

Southern charm and storytelling propels Ava's Man, says Jason A. Keenan.

# Bragg bags another great story

**C**harlie Bundrum shouldn't be the star of his own book. He was what one might call an average man who fought his way through the Great Depression and its aftermaths in the Appalachian foothills on the border region between Arkansas and Georgia in the American South.

He toiled as a roofer and a carpenter. He kept the financial wolves at bay by making backwoods likker. He fished for fun and companionship.

So why is Charlie the star of his own book? Two reasons. The first is he had the fortune of having Rick Bragg for a grandson, who crafted Bundrum's life story into *Ava's Man* (Knopf, 259 pages, \$38).

A winner of the prestigious Pulitzer Prize for his newspaper writing, Bragg has a way with words that any one else who puts letters on the page can dream of. Words sparkle and shimmer, dance and twist. Stories do get told.

This excerpt catches

some of that magic – and the man of the title:

"Charlie Bundrum was what women here used to call a purty man, a man with thick, sandy hair and blue eyes that looked like something you would see on a rich woman's bracelet. His face was as thin and spare as the rest of him, and he had a high-toned, chin-in-the-air presence like he had money, but he never did. His head had never quite caught up with his ears, which were still too big for most human beings, but the women of his time were not particular as to ears, I suppose."

Probably the most over-used phrase in talking about a book is to call it a page-turner (it's right up there with genius and star in wider parlance). But let me tell you, this book could not be put down. Bragg's writing – a magical Southern style that never veers into the caricature of so many 'accented' writers.

But Charlie Bundrum himself is as important as the mastery Bragg brings to telling the story. Charlie's life was like to many that plowed

through the Great Depression – he fought and struggled to make ends meet.

Charlie was a great man because of the way he treated others. Sure, like any man he had his faults.

Sometimes he was running from the law because of his always well-hidden moonshine stills. Sometimes he got a little drunk and into a bit of trouble.

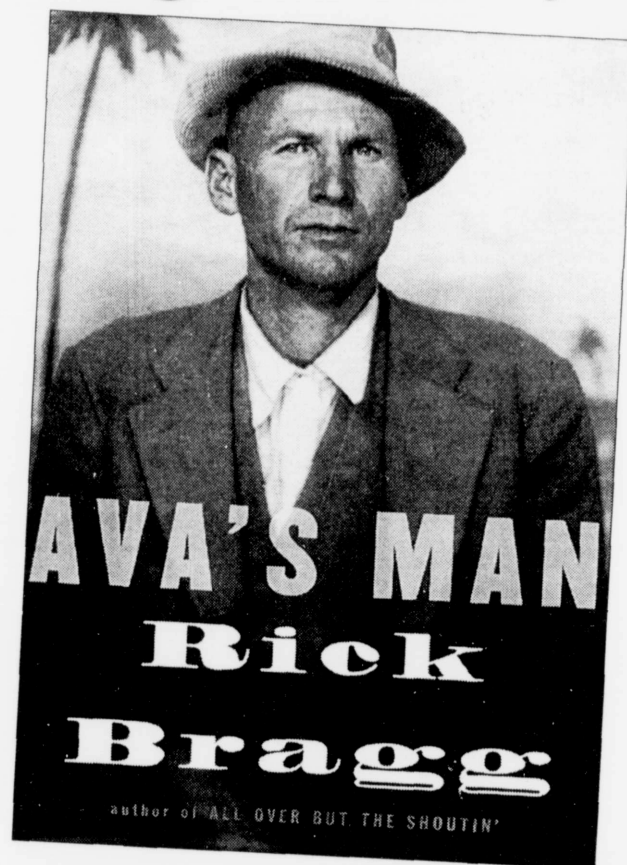
While he moved the family 21 times to keep poverty and starvation from the door, he kept his seven children safe and fed.

If you were a decent sort, he was your friend. If you were crooked, he wouldn't have anything to do with you.

When he died, cars lined the blacktop for more than a mile, and everyone from all stations in life between high and low were there.

But he'll live on for a long, long time thanks to the marvelous tribute of his grandson.

And it's fine proof that the humble can be great, even if they don't grab the headlines every day.



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