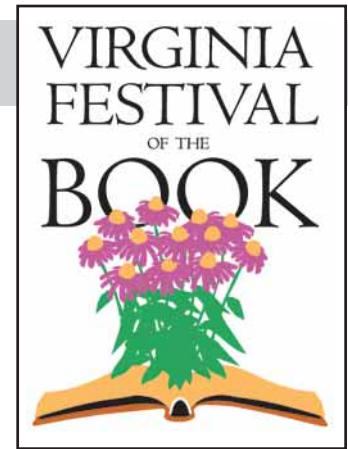


## *Wild Thorn* by Willam Hoffman recommended by Kathleen Hoffman

The Virginia Foundation for the Humanities' "VABooks!" suggests a book for Virginians to read in common. This month, Kathleen Hoffman—former newspaper writer and editor, no relation to the Virginia author—recommends *Wild Thorn* by William Hoffman. William Hoffman will be among the authors appearing during the ninth annual festival, March 19-23, and will co-host the Authors Reception. We hope that individuals, book groups, families and neighbors will read and discuss our common heritage.



While William Hoffman is acclaimed as a mystery and suspense writer, and *Wild Thorn* is a complex and engrossing mystery, a better reason for Virginians to read a book by this Virginia writer is his deep understanding of a complex and engrossing state.

Hoffman came from his farm in Charlotte Court House to central Virginia for a rare appearance last year. The courtliness and charm of this admittedly aging Virginia gentleman, horseman and long-time teacher of other Virginia gentlemen at Hampden-Sydney was immediately evident. But he chose to speak about his own life: growing up the son of a coal miner, being overtaken by the writing virus after encouragement from a professor at Washington & Lee, and since then continuing to develop and illuminate an unusually deep understanding of the people of his state of choice. The seams in a coal mine are more easily plumbed than the societal strata of Virginia.

In *Wild Thorn*, we see the return from the earlier book *Tidewater Blood* of Charles LeBlanc, the acknowledged black sheep of a family of old landholdings, old portraits and old wealth. Only thing is, Charley's own bloodlines are less than pure Tidewater gentry, and he's never been comfortable with the whole gentility thing. He and his companion, the splendidly-drawn Mildred "Blackie" Spurlock, leave their rough

life in the open spaces of Montana to come east, stopping in the faded West Virginia mining town where Blackie once lived and tough-minded LeBlancs once ran a coal empire. There they find a murder, a stock-market-enriched and strange family of newcomers who may be involved, and a threat to Charley LeBlanc's past and his deeply-felt sense of justice.

Hoffman's unique strength is in building spare, beautiful images in language as he illuminates the time and place of this West Virginian community, roughly analogous to those in southwestern Virginia. We learn what it is to be inextricably bound to mining, coal dust in the blood, even when the bustle and profits belong in the past. Blackie's father, Charley realizes, "still lay buried under . . . the mountain that had become both his assassin and his tombstone." We see the grown-up railroad beds—"no coal, no trains"—but also realize that the industry that brought prosperity was not an easy one. "You go in the mountain and hear the roof trembling like a bunch of bones breaking, you learn about fear all right," says a miner/preacher, one of a rich trove of minor characters.

Hoffman and Charley both dip the occasional toe into lifestyles and people far from the coalfield, with a visit to Charley's brother in Richmond, where their father's immense account had been kept in a bank "where old dollars

resided and seasoned like tobacco hung on racks in curing barns.” As he passes the courthouse, leaving the little mountain town of Cliffside before light to head down I-64 by way of Staunton, he notices that “the Confederate statue on the lawn appeared spectral, marching from the pit of night.”

When Charley leaves Richmond for Tidewater, there is also a reappearance by what may be Hoffman’s finest character, the proper but wonderful lawyer Walter Frampton. You’ll like Walter, you’ll be fascinated by the strange mix that is Charley, and you’ll like this book.

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### **Virginia Festival of the Book**

145 Ednam Drive • Charlottesville, VA • 22903-462  
434.924.3296 • [vabook@virginia.edu](mailto:vabook@virginia.edu) • <http://www.vabook.org>