael acknowledges. “I turned to full-time writing. After my graphic novels, I moved into murder mysteries. The first novel, *The Rector*, came to me in a dream. I’ve completed two books in this solo series and now writing the third. *The Rector* has caught the attention of Hollywood and will hopefully soon be made into a movie.”

Michael brings his own style to his books as he blends his theology with his love for a good mystery. His novels delight his readers with the intensity of a psychological thriller that has hidden references and twists that draw the readers into each chapter. “I try to write cinematically—scenes that move at the same pace a movie would. I loathe novels that over-describe characters or scenes, ones that can go on for pages. Too much. Let the reader use their own imagination a bit. I like to have my reader participate with me in the story. Every scene, every paragraph needs a little conflict. I don’t want my reader to put the novel down. I’ve learned some secrets to keep them reading.” For now, he’s leaving his fans waiting for the filming of the movie and the release of his next book in the series.

Still, he concedes that his nephews are more talented writers than him.



Three generations: Puffer Thompson with his father and son.

“There’s a lot going on in our family. People find something profound to say and use their talents to express it whether it’s through art or music or advertising or writing.” – WRIGHT THOMPSON

Michael’s nephew, Wright Thompson, also knows the thrill of having fans waiting for his next project, such as his new TV show, *TrueSouth*.

“If there’s a Thompson that reminds us of Hemingway, it’s Wright,” exclaims, Michael. A senior writer for ESPN, Wright recently released his book titled *The Cost of These Dreams: Sports Stories and Other Serious Business*. When being interviewed on his book tour, Wright admitted, “This may be one of the most memorable moments of my career. I just spoke to a packed crowd in New York—*Golf Magazine’s* Varsity Letters at the Gallery at (Le) Poisson Rouge. I’m on the road headed to some other wonderful venues to talk about something that I truly love doing.”

As of this writing, Wright’s book is fourth on the *New York Times* Best Seller list. Needless to say, it’s quite an accomplishment.

Although Wright currently makes his home in Oxford, his career actually began Clarksdale where he grew up. While in elementary school, he started a neighborhood newspaper, and he never looked back from there. In college, he

joined the newspaper staff and was randomly assigned to write a sports column. He’s stuck with that field and has become one of America’s best-known sportswriters, bringing fans the stories of athletes and their journeys through courage and conflict, through hardships and overcoming them. He looks beyond the stats and gets to the hearts of the athletes, letting fans know what drives them in their personal and professional lives.

Wright doesn’t just stick to sports topics. He also admits that he has a passion for food like his other family members. “I’m thrilled that ESPN asked me to develop a show that tells the stories of restaurants of the South. As executive producer of *TrueSouth*, I can say credit goes to me only for being smart enough to ask John Edge to work on this. He’s phenomenal and does most of the work. I get to go around eating at all these fantastic off-the-grid places. It’s my second passion.”

Wright also gives credit to his family for encouraging him to embrace his creativity and use it to follow his passions in life. “My mother was a creative writing teacher.

There’s a lot going on in our family. People find something profound to say and use their talents to express it whether it’s through art or music or advertising or writing.” Wright believes, like all the other Thompson writers, that their mothers played a huge roll in their creative development.

Even with his writing, producing, and book tour, Wright still finds time to return to his Mississippi home to share a good meal and more stories with family. “One thing I know, though, is that when I retire, I’m going for that sailboat. No second or third career for me. I’m going to enjoy my time without a schedule to follow.”

John William Thompson, another nephew of Michael, isn’t even thinking about slowing down. He uses music to tell the stories that come from his life in the South. He grew up in Bentonia. “Mama says that as young child I would write what she called my ‘sing songs.’ That seems to be the first evidence that melody was the particular way I wanted to express myself. I was just drawn to music from then on. As a young kid, it was spinning Elvis and country classics like “Teddy Bear” by Red

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Sovine and “Wabash Cannon Ball” by Roy Acuff. As I moved into teen years, I am sure my family grew tired of my habit because I would carry my jam box everywhere I went. I didn’t have headphones, so I would hold this huge box up to my ear and keep the volume low so I didn’t disturb everyone else in the car.”

What may have seemed like a disturbance then has turned into a career as an award-winning singer/songwriter and led him to the stages of Nashville and around the world to perform for American service personnel on active duty. “I didn’t pursue avenues of performing as a young writer. I didn’t perform publicly until my wedding at the age of twenty-nine. I am not sure how I got through that because I suffered tremendously with stage fright. For the most part, I have conquered that, but it is still evident at times.” One of the most memorable times in his career came when playing for active duty military at Guantanamo when his brother was stationed there as the FBI’s agent-in-charge.

With 450 songs already written, John isn’t slowing down any time soon. “There are some songs that reflect the events of my life in the last couple of years that I need to get in the studio and get them recorded—songs like ‘Papa I’ which is truly one of my favorites to play. It’s a song speaking to my father and telling him that I have heard what I think was his most profound message to his children: don’t give up, whatever it is you are doing.”

Uncle Michael vouches for John William’s song-writing ability, “His way with words is haunting yet uplifting at the same time, if that’s possible.”

At the end of a long day, John cherishes his time around the table with family members. “If it’s one thing my family takes seriously, it’s food. My cousin Wright has written often on our family’s Thanksgiving feasts and the approval process of dishes that are accepted. It’s not that you are told not to bring something, but if the platter isn’t bare at the end of the day, that’s a pretty good hint. Papa loved to smoke meat, and my brother and I have certainly acquired that passion along with cooking up a batch of his famous barbecue sauce.”

Puffer Thompson, last but not least of the Thompson writers, takes his creativity into the world of marketing as a copywriter, though he also thought of becoming a chef

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and sharing his love of food with others outside of the family.

“When I graduated from Ole Miss, I knew I needed to choose a direction for a career. I got my love of cooking from my dad, but I decided to follow my Uncle Michael into advertising. Now I can come home from a day at the office and cook as my hobby.”

Puffer, who resides in the fair town of Fairhope, Alabama, but grew up in Yazoo City, runs his own agency, traveling frequently to work face-to-face with clients. “Though I’m a writer, in my field, visuals can be more powerful than words. I work with graphic designers and art directors to make sure that we are telling a memorable story—we are making someone’s brain click when we present an ad or content for a website.”

With an English teacher as a mother, Puffer learned early that he needed to make every word he wrote count. “I used to fear the blank page, but it’s a great feeling when you push through and the project’s done and you and the client both love it.”

One piece of his writing that thousands of people see each fall came through a request from a first cousin who works at Ole Miss. “Michael Jr. asked me to write something for their staff retreat that defines what Hotty Toddy means to Ole Miss alumni and fans. I had no idea at the time that it would end up on a plaque at the Walk of Champions beside Vaught-Hemingway Stadium. It’s my favorite piece of writing, but I would have stressed over it more had I known where it would hang.”

Puffer Thompson sums up the life that holds these four writers together. “It’s about the simple pleasures that we share. We all come together to cook or share a meal, and the stories just come. The Delta is known for its storytellers. We can be proud of it. Michael tells intriguing stories through his novels. Wright tells insightful stories of people in the sports and the food world. John moves people through his songs. I tell stories of companies or clients. Even our other family members decorate with their floral arrangements or write blogs or teach English or Sunday School. We all laugh together a lot. But we believe in one Savior. We could fill more than a few books with our own stories.”

Maybe writing their own stories, their memoirs, will be the next career move for one of them. **DU**



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