



RETURN to PLUTO

A literary wanderer plants roots on another planet – the Mississippi Delta



Pluto, Miss. — Richard Grant pilots his dustbowl-gray pickup down Bee Lake Road, a faded blacktop buffered by flat Delta farmland and its namesake serpentine oxbow, a swampy memory left by the Yazoo River after it changed course years ago.

Grant grew silent a few miles back, somewhere around Yazoo City. Moving away from Pluto, Miss., the setting of his bestselling memoir, *Dispatches From Pluto: Lost and Found in the Mississippi Delta*, was as difficult for him as living here was joyous. Since selling the house in April 2015, he's been back only twice.

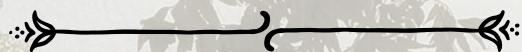
Selling the house “was very painful for me,” he admits. “I’m not looking forward to going back right now. It just makes me sad that I don’t live there anymore.”

Just before he dropped off the levee road of U.S. 49 East, Grant picked up his narrative again, pointing out the shotgun-scarred sign welcoming drivers to Holmes County. Now, as he threads the line into the corn fields, he sinks to Delta level, where the heat and dirt settle and the stalks rise, blocking the horizon. The domed sky is enormous, nearly cloudless, with a lightly hazy atmosphere.

“Now we’re on Pluto,” he announces.

After a dusty mile, the truck eases to a stop at the low-slung ranch home of Bobby T., who’s enjoying the summer sun from his wheelchair in the front yard. Grant talks about the crops and the Thompson clan, the family that calls this place home and who welcomed Grant as their own when he moved from New York City. Bobby is friendly, but his eyes continually retreat to a thousand-yard stare that reaches beyond the fields.

The road extends past Cathy Thompson’s home, nestled in a grove of majestic oaks, and the installed pool where Isobel, Grant’s daughter, took her first swim. We meander past a cluster of white-sided buildings and lean-tos stocked with farming equipment, and then immediately back to wide-open fields and endless sky.



"It was a beautiful day in April, and I'd been miserable in New York," Grant recalls of his first trip here with Martha Foose, the renowned chef and author who convinced him to visit her family's homestead on Pluto.

"I just laid under the shade tree, ate fried chicken and drank wine and listened to the birds," he said. "It just felt happy. I felt relaxed. I fell in love with the place."

As they toured the area, Grant remarked about an old home they passed. Foose's father owned it, and it was for sale at a price that would make any Manhattanite think twice. On his second trip to Pluto, he brought his girlfriend, Mariah, and by the time they returned to New York, Grant was running options on how he could buy the house.

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Grant, a natural wanderer, grew up in Malaysia, Kuwait, and, finally, London. He is the son of a British businessman with Anglo-Scottish roots. The move to England never settled with him and, after graduating college with a degree in history, his wanderlust grew.

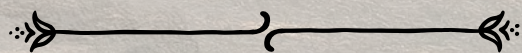
"I always felt I was on the outside of things looking in, trying to make sense of it," he said. "It's pretty much been like that ever since."

Feeling claustrophobic in his appointed homeland, Grant worked as a security guard to save enough money to reach New York, where he had friends. He migrated to Philadelphia and painted houses, amassing enough to travel to Los Angeles, then spent time criss-crossing the country doing odd jobs before settling in Tucson, Ariz., and eking out a meager living as a freelance writer.

"You could rent a little adobe house for \$300 a month, which is what I did," he said. "I lived on rice and beans — on an absolute shoestring — for years and years and years, selling stories mainly to magazines in Britain."


Grant contends he didn't work too hard, by design. His camping trips, river expeditions and ventures south of the border gave him ample writing material. Gradually, his journalism led to books, such as *God's Middle Finger*, an exploration of virtually lawless rural Mexico, and *Crazy River*, concerning travels in East Africa — and those led to a documentary for the BBC.

Such a winning streak caused him to reconsider New York, the literary capital of America, where many of his friends lived and where he expected to stay busy. He and Mariah decided to leave Arizona for a downtown Manhattan



TOP LEFT: A dusty typewriter sits at Richard Grant's former home in Pluto, top right. **BELOW:** Scenes from the home and property that inspired Richard Grant's book.



A man with short brown hair, wearing a light blue button-down shirt with rolled-up sleeves, light blue trousers, and a brown belt with a large gold buckle, stands on a wooden porch. He has his arms crossed and is smiling, looking off to the side. In the background, there is a yellow house with white trim and large windows. A white rocking chair is visible on the porch to the right. A potted plant is on the left.

"This is an extraordinary place that sort of defies explanation. It causes people to try to explain it through writing, through music. I think it has one of the deepest, richest, most contradictory cultures in America."

— RICHARD GRANT

ANOTHER WORLD

Author Richard Grant soaks up the scenery at the site of his former home in Pluto. The Delta town was the inspiration for his best-selling book, *Dispatches from Pluto*.



Author Richard Grant walks through a patch of bamboo at his former home in Pluto.

basement apartment with a single sidewalk-level window.

"I had just made this documentary and had some money and was like, 'Let's blow this money, let's live in New York for a year, just for the hell of it,'" he said. "I had another documentary lined up. I had a book proposal in the works. I had my first commission from *The New Yorker* magazine."

But within two weeks of being in the Big Apple, the documentary and book proposal fell through and *The New Yorker* rejected his story. While staring down square one in one of the most expensive zip codes in the country, Foose's invitation to visit Mississippi promised at least temporary relief.

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Approaching the driveway, Grant flips on his turn signal (he picked up the habit again after moving to Jackson) then laughs at himself and eases it off. Gravel crunches under the tires as he turns off the paved road onto the driveway.

Up close, the trees that surround Grant's former home on Pluto yield to a verdant explosion of muscadine and ivy. Cypress trees shade a pair of small ponds next to blossoming crepe myrtles that have been allowed to grow naturally into trees. A shower of pink flower petals floats through the air when the wind blows while scores of dragonflies give chase above the corn stalks.

Just beyond the house is a canebrake, then the levee along Tchula Lake where Grant used to walk during bouts of writer's block. The cottage he used as a writing space sits in the shade of the cane on the edge of the property.

The new landlord has sealed off the spot where snakes used to get in, he observes. His biggest invader was a five-foot chicken snake that crashed down a shelf in the back room.

That first night on Pluto, Grant remembers the windows being covered with insects. They made a noise that rivaled the sounds of the squeaking brakes and traffic he was accustomed to hearing in the city. For weeks after he and Mariah moved in, the shock of trading New York for the remote Delta felt surreal.

Grant's plan was to get a book out of his experience in the Delta as a way for him to support Mariah as she finished school. He found inspiration in such Pluto's residents as Albert Johnson, a tractor driver on nearby Stonewall Plantation who grew up in a sharecropper's shack. Johnson, along with others, helped Grant understand how complicated the relationships are among whites and blacks who live and work in the Delta.

"This is an extraordinary place that sort of defies explanation," he said. "It causes people to try to explain it through writing, through music," Grant said. "I think it has one of the deepest, richest, most contradictory cultures in America."

After a year, his publisher wanted a book, but Grant needed more time.

"I told him, 'This place is really complicated.' He said, 'No, we need the book in six months.' So I had this pile of notes and newspaper clippings, and I'd been thinking about how to structure the book," he said. "I basically wrote it in



Albert Johnson, left, shares a laugh with author Richard Grant and Jerry Kimble. Both Johnson and Kimble, Grant's neighbors in Pluto, were mentioned in his book.

a horrible, sweaty deadline panic."

Grant increased his usual writing output from one to four finished pages per day. That kept him writing for 12 to 15 hours daily, running on coffee all day and then shutting down with whisky at night. But the results gave him his biggest successes to date: a bonafide *New York Times* bestseller and the Pat Conroy Southern Book Prize.

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Today's visit to Pluto isn't just a trip down memory lane. The house's new owners are here, and the camper shell Grant needs to retrieve turns out to be more than a two-man job, so he heads over to Stonewall and finds Johnson and Jerry Kimble, who follow him back to the house.

Soon, Jaime Peaster, the grandson of the man who built the house in 1910 and who bought it from Grant, pulls up. He and Johnson wager on the corn harvest in front of the shed where, piled five and six high, sits leftover firewood Grant chopped during those two harsh winters spent here.

Although the Grants moved to Jackson's Fondren neighborhood to be closer to work, a big part of them never really left. They've stayed connected to Pluto

through the Thompsons, who have become their surrogate family. Cathy, who orchestrated Richard and Mariah's Delta wedding detailed in the closing chapter of *Dispatches From Pluto*, even delivered Isobel. She considers herself Isobel's "Delta grandma."

"I said in the book we got adopted into the Thompson family — I wasn't exaggerating," Grant said. "I would hate to break that connection, you know? It's a fantastic thing for our daughter to have Pluto right around the corner with a loving set of grandparents."

Grant's first book, *American Nomads*, published in 2003, chronicled his travels among fellow itinerant adventurers across the American Southwest. For a man who has claimed 19 different addresses in 25 years, perhaps what Pluto gave him most was that sense of permanence, as his own new family takes root in the fertile Mississippi soil.

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