



**The April Newsletter:
The April Meeting will be
Tuesday, April 23, 2024,
in the Meeting Room of the McMillan
Museum on the Brewton College Campus.**



Dr. Chancery.

The Program: Dr. Brett Chancery Will Present a Program on Brewton Native, Michael McDowell, Known for His Southern Gothic Novels and Screenwriter for The Nightmare Before Christmas and Beetlejuice.

From the article "Coastal Alabama History Instructor, Brett Chancery, Pens Article on Brewton Native and Beetle Juice Screenwriter, Michael McDowell": In his captivating Alabama Heritage Magazine article, "Familiar Nightmares: Michael McDowell's Alabama Influences," Brett Z. Chancery delves into the

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Henry Joseph Rosenstihl and his wife, Emily, playing guitars on the steps of a porch in Union Springs, Alabama. Photo, date unknown. From ADAH.

The May Program

Kevin McKinley will present a program on Canoe, Alabama. Kevin has a weekly historical and genealogical column "All Things Southern" which appears in several south Alabama newspapers and is also the author of "Shadows and Dust," a YouTube channel focusing on local and regional history.

Refreshments for April Meeting

If you choose, bring your favorite finger food for refreshments after the program. The Society will provide drinks. It will be nice to start again enjoying refreshments and visiting with members and guests after the program. So plan on staying for refreshments after the meeting.



President James Monroe, who signed the resolution admitting Alabama to the Union in 1819

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The Program

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intriguing connection between the dark and quirky themes of Tim Burton's films and the influence of writer Michael McDowell.

Known for his prolific collaboration with Burton and a remarkable output of books, McDowell's impact on the cinematic world is profound. Chancery navigates the nuances of McDowell's work, shedding light on the author's rare return to his native Alabama and the state's enduring influence on his writing.

Chancery explores how McDowell's childhood experiences in Alabama left an indelible mark on his literary career, creating a compelling narrative that ties together the seemingly disparate worlds of Southern upbringing and Burtonesque fantasy.

The author, Brett Z. Chancery, brings a unique perspective to the exploration of Michael McDowell's life and works. A proud alumnus of the University of Mobile and the University of South Alabama, Chancery has dedicated over



Brett Shown with wife Jennifer, who is a biology instructor at Coastal Alabama, and daughters Anna, Claire, and Charlotte.

fifteen years to serving students in Alabama. With the publication of "Familiar Nightmares: Michael McDowell's Alabama Influences," Chancery has successfully defended his dissertation exploring McDowell's life and works and has completed the requirements for his PhD in humanities from Faulkner University.

Chancery's connection to the McDowell's narrative becomes even more apparent as he shares his hometown of Brewton, Alabama. As a full-time history instructor at Coastal Alabama Community College, Chancery not only imparts knowledge to his students but also actively engages in the exploration of local and state history, making him a fitting scholar to unravel the layers of McDowell's Alabama influences (<https://www.coastalalabama.edu/news>).

Note: Copies of Alabama Heritage Magazine are available in the Alabama Room.



Apache Indians seated in a circle outside the cabins at the Mount Vernon Barracks in Alabama. Photo taken in the 1890s. Alabama Department Of Archives And History.

The ECHS *Journal* Section

Michael McEachern McDowell

The following article is from the [Encyclopedia of Alabama](https://encyclopediaofalabama.org/article/michael-mceachern-mcdowell/) (<https://encyclopediaofalabama.org/article/michael-mceachern-mcdowell/>).

Alabama-born author Michael McEachern McDowell (1950-1999) is perhaps best known for his role in writing the screenplays for the popular films [The Nightmare Before Christmas](#) and the cult hit [Beetlejuice](#). But with more than 30 novels, McDowell was a prolific novelist in his own right and gained popularity across the country, even earning the high praises of acclaimed author Stephen King. McDowell's niche centered on Southern Gothic literature and horror in general.

McDowell was born on June 1, 1950, in Enterprise, Coffee County, to Thomas Eugene McDowell and Marion Mulkey McDowell, both of Geneva, Geneva County. Michael was their first son, followed by a daughter and a second son. His experiences in Alabama helped shape his literary career.

As many of his Southern Gothic novels demonstrate, McDowell had extensive knowledge of Southern culture and geography. In his childhood, McDowell lived and was educated in the small south Alabama towns of Geneva and Brewton,

He attended kindergarten in Geneva before transferring to Brewton Elementary School. In 1968, he

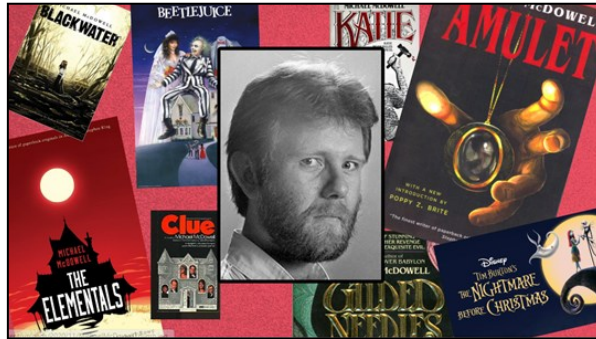


Photo of Michael McDowell surrounded by the covers of some of his novels.

While arguably best known for his works of Southern Gothic horror, McDowell was an accomplished stylist who wrote several series with marked differences in tone, character, and subject matter. His period novels are praised for their intricate eye for historical research and accurate details, and range from *Gilded Age* New York City to *Wiregrass Alabama* in the depths of the Great Depression ([https://oaklawnlibraryfriends.com/Michael McDowell/](https://oaklawnlibraryfriends.com/Michael%20McDowell/)).

In the mid-1980s, McDowell wrote the “Jack and Susan” mysteries for Ballantine Books, featuring characters reminiscent of the influential Thin Man films. The series included *Jack and Susan* in 1953 (1985), *Jack and Susan* in 1913 (1986) and *Jack and Susan* in 1933 (1987). The books chronicled the adventures of an eternally youthful couple and their ever-changing dog. McDowell had contracted to do one for each decade of the century, but he bowed out of the contract after three (<https://oaklawnlibraryfriends.com/michael-mcdowell/>).

graduated from T. R. Miller High School in Brewton as class valedictorian.

Following high school, McDowell pursued a college education at Harvard University as an English major and graduated in 1972. He received his doctorate from Brandeis University in 1978. His dissertation, entitled “American Attitudes Towards Death, 1825-1865,”

explored death and its impact on American culture from an academic perspective.

His later works are characterized by gruesome descriptions of horrific events mixed with a dark sense of humor. His grotesque writings, however, did not derive purely from his imagination, as his doctoral research also led him to amass an extensive collection of death memorabilia. Items include post-mortem photographs, jewelry made from human hair, and even a child's coffin. His research informed his later writings as a novelist and screenwriter.

McDowell's education prepared him for a career as an English teacher, but his career goals

changed. As he was working on his dissertation, McDowell decided to pursue a career in writing. He worked as a secretary to earn an income while writing his first novels.

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Michael McEachern McDowell

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After landing a contract with Avon Books, McDowell earned enough money to quit his secretarial position and pursue writing full-time.

Although he had previously written six unpublished novels, The Amulet (1979) was his first published novel. It traces the harmful effects of an enchanted piece of jewelry that wreaks havoc on the inhabitants of the small, fictional town of Pine Cone, Alabama, which is loosely based on Geneva and Brewton.

McDowell wrote in several genres, but his most successful niche was horror. When asked why he pursued horror and occult novels, McDowell explained in a 1984 Fangoria* interview that he was frustrated with the failure of his novels not selling. Purely as a writing exercise, McDowell expanded a screenplay into The Amulet, which sold immediately. Realizing his success, McDowell continued writing in the horror genre with great satisfaction.

McDowell's unintentional entry into the genre garnered much attention with the successes of popular novels like Cold Moon Over Babylon (1980), The Elementals (1981), and the six part Blackwater (1983) series, among

In an interview with the Northern Alabama paper The Gadsen Times back in 1989, McDowell wrote: "I deal with Alabama both as a narrative and as atmosphere." He elaborates by saying: "Alabama is dense emotionally, and you've got to deal with everything there. It is the intensity of the morality. I consider it a major part of what success I've had." What McDowell brings to the forefront of his fiction, that other Southern writers only hint at, is the everyday relationship people had with the occult and the supernatural that he saw first-hand when he was growing up. Instead of letting this add to the mythology and the atmosphere of his writing, McDowell uses it to drive the narrative and it ends up taking us to some gruesome and extraordinary places (<https://www.thisishorror.co.uk/injured-eyeballs-27-who-the-fuck-is-michael-mcdowell-part-1/>).

Michael McDowell was born in 1950 and grew up in what he describes as "small towns in southern Alabama", near the border with Florida and the Gulf of Mexico. Though he went to state schools in Brewton, he claimed to have had an excellent education: "the equivalent, if not superior, to that of my classmates in college who had been to various prep schools. I never once felt inadequate at Harvard." He had a very successful academic career graduating from Harvard and going on to earn his doctorate from Brandeis with a dissertation entitled: "American Attitudes Toward Death, 1825-1865. " A fascination with death, in all its forms, informed the whole of McDowell's short life, almost as if he knew it was going to come sooner for him than others and he'd have to learn to understand and embrace it (<https://www.thisishorror.co.uk/injured-eyeballs-27-who-the-fuck-is-michael-mcdowell-part-1/>).

others. Cold Moon Over Babylon depicts the murder of a fourteen-year-old girl named Margaret Larkin and the mysterious revenge the murderer faces near the Styx River.

Often considered McDowell's most terrifying work, The Elementals is more a traditional haunted house story but offers a mix of natural and supernatural omens warning the Savage and McCray families

of the house's deadly past. The Blackwater series was originally published as a six-paperback installment of the novel in which its main character Elinor Dammert strives to belong to the small Alabama town but holds a deadly, mysterious secret.

Each of the four novels above reflect McDowell's experiences and knowledge of Alabama culture and geography. McDowell wrote or coauthored more than 30 novels under his own name and numerous

pen names, including Nathan Aldyne, Preston Macadam, Mike McCray, and Axel Young.

In addition to his work as a novelist, McDowell also wrote a number of screenplays and related works for the film industry. Beetlejuice and The Nightmare Before Christmas are arguably his most successful works, but McDowell's contributions in the film industry included work

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Michael McEachern McDowell

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for Alfred Hitchcock Presents, Tales from the Crypt, and George A. Romero's Tales from the Darkside.

McDowell's work with acclaimed director Tim Burton in the production of both Beetlejuice and The Nightmare Before Christmas earned McDowell a place as a pop culture icon. (Beetlejuice also featured Alabamian Glenn Shadix in the role of Otho, and Burton filmed portions of Big Fish, a film based on a Daniel Wallace novel, in central Alabama.) The now-famous McDowell returned to Brewton to attend his twentieth class reunion in 1988, the same year Beetlejuice was released.

In 1994, McDowell was diagnosed with Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome (AIDS), at the time generally a terminal illness. He not only continued writing screenplays but also began teaching screenwriting at both Boston University and Tufts University. He died on December 27, 1999, in Massachusetts, at the age of 49.

At the time of his death, McDowell was survived by his partner of 30 years, author, actor, and director Laurence Senelick, and two siblings. His personal papers are housed in the Michael M. McDowell Collection at Bowling Green State University in Ohio and his extensive collection of death memorabilia was purchased by Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois, for research purposes.

At the time of his death, McDowell was in the process of writing another novel. Novelist Tabitha King, wife of writer Stephen King, completed McDowell's unfinished manuscript, and it was published under the title Candles Burning. In the novel, Calley Dakin, a seemingly ordinary little girl, is exiled with her mother to a family home in Pensacola Beach after her father's vicious murder. But as the story unfolds, readers discover there is more to Calley than what meets the eye. McDowell's legacy in the horror genre continues to play an important role for readers today.

*Note: Fangoria is a website and magazine specializing in horror.

The Michael McDowell "Death" Collection

Chicago's Northwestern University purchased the "Death" collection after McDowell's death.

The website for the University Library System comments, "The Collection is comprised of 76 boxes, and spans the years 1616 – 2005. The collection was assembled by McDowell based on his interest in the subject matter, and includes correspondence, photographs (including photographic prints, daguerreotypes, tintypes, ambrotypes, and stereographs), memorial cards, jewelry, hairwork, scrapbooks, ledgers, news clippings, and artifacts. In most cases the items in this collection were purchased by McDowell, or were given to him by friends and colleagues" (<https://findingaids.library.northwestern.edu/repositories/7/>).

In the article "See the Macabre Death Collection of Alabama Horror Novelist Who Wrote 'Beetlejuice,'" Kelly Kazek writes of her interview with Benn Joseph, head of archival McDowell. Joseph says the collection can be viewed in its current storage boxes at Chicago's Northwestern

University and may someday go on display.

"We've struggled with how to exhibit the more sensitive materials," he said of the collection,* which includes postmortem photographs, often of children, made in the Victorian era when photography was available but still something of a luxury. Because many families did not have images of younger members, they would have a photo made when the child died as a remembrance, sometimes posing the child to look as if he were still living.

*Note: The library was making plans to put items on display beginning in 2013.

The McDowell collection also includes pieces of jewelry woven from the hair of the deceased, funeral memorabilia and an 1868 planchette used with a "spirit board" to communicate with the dead, and spirit photos, another fad of the Victorian era in which photographers created prints purporting to show people with the spirits of dead loved ones.

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The Michael McDowell “Death” Collection

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"There are quite a few spirit photos, most with no information on them," Joseph said. "But a few are by well-known spirit photographers, like Georgiana Houghton, a medium who would conduct seances and have photographs taken of her interacting with spirits. The interaction shown in the photos was rare," he said. "Typically, spirit photos showed a faded figure standing near the subject of the photo, with the most famous example being one that purports to show the figure of Abraham Lincoln standing behind Mary Todd Lincoln after his death. "

Joseph said he is often asked why the university purchased the macabre collection after McDowell's death. "These materials will be useful for anyone researching American death and mourning practices, particularly the funeral industry, spiritualism, practices of ritual, emotion, or sentimentality involving death and dying, the evolution of memorial cards and funeral announcements during the 19th century," he said.



At left, one of the most famous examples of "spirit" photography, taken by William H. Mumler, with what was purported to be the spirit of Abraham Lincoln looking over her.

At right, copies of sample "Tribute Songs."



The collection also offers a glimpse into what families did after their loved ones died, at a time when they were preparing their homes to display the remains and getting ready to bring them to the cemetery.

After choosing a burial gown - worn in ads by living models - many families then looked for a headstone. Traveling headstone salesmen in the early 20th century often carried around design samples in a box about the size of one that holds chocolates.

Those paying their respects in the 19th and early 20th centuries frequently selected a tribute song for the dead to play inside the family homes, Mr. Joseph said. There were some 100 popular pieces of topical sheet music, with such titles as "She Died On Her Wedding Day."

From an article in the *Daily Mail* by Emma Thomas <<https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2480812/Revealed-Macabre-Death-Collection-belonging-horror-writer-used-coffin-coffee-table-collected-locks-dead-peoples-hair.html>>.



Pins and brooches containing locks of dead people's hair are worn by women as badges after the death of a loved one.



A children's coffin that once belonged to McDowell holding Halloween candy at the McCormick Library of Special Collections, Northwestern University.

The ECHS *Journal* Section

Michael McDowell Collection at Bowling Green University

From the Introduction to the Michael M. McDowell Collection at Bowling Green State University:

The Michael M. McDowell Collection records the life and career of a writer who excelled in academic

performance at Harvard and Brandeis and discovered along the way a passion for creating popular fiction for mass audiences and dramatic productions for television and the movies.

The Collection includes correspondence and manuscripts dating from 1966-2001. This author of predominantly horror and occult-themed novels and screenplays began donating his collection to the Browne Popular Culture Library around 1987 until his death in 1999. His literary executor, Laurence Senelick, continued to transfer additions after that date.

Correspondence offers a glimpse into McDowell's family background, his friendships, personal and professional life. Especially significant is his own correspondence in which he records his thoughts



**Bowling Green University
Located in Bowling Green Ohio**

when writing family, friends and colleagues. The correspondence with his immediate family, his father in particular, contains the most detail about McDowell's financial struggles, building a life for

himself in Boston, his collecting interests and sharing his success via publicity and copies of his books sent home once he became a published author.

Another portion of the correspondence reflects McDowell's activism. A 1969 letter describing his attendance at an anti-Viet Nam War protest in Washington D.C. indicates a strong social conscience. Other letters, sent to such Massachusetts legislators as Senator Ted Kennedy, Senator Paul E. Tsongas, and the Honorable Thomas "Tip" O'Neill Jr., contain his views on the 1970's energy crisis, sex discrimination, federal support for the arts and a variety of concerns. McDowell's letters written between 1994 and 1999 to medical providers and tax collectors are a vivid account of his life with AIDS (https://lib.bgsu.edu/finding_aids/items/show/1692).



Children and adults in front of the Payne School in Selma, Alabama, on the day the school opened, November 4, 1889. Alabama Department Of Archives and History.

ECHOES
THE NEWSLETTER FOR
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Escambia Historical Society Cookbook	\$10.00	\$15.00
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