Michael Martone, born in Fort Wayne, Indiana, borrows much of his subject matter from the Midwest. An extremely prolific author, his most recent works include *Double-wide, Michael Martone, The Blue Guide to Indiana, Racing in Place*, and *Thucydides at Syracuse*. His stories and essays have also been included in *The Best American Stories* and *The Best American Essays* anthologies, as well as magazines *Harper’s, Esquire*, and *Story*. He is currently a professor of English and director of the Creative Writing Program at the University of Alabama.

**Coastlines:** Flatness itself in *The Flatness and Other Landscapes* seems to be an entry point to discussing what comes up from the ground that most people don’t see, evident in your descriptions of mountains and rising floodwater. There is also much attention paid to walking, trains, and river flow. Even the American Gothic House is transformed in “The Other Houses in Eldon, Iowa” from a flat painting into a home where people are living and moving. How important was the idea of movement when you were writing these essays?

**Martone:** I might have been playing with the two other dimensions beyond the axis of the x and y, the description of the flat landscape and the piece of
paper on which I was writing. First, I wanted to be sensitive, to pay attention to and make the reader sensitive and attentive to a thickness, a torque, a bias in the Midwestern landscape. The flatness of “The Flatness” is, in fact, not flat. But there is also that fourth dimension, time, and time is a component of place. Time is also always related to movement. We ask how far something is, and we answer that it is a good hour away, a day’s drive, twenty minutes, give or take. The Midwest was also known, last century, as the Middle Border and, for a little time, it was the frontier, the West. But history blew through that place, transforming it from “wilderness” to “civilization” seemingly overnight, like the leading edge of the penumbra. Shadows fall on the flat face of the sundial cast by the single vertical stake—one can see the physical movement of time cast on the ground and flying over on the arched membrane of the heavens.

Coastlines: In the essay “The Flatness,” you describe the Midwest as a multidimensional “stretched canvas.” As the beginning of an essay collection, this appears to be symbolic of the rest of the images following it being painted onto the canvas described. Was this originally the essay that came before the others that thematically organized what was to come after, or did these types of descriptions come up in revision after the essays themselves had been written and collected?

Martone: I did write the essay “The Flatness” first. All of the other essays were written for different occasions. They were responses to prompts coming from various editors. Assignments. But writing “The Flatness” first was a kind of musical key that defined the tone of the essays to follow.

Coastlines: Racing in Place: Collages, Fragments, Postcards, Ruins defies what can be considered traditional memoir. The essay “On Being,” for example, draws attention to the fact that it is an essay that’s been crafted and manipulated, especially when the narrator tells us his intentions to craft that never made it into the essay per se: “here, I was going to try to do something with the seventeen-year cicada hatches...Here, I was going to force a connection” (167). Is bending and manipulating reader expectation important to you when you begin to expand on an idea in a story or essay, or do you proceed with your writing and allow it to grow from an idea without the reader in mind?

Martone: More and more I resist really considering the idea of genre at all. I think, more and more, that that question, the question of genre, is such an academic question, that it is a different part of the brain that worries this question. I think as a writer (and I think that is how I think of myself—as a writer—not a fiction writer or nonfiction writer), I need to resist a bias that is present in the place I work, a university, to order and sort. The university is a vast critical machine. It wants divisions, and ordering, categories. And I am afraid I could worry such questions to death. So I try to resist naming what it is I do. Leave that to other folks. I just want to make things. So, I guess, I just go ahead and make things without thinking of the readers’ expectations of genre. I do allow the thing to grow on its own, into its own
shape and size. I do think of the reader as someone who approaches my text or any text with a curiosity, who wants to answer the question “what is this thing I am reading?” I don’t think of the reader, when I do think of the reader, as someone who is judging me or comparing me to someone or something else, to some norm of fiction or nonfiction or play or poem.

Coastlines: In the same collection, “Going Up” seems to stretch out into tall, square sections, adding to the effect of reading about height and immersing the reader into the structure of the essay, as well as the descriptions. Can you tell us about how you allow content and form to blend when you’re writing? Are these types of structural decisions made before or after you begin working on an essay or story?

Martone: I am by nature not a narrative writer. I don’t write stories either in fiction or nonfiction. I tend to be lyrical. I like working juxtapositions and working in the setting and context of a piece. The great thing about narrative is that it comes with a structure right off the shelf—a beginning, middle, and end; rising action, climax, dénouement. So if you are not plugging into that structure, you might feel that you need other structures to build upon. I tend to think that I use cartilage instead of solid bone. I think some of the choices come before the composition of the piece—highly arbitrary numbers, say. I know I used 13 sections numbered 1-14, skipping 13 to mimic a building’s floor numbering in a piece about going up in elevators. Things flowed from there. The square text subliminally reminded me of the elevator car, etc. I needed something to hang my hat on, and that hook can be pretty slight.

Coastlines: Are there any pros or cons for you in terms of categorizing work into specific genres? Michael Martone, for example, is hard to pin down because of its unique approach towards storytelling, made up entirely of “contributor’s notes.” How do you react when students bring this type of writing to workshop? Could you discuss your teaching style in terms of reader expectation?

Martone: I think readers categorize. They have to in order to make order, to make sense, a kind of sense. When I teach a workshop I do two things. I try to describe the story as much as I can. I am not that interested in attempting to find quality in a piece—is it good or bad or if it works or not. I try to suppress my particular taste and feed back to the writer what I have read. I also have the writer talk about the thing he or she has written. I am much more interested in process than product. In these ways, I think a workshop then will never be “stumped” by a piece of writing. One can always describe what has been written, and one can always respond to the writer talking about the problems the writer set out for him or herself and how he or she thought those problems were solved or not.