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# FESTIVAL



*Celebrating Southern Literature*

# **Southern Exposure**

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*John Sumner*



# Festival

## CELEBRATING SOUTHERN LITERATURE

The South's fascination with the romantic and the impossible has long mesmerized its politics, its literature and its own images of itself. "Romanticism was taken and acted on as the reality of things," writes Marshall Frady in his book *Southerners*. "This sense of comprising some spiritual order of the outcast and benighted . . . was all the more beguiling to Southerners because the rest of the nation seemed so ready to collaborate in the conceit."

But the South's insularity, its racial preoccupations, its public presence as a dream of itself, are fast fading under the jarring influence of rapid changes and radical traumas: the struggle for civil rights, the Vietnam War, the boom of industrialization and attrition of older, agrarian values. This issue of *Southern Exposure* examines the relationship between the South's social and political changes, and the interior, imaginative life of its writers. It is an issue about both art and survival. "I have written to stay alive," says Alice Walker. "I have written to survive."

At this juncture in our common history, it is especially important that we look to our artists to inspire and lead, for they celebrate the human spirit and our capacity to resist all efforts to strip us of our dignity. "Who, brothers and sisters," asked Ossie Davis at the recent Black South Literature and Art Conference, "is to remind us of our humanity, to plant within us again the seed of spiritual greenness, to make possible even in this concrete jungle that we now call home, that flowers of resistance and patience — mankind's best offerings — will indeed bloom and blow again — is that not the responsibility of our artists?"

Much of the variety and vitality in *Festival* comes from cultural traditions not often heard outside their own communities. Marilou Bonham-Thompson writes of her experiences as a poet with Cherokee heritage. Carmen Tafolla surveys chicano writing, while Barry Jean Ancelet and Mathé Allain examine the renaissance of Cajun writing in Louisiana. In these and other articles — such as M. Segrest's essay on Southern lesbian-feminist writers, Sondra O'Neale's analysis of changing images of black women in fiction, and Jerry Williamson's discussion of Appalachian writers' resistance to the imposed identity of "hillbilly" — we see writers struggling with the knowledge that they and their art have been relegated by the literary establishment to "minority" status — in other words, inferior and irrelevant. From such angry and painful struggles, these writers achieve a victorious liberation of identity and purpose.

*Festival* abounds with such victories. The two stories — Cheryl Hiers' "A Citizen of Florida" and Barbara Angle's "Kate" — portray two different women asserting their dignity and courage in hostile environments. The story-

telling section celebrates the joy, humor and poignance of oral literature, so vital to the South's history and yet so fragile in an age of mass communication. In the publishing section, small-press publisher Judy Hogan describes her valiant efforts to publish fiction and poetry when publishing is dominated by corporate conglomerates. Tom Campbell and John Valentine share their experience of running a small, independent bookshop, a kind of store fast disappearing from America in the wake of burgeoning shopping malls and chain bookstores. Other writers, such as George Scarbrough, Alice Walker and Max Steele, discuss the power of writing to reveal and interpret Southern landscapes, both external and internal.

From the beginning, we saw *Southern Exposure's* literature issue as being unique. We knew that various surveys of Southern literature had been published in books and journals; but we also knew that most of these examinations focused almost exclusively on the literary text, with an academic audience in mind. We set out with different goals. One was to examine literary activity in the South on many levels, ranging from contemporary fiction and poetry to the teaching of literature in the schools, to the problems of publishing and distributing books. We sought also to strike a healthy balance between first-hand accounts of Southerners' involvement with creative writing and interpretative essays which put these personal accounts into a larger scholarly and sociological perspective. We envisioned a broad audience, scholar and general reader alike.

Even more important, we wanted this book to celebrate the rich cultural diversity of Southern life and literature. We wanted to emphasize that Southerners are a people who live and write in a variety of ways, using different images and holding different values. *Festival* invites us to listen to the vivid and fascinating voices of Southern life; to appreciate the insights, wisdom and grace of our neighbors, whose voices may not sound exactly like our own, and to recognize our deeper, common quest for identity and dignity. In these fast-changing times, with television and technology undermining community values and expression, we celebrate our diversity and encourage our creative writers to remain ever vibrant, ever strong.

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*Bob Brinkmeyer, a long-time friend of the Institute, teaches English at North Carolina Central University and has published extensively on Southern literature. This summer he hopes to perfect his jump shot and bring up his batting average in City League softball play.*

*Stephen March, novelist and songwriter, can often be found in Tijuana Fats late at night.*

# Feu de Savane: A LITERARY RENAISSANCE IN FRENCH LOUISIANA

by Mathé Allain and Barry Jean Ancelet

## *Combustion Spontanée*

*Pourquoi écrire  
Personne va lire.  
Tu perds ton temps  
A cracher dans le vent.  
La poésie, c'est grand,  
Pas pour les enfants,  
Ni les illettrés,  
Ni les acculturés.  
Ils ont rien à dire  
Et, ça qui est pire,  
Même s'ils en avaient,  
Il faudrait le faire en anglais.*

*Mais ça change  
Dans la grange.  
Il y a du nouveau foin  
Entassé dans le coin  
Et il va se faire voir, lui.  
Il a attrapé de la pluie.*

**W**hen Jean Arceneaux penned this poem in 1979, he gave voice to the feelings of thousands of his fellow Acadians, or Cajuns, those hard-working, hard-drinking, hard-playing descendants of the Nova Scotia exiles deported by the English in 1755. Hard-headed and easy-going, suspicious and hospitable, religious and anti-clerical, conservative and anarchistic, the Cajuns have regularly disobeyed their rulers, insolently challenged

their “betters,” and consistently baffled outside observers. Today they are living a cultural revolution while thumbing their noses at the traditional purveyors of culture.

Louisianans once believed the Cajuns’ language was a *patois*, “not real French;” their music was “nothing but chanky-chank;” their oral literature was doomed to well-deserved oblivion. For many Louisianans, to be French, to participate in French culture, was to be marked as ignorant and inferior. But for the Cajuns, French language and culture have always been central to their identity. For a while they outwardly accepted as inevitable the Americanization of their culture, language and values, but, as “*Combustion spontanée*” points out, French remained alive and traditions remained strong, albeit under the surface.

Certainly Cajuns have enjoyed the new affluence that came to their state with the development of the oil industry; they bought big cars and televisions as readily as other Americans. But “Americanization” left them with a sense of loss. They suspected they could not live by sliced bread alone; *boudin* and *gratons*, those traditional Cajun delicacies, would greatly improve the fare.

By the 1940s, Cajun music – a vital element of the culture – was all but gone after nearly a decade of influence from Western swing, country and bluegrass. The diatonic accordion, the symbol of this forsaken music, had lost its dominance during World War II when German factories could no longer supply instruments. And the rural French Louisianans seemed headed toward the melting pot like their urban counterparts, the French Creoles. Compulsory English education, the prohibition of the use of French in the schools, and the English-language mass media seemed certain to doom the culture to extinction.



Philip Gould

Then in 1948 a young folk musician named Iry Lejeune recorded a song called “*La Valse du Pont d’Amour*” and provided the catalyst for a revival of traditional Cajun music. His record was an unexpected success. Following

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#### SPONTANEOUS COMBUSTION

*Why write,  
No one will read it.  
You’re wasting your time,  
Spitting in the wind.  
Poetry is something grand,  
Not for children,  
Nor for illiterates,  
Nor for acculturates.  
They have nothing to say  
And, what’s worse  
They’d have to  
Say it in English.*

*But things are changing  
In the old barn.  
There’s a new pile of new hay  
In the corner.  
And this time, it will be noticed.  
It was dampened by the rain.*

— Jean Arceneaux

*Creole fiddler Kenry Fontenot plays at the 1978 Cajun music festival in Lafayette.*

---

Lejeune’s lead, other musicians dusted off their abandoned instruments and tunes and once again performed the old Cajun music.

These folk musicians, who could neither read nor write music or French, composed new songs in the old style — and unwittingly started a Cajun literary renaissance. The songs formed a natural bridge from an oral to a written literature, their lyrics constituting a small but important body of work suited to a society not yet literate in its own language. The themes are traditional: the pangs of unrequited love, the burden of poverty, the wages of sin. But the composers, like their spiritual ancestor François Villon, could say, “*Je ris en pleurs.*” I laugh in tears. And their cries of pain are veiled in jocularity.

Although nearly blind, Iry Lejeune traveled and played throughout southwest Louisiana, his accordion in a gunny sack, writing most of his songs himself with the help of his friend and recorder, Eddie Shuler. Iry was killed in an automobile accident in 1954 at age 27. “*La Valse de Quatre-Vingt-Dix-Neuf Ans*” is typical of his music:



Ginette Vachon

*In the spirit of Mardi Gras, poet Jean Arceneaux observes the scene from behind a mask.*

*Oh, moi, je m'en vas  
 Condamné pour quatre-vingt-dix-neuf ans.  
 C'est par rapport à les paroles toi, t'as dit  
 Qui m'ont fait souffrir aussi longtemps comme ça.  
 Oh, c'est tous les soirs,  
 Moi, je me couche avec des larmes dedans mes yeux.  
 C'est pas de toi, bébé, je m'ennuie autant.  
 C'est de ces chers enfants je connais qui misèrent.  
 Oh, c'est plus la peine,  
 Tes menteries vont te rester sur ta conscience.  
 La vérité va peut-être te faire du mal,  
 Mais quelqu'un va toujours te récompenser.*

Other musicians picked up on Iry Lejeune's lead, and soon Cajun music was stubbornly making a comeback. The revival of Cajun music heralded a general change of attitude throughout the culture. One group in particular, the Balfa Brothers Band, became a symbol of Cajun music everywhere, performing in the United States, Canada and Europe. With Dewey Balfa — a man dedicated to the

preservation and development of traditional Louisiana music — at the center, the band came to represent for many the cultural pride of the Louisiana French movement.

**T**hus the scene was set for the state legislature's 1968 act declaring Louisiana a bilingual state, acknowledging a state of affairs that had existed all along and restoring official status to the language of the colony's founders. At the same time the lawmakers created the Council for the Development of French in Louisiana, which is charged with preserving and developing the state's French heritage. CODOFIL's efforts, along with other contemporary forces, have helped reverse the process of acculturation so that today many young Louisianans, steeped in the oral traditions, are writing poetry, plays, songs and short prose in French. This renaissance, unlike the French literary movements of the nineteenth century New Orleans French Creoles, has been relatively impervious to outside influences, emanating instead from the Cajun culture itself.

The earliest works in an emerging culture are songs and tales transmitted orally. Then appear drama — usually based on myth and folk tradition — and finally poetry derived from the oral antecedents. Just as the medieval mystery and miracle plays and farces, performed in the churches or on cathedral porches, were among the earliest examples of French literature, so the first Cajun literary work was a play, *Jean l'Ours et la fille du roi*. Written in 1977 by Richard Guidry and Barry Jean Ancelet with the assistance of the amateur theatrical troupe *Nous Autres, Jean l'Ours* was based on a traditional story told by Elby Deshotels of Mamou. This tale is woven around a folk hero, the poor but clever and impudent boy who wins the king's beautiful daughter and a large share of the kingdom with the help of his supernaturally gifted friends. The presence of a king in an otherwise typically Cajun environment surprised neither the storyteller nor the south Louisiana audiences, who took him well in their stride. The production and performance of this first Cajun play tapped the rich vein of oral literature and offered an alternative to mass media entertainment and values.

Other plays followed. *Martin Weber et les Marais-bouleurs*, in 1978, and also by Guidry and Ancelet, was based on a local legendary character. In 1979 *Mille Misères*, by Emile DesMarais, squarely faced the problem of ethnic identity and survival, condemning America's encroachment upon Cajun tradition. In the same vein, and markedly influenced by New Brunswick Acadian writer Antonine Maillet and her brilliant monologues collected in *La Sagouine*, Guidry has written a series of Cajun monologues, which are performed in theaters and will soon be published by the Center for Louisiana Studies in Lafayette.

Supported by grants from the Acadiana Arts Council, the first Cajun plays toured the southern part of the state in 1978 with performances in church halls, community centers and high school auditoriums in small communities with no previous experience of live theater. They played to enthusiastic crowds and helped awaken latent literary talents.

**H**esitantly at first, young men and women began jotting down their thoughts and feelings. And from these stirrings came *Cris sur le bayou*, the first collection of Louisiana French poetry published in the twentieth century and certainly the first anthology of Cajun poetry ever assembled. The volume was born of the *Paroles et musique* performance during a 1978 meeting of the French-speaking peoples of North America, held in Quebec. Asked to insert a "little Cajun story, something typical, you know," into the program alongside the symphonies and poetry of French Canada, Ancelet and Zachary Richard searched for a more literary piece and discovered a small body of contemporary Louisiana French poetry. A later search turned up still more young activists who felt the need to write. These writers gathered for a regional version of *Paroles et musique* at the University of Southwestern Louisiana in Lafayette in 1979, and decided to produce the collection. *Cris sur le bayou* came directly from the heart of the Cajun experience and addressed itself to the problem that preoccupies the French-speakers of Louisiana: how to preserve one's ethnic and linguistic identity in the face of an encroaching, homogenizing mass culture.

These concerns typically inform the poetry of Jean Arceneaux, a young Cajun who lives on the prairie west of Lafayette. Born in Acadia Parish, he studied in Lafayette and in France. He began writing seriously in 1978, almost by accident, and the bilingual monthly *Louisiane Francaise* soon published "Réaction," his first poem. In "Schizophrénie linguistique" Arceneaux expresses the anger of Cajuns who were forbidden to use their native tongue in the classroom or on the schoolgrounds and spent countless recess periods writing "punish work" for breaking this commandment. Gradually they came to believe that French really was a badge of social inferiority and that upward mobility required the acceptance of the gospel according to Colonel Sanders. Then one day they discovered that they needed French to live and feel:

*I will not speak French on the school grounds.  
I will not speak French on the school grounds.  
I will not speak French . . .  
I will not speak French . . .  
I will not speak French . . .*

#### LINGUISTIC SCHIZOPHRENIA

*I will not speak French on the schoolgrounds. . . . After a thousand repetitions, the message gets through and the reaction is automatic. One no longer speaks French on the schoolgrounds or anywhere else, especially not with the children so that they will not spend their recess time writing that damned punish work. They must not speak French; it would show they are nothing but Cajuns. We must go beyond that, speak English, watch English television listen to English radio like good Americans. Go ahead, teach the kids English, bring them all the way to the Million Dollar Man. We do not need to speak here. This is the United States, the land of the free. We will never be anything but poor Coonasses. Coonass. No, that name does not embarrass us. It is just a nickname. It means nothing; it's all in fun. It does not embarrass us. We like it; it's cute. It does not make us mad. It makes us laugh. But in what language do we laugh? And in what language do we weep? Do we shout? Do we love? Do we live?*

— Jean Arceneaux

*Hé! Ils sont pas bêtes, ces salauds.  
Après mille fois, ça commence à pénétrer  
Dans n'importe quel esprit.  
Ça fait mal; ça fait honte;  
Puis là, ça fait plus mal.  
Ça devient automatique.  
Ét on speak pas French on the school  
grounds  
Et ni anywhere else non plus.  
Jamais avec des étrangers.  
On sait jamais qui a l'autorité  
de faire écrire ces sacrées lignes*

*A n'importe quel âge.  
Surtout pas avec les enfants.  
Faut jamais que eux, ils passent leur temps  
de recess  
À écrire ces sacrées lignes.  
Faut pas qu'ils aient besoin d'écrire ça  
Parce qu'il faut pas qu'ils parlent français  
du tout.  
Ça laisse voir qu'on est rien que des  
Cadiens.  
Don't mind us, we're just poor coonasses.  
Basse classe, faut cacher ça.  
Faut dépasser ça.  
Faut parler anglais.  
Faut regarder la télévision en anglais.  
Faut écouter la radio en anglais.  
Commes de bons américains.  
Why not just go ahead and learn English.  
Don't fight it. It's much easier anyway.  
No bilingual bills, no bilingual publicity.  
No danger of internal frontiers.  
Enseignez l'anglais aux enfants,  
Rendez-les tout le long,  
Tout le long jusqu'aux discos,  
Jusqu'au Million Dollar Man.  
On a pas réellement besoin de parler  
français quand même.  
C'est les États-Unis ici,  
Land of the free.  
On restera toujours rien que des poor  
coonasses.*

#### THE NINETY-NINE YEAR WALTZ

*I'm going away,  
condemned for 99 years,  
because of your words  
that hurt for so long.  
In tears every night,  
I go to my bed.  
It's not you that I miss.  
I miss my children who suffer so much.  
It's no use.  
Your lies will always remain.  
The truth will pain you  
only until you find someone to help you forget.*

— Iry Lejeune



Philip Gould

Poet and songwriter Ralph Zachary Richard plays at the 1975 Cajun music festival in Lafayette.

*Coonass. Non, non. Ça gêne pas.  
On aime ça. C'est cute.  
Ça nous fait pas fâchés.  
Ça nous fait rire.  
Mais quand on doit rire, c'est en quelle  
langue qu'on rit?  
Et pour pleurer, c'est en quelle langue  
qu'on pleure?  
Et pour crier?  
Et chanter?  
Et aimer?  
Et vivre?*

Ralph Zachary Richard, born and raised in Scott, Louisiana, and educated in Lafayette and New Orleans, is another young Cajun with strong roots in the prairies. Immensely popular in Quebec and France as a singer and musician, he prefers to be thought of as a composer and writer of the Louisiana French movement. Like his fellows, he feels fiercely that he needs his linguistic heritage to protect his identity, and he brandishes his imperfect spelling of his language as one of the effects of Americanization and the lack of French language instruction in the schools of his youth. An example is "Poème Pour La Défense de La Culture":

*Devenu étranger à ma propre langue,  
Parler français, parler anglais,  
caméléon de culture,  
c'est quoi, quoi c'est ça  
la culture.*

*Crier Acadien,  
Brailler 'Cajin,  
Danser, Vivre,  
Rire, Porter chagrin,  
Porter misère,  
Voyager d'amour.*

*Dans toute les langues  
Du monde, tout l'monde  
Criant d'une seule voix  
«J'su que j'su.»*

*Fin de la tyrannie.  
Délivrance à la paix.*

Deborah J. Clifton, whose roots are at once in Ohio and in Cameron Parish, spoke Creole as a child. Black, French-speaking and a woman, she attacks white, Anglo-American and male institutions with equal vehemence. "Situér Situation," for example, is an impassioned affirmation of black agony and a bitter indictment of white refusal to face the reality of that suffering:

*Mo, chus la fille d'agonie  
Toute ma vie té passé en agonie  
Et probablement je va mourir en agonie.  
La misère, c'est ça mo l'heritage.*

*J'ai été éné à l'agonie, sorti d'eine race en  
agonie*

*D'ein peuple qui jamais conné arien  
d'autre*

*Y'en a qui dit que je l'exagère, que les  
problèmes de qui je parle c'est pas  
vraiment là.*

*Pour beaucoup l'année j'écouté les moun  
qui'm disait tout ça.*

*Mais mon agonie c'est trop dur  
Et je connais bien que la vie est bien  
comme ça semblait.*

*Si tu li ça-icit, tu peux l'aimer ou  
l'hair mais dis plus que notre souffrance  
est pas là,  
pas vraiment là.*

Karla Guillory is another Louisiana woman writing in French. Born in Eunice, Guillory's interest in writing was formed as an exchange student in Quebec. A friend at the University of Southwestern Louisiana encouraged her, and she began to expose her sensuality in verse. She often refers to her poetry as her "French thoughts" because, she explains, she expresses in French what she would never think in English. For example:

*Tu es là devant moi avec ton sourire  
Mes sentiments s'expriment dans mes  
souples*

Tu me veux, je comprends  
 Tu me parles, je réponds  
 Tu me guides, je te suis  
 Tu me touches, je frémis  
 Tu m'inclines, point je ne m'oppose  
 Je t'aime, je suppose.  
 Si te désirer était gouttes de pluie,  
 Ah, l'orage dans ma vie!

Carol Doucet is a mild-mannered, soft-spoken high school French teacher who reveals in his poetry an unexpected depth of passion and dissidence. Keenly aware of the importance of his Louisiana French roots, he has pioneered methods of teaching Cajun French in the classroom. His poems describe the Louisiana landscape and its seasons and revolve around traditional customs such as funeral wakes. They reflect typically Cajun attitudes, such as amused tolerance of drunkenness and admiration for toughness, hard work and wit. A case in point is his "Adieu, vieux gaillard":

*Une cinquantaine de personnes sont rassemblées  
 Au salon mortuaire à Bastringueville.  
 Sept hommes sont sur la galerie en avant,  
 Ça fume et ça cause.*

#### SITUATING SITUATION

*I am the daughter of anguish,  
 I have lived my entire life in anguish  
 And I will probably die in anguish,  
 Misery is my heritage.*

*I was born in anguish, of a race in anguish,  
 Of a people who have never known anything else.  
 There are those who claim that I exaggerate, that the problems  
 of which I speak are not really there.  
 Most of the year, I listen to people who tell me this.*

*But my anguish is too painful,  
 And I know very well that life is exactly what it appears to be.  
 If you read this, you can like it or hate it, but no longer say  
 that our suffering  
 does not exist,  
 does not really exist.*

— Deborah J. Clifton

#### POEM IN DEFENSE OF THE CULTURE

*Estranged from my own tongue,  
 speaking French, speaking English,  
 cultural chameleon.  
 Culture?  
 What is it?*

*To cry Acadian,  
 to scream Acadian,  
 to dance, live  
 and laugh, to carry sorrow  
 and to carry woe,  
 to travel in love.*

*In all languages,  
 everyone who cries out  
 with a single voice:  
 I am what I am.*

*End of tyranny.  
 Deliverance into peace.*

— Ralph Zachary Richard

*De temps en temps on les entend rire.  
 Les femmes veillent le corps  
 Au dedans, les hommes sont assis dans le vestibule.  
 «Il était blagueur, ouais!  
 Un jour, quand on était tous là-bas chez Claude Poulain  
 Il nous a raconté comment lui et Georges Perovert  
 Ont coupé le poil de là queue du cheval à le neveu  
 à Théodore Boiscreux . . .»*

*Il y en a qui sont assis assez tranquilles,  
 D'autres craquent des farces.  
 Bien vite on dira le chapelet.  
 «Ça, c'est un homme qui travaillait dur.  
 Je l'ai vu un jour lever le bout d'un  
 De ces grands madriers lui seul.  
 Deux bougres avaient essayé de le lever.  
 Il leur a dit de se reculer de là, et il  
 A pris le bout lui seul et il a marché avec,  
 Et il l'a grouillé là où il faillait . . .»*

*Le temps passe.*

*«Oui, c'était un bon bougre, ça.»*

*Le temps passe. Et le temps passera.*

Michael Doucet is one of the most influential forces in the revival of traditional Cajun music. Especially interested in the roots of the music, he has apprenticed himself

*There you are with your smile and  
 My feelings show themselves in sighs.  
 You want me, that I know.  
 You speak to me, I respond,  
 You guide me, I follow.  
 You touch me, I tremble.  
 You bend me, I consent.  
 I love you, I suppose.  
 If desire were raindrops,  
 What a storm in my life!*

— Karla Guillory

#### FAREWELL, OLD FELLOW

*Some fifty people have gathered  
 In the Bastringueville funeral home.  
 Seven men on the front porch  
 Smoke and talk,  
 laugh from time to time.  
 The women wake the corpse inside.  
 The men sit in the hall.  
 "He liked to joke, I'm telling you!  
 One day, when we were over at Claude Poulain's place,  
 He told us how he and George Perovert  
 Cut the hair off the tail of Theodore Boiscreux's nephew's horse..."*

*Others sit quietly,  
 Some crack jokes.  
 Soon they will recite the rosary.  
 "He was a man who worked hard.  
 I saw him lift the end of a huge beam,  
 All by himself.  
 Two fellows had tried to raise it.  
 He told them to step back, and he  
 Lifted one end, all by himself, and walked away with it.  
 He moved it to where it was needed."*

*Time passes.*

*"Yes, he was a good fellow, all right."*

*Time passes. And time will pass.*

— Carol Doucet

to some of the earlier bearers of tradition and recently began teaching a course on Louisiana French folk music at the University of Southwestern Louisiana. He has recorded albums and written songs like this one, in Creole, "Z'haricots gris gris":

*Tout partout au ras du bayou,  
Mousse-là balance au gros chêne vert,  
Cocodrils dormi en cypière,  
Fi-folets dansé en cimetièrè.*  
*Vent plein de cris de loups-garous  
Mulattes apès taper rythme-là fou.  
Moune-là connaît yo li z'haricots,  
Mulattes apès grouiller sont z'os.*  
*Z'haricots chauds apès veni plus chauds,  
Moune de couleur crient, «Grande eau!»  
Pluie bien frais qu'apès bouilli,  
Pas capable froidi, son j'apès bouilli.*  
*Beaux et belles apès fait ses projets,  
Et grand mouma a dit, «Gris gris!»  
Loin, loin en cyprière noire,  
Tout quelqu'un Créole crié, «Z'haricots!»*

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#### PREMIER LIVRE

*First grade, the good sister told me,  
"You must not speak French on the schoolgrounds,  
And those of you who do will spend your recesses with me."*  
*Fourth grade, the good sister, very pious, told me,  
"Cajuns are stupid, can't even pronounce  
This, that, these and those."*  
*Eighth grade, the good sister, with a very holy name, told me,  
Laughing, "Stand up and pronounce the name of that bayou in  
French again.  
It's so quaint."*  
*Tenth grade, my high school French teacher told me,  
"That is what is said here,  
But it is not proper French."*  
*Twelfth grade, my father, watching television, told me,  
Laughing, "Look at those old coonasses on the Marine show,  
They dance before they can walk."*  
*Second year of college, my French professor told me,  
"You know, that is what is said here,  
but it is not exactly correct."*  
*Third year of college, my roommate from Shreveport told me,  
"I need some information on the Cajuns for my term paper. You  
know.  
How they play cards . . . and drink beer . . . and dance all the time."*  
*Fourth year of college, my wife's grandfather told me,  
"If you want to talk to me,  
You're going to have to speak French."*  
*And when I said a few words in proper French,  
He turned to my wife and asked,  
"What did he say?"*  
*And when I spoke with my aunts,  
My cousins and my father-in-law,  
It was the same.*  
*It was I, not they, who was in cultural exile.  
Culturally dead.  
That's when I started listening to learn our proper French.*  
*And when my old neighbor asked me at the second Cajun music  
festival,  
"What are you doing here? You think yourself Cajun now?"  
I answered dryly, "Yes, finally."*

— Antoine Bourque

Antoine Bourque, another prairie Cajun, was born in Opelousas, brought up at Coulée Croche, and educated in Lafayette. He is a widely published historian who had long repressed his creative inclinations for the sake of scholarship. Well-versed in the history of his people, he conceals the quiet vehemence of his frontier background under an imperturbable exterior. "Premier livre" is one of a series of his poems in which he takes on the Anglo-American establishment directly, showing the complete cycle of cultural pride lost and regained.

*Premier livre, la bonne soeur m'a dit  
"You must not speak French on the school grounds,  
And those of you who do will spend their recess with  
me."*  
*Quatrième livre, la bonne soeur, très chrétienne, m'a dit,  
"Cajuns are stupid, can't even pronounce  
This, that, these and those."*  
*Huitième livre, la bonne soeur, avec un nom très sacré,  
m'a dit,  
En riant, "Stand up and pronounce the name of that  
bayou in French again.  
It's so quaint."*  
*Dixième livre, mon professeur de français au high school  
m'a dit,  
"Cette phrase, c'est ce que l'on dit ici,  
Mais ce n'est pas du bon français."*  
*Douzième livre, mon père, regardent le television,  
m'a dit,  
En riant, "Look at all those old coonasses on the Marine  
show.  
They dance before they can walk."*  
*Deuxième année de collège, mon professeur de  
français m'a dit,  
"Tu sais, c'est ce que l'on dit ici,  
Mais ce n'est pas exactement correct."*  
*Troisième année de collège, mon roommate de  
Shreveport m'a dit,  
"I need some information on the Cajuns for my term  
paper. You know.  
How they play cards . . . and drink beer . . . and dance  
all the time.*  
*Quatrième année de college, le grand père de ma femme  
m'a dit,*

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#### Z'HARICOTS GRIS GRIS

*Everywhere near the bayou,  
Moss swings from live oaks,  
Alligators sleep in the cypress swamp  
The will-o'-the-wisps dance in the graveyard.  
The wind is filled with werewolves' cries,  
The mulattoes tap a wild rhythm.  
Those people know all about the z'haricots,  
The mulattoes are shaking their bones.  
The hot z'haricots get even hotter.  
The colored people cry out, "High water!"  
The cool rain which is boiling  
Cannot cool, can only boil more.  
The girls and the guys are making their plans,  
The head man cries out, "Gris, gris!"  
Far, so far away, in the black cypress swamp,  
All the Creoles cry out, "Z'haricots!"*

— Michael Doucet

"Si tu veux causer avec moi,  
Il faudra que tu parles en français,"

Et quand j'ai parlé avec mes vieilles tantes,  
Mes cousins et mon beau père,  
C'était la même chose.

C'était moi, pas eux, en exil culturel.  
Culturellement mort.

C'est là que j'ai commencé à écouter pour bien parler  
le bon français.

Et quand mon vieux voisin m'a demandé au deuxième  
festival de musique acadienne,  
"Quoi c'est tu fais icitte? Tu te crois Cajun asteur?"  
J'ai répondu sec, "Ouais, enfin."

**A**mazingly and gratifyingly, this rebirth of French literature in Louisiana began spontaneously — no official agency, no academy fostered it. *Paroles et musique 1979* revealed that many had felt the need to write at the same time and had begun to do so unaware of each other. Some of the young writers represented in *Cris sur le bayou* had known each other before the collection was compiled, but others were discovered by chance — someone would mention, for example, that his sister had a friend who knew a woman who might have written a few things.

Since then, the University of Southwestern Louisiana — especially through its Department of Foreign Languages and the Center for Louisiana Studies — has been a rallying point for the movement. New poems and short stories keep turning up, and in fact enough have come in to fill a second volume. *Paroles et musique 1981* — now an annual event sponsored by the university — will bring together some familiar faces and introduce new ones. In 1980 the university sponsored *Le Prix Thériot*, the first Louisiana French poetry competition, and drew some 40 entries from 18 poets. The second such competition will undoubtedly flush new coveys of poets, young and old.

And there is another activity. Working with actresses Amanda Lafleur and Earline Broussard, Carol Doucet and Richard Guidry have organized a touring company, *Le Théâtre Cadien*. The present authors have developed a course on the French literature of Louisiana from 1682 to 1982. French literature is alive and well *dans le sud de la Louisiane* and it's apparent that the first *cris sur le bayou* were not voices crying in the wilderness but choirs heralding a *feu de savane*, a brush fire, a spontaneous combustion spreading across the Louisiana prairies and into the bayous. □

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*Mathé Allain, a native of Morocco, is assistant professor of French at the University of Southwestern Louisiana. Barry Jean Ancelet, a native Louisiana Cajun, is director of folklore and folklife at the Center for Louisiana Studies at the same university. Their Anthologie de la Littérature Française de Louisiane, a text covering Louisiana French literature from 1682 to the present, is available from Média Louisiane, P.O. Box 3936, Lafayette, LA 70502. Many of the other anthologies and writers' works in this issue are also distributed by Média Louisiane. In addition, the Center for Louisiana Studies publishes and distributes the works of writers mentioned in this article (P.O. Box 4-0831, Lafayette, LA 70504).*

*Blood of the Lamb*

Lester took the serpent from the box  
before I was ready.

*Praise the Lord*

Hung there loose like a rope,  
then turned stiff.  
Lester handed it over.

*Praise God*

It jerked. I held on,  
but I didn't have the spirit yet, Lord.

*Hallelujah to Glory*

Lester was speaking in tongues,  
but nothing flowed through my hands.  
They were still cold.

*Oh Lord, up out of skin*

It struck. I held on as long  
as I could. Blood ran down my cheek.

*Praise be to God*

I knew what was meant.  
I wasn't ready, Lord  
but I came on, just as I am.

— Marita Garin





*Alice Walker speaks quietly, but with a powerful directness and intensity. She emits a warmth and a depth of character that captivates the audiences she frequently addresses, as well as the people who meet her casually. Yet Alice Walker is, primarily, not a speaker but a writer.*

*Born 36 years ago in Eatonton, Georgia, into a poor farming family, Walker attended Spelman College in Atlanta for two years before winning a scholarship to Sarah Lawrence. After college, she went to Mississippi to work in the Civil Rights Movement. During the last 10 years, her writing has chronicled Southern struggle and reflected her concern for the critical issues of race, violence, poverty and sexism. Recently she wrote in Ms. magazine that "A 'womanist' is a feminist, only more common," and she identified herself as a "womanist."*

*She explains, "I have trouble with having to say that I'm a black feminist when white feminists don't ever say that they're white feminists. They say that they are feminists because it is assumed that they are white feminists, since the word 'feminist' comes from their culture. I wanted a word that came from black women's culture, and 'womanist' comes from our culture. When I was growing up, when all of us were growing up, our mothers would always say, 'You're acting womanish,' you know, when you were trying to act like a woman. And I like the way it feels in my mouth. I like 'womanist.' I always felt that 'feminist' was sort of elitist and ethereal and it sounded a little weak. I once mentioned that to Gloria Steinem, who said, 'Well, maybe so, but our job is to make it strong.'"*

*Nan E. Parker*

*Walker has published two novels, Meridian and The Third Life of Grange Copeland; a collection of short stories; numerous essays; and three volumes of poetry, the most recent being Good Night Willie Lee, I'll See You in the Morning. And, she says, "I'm just getting ready for publication a new book called You Can't Keep A Good Woman Down. It's a collection of short stories, and I'm finishing a collection of essays called In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens. And I'm writing a novel."*

*This interview was conducted in late 1980 for Southern Exposure and for WRFG, a community radio station in Atlanta.*

# Writing to Survive

An Interview with Alice Walker  
by Krista Brewer

*James Baldwin said that writers write to change the world. Why do you write?*

I have written to stay alive. I've written to survive. That was from the time I was eight years old until I was 30. Then from the time I was 30 until now at 36 maybe I'm ready to change the world.

Because I'm black and I'm a woman and because I was brought up poor and because I'm a Southerner, I think the way I see the world is quite different from the way many people see it. And I think that I could not help but have a radical vision of society, and that the way I see things can help people see what needs to be changed.

*What about your childhood? What particular experiences do you think caused you to become a writer?*

I think isolation at an early age — a feeling of being very different from my brothers and sisters. Though I had lots of brothers and sisters — five brothers and two sisters — I was the youngest and felt very lonely. They seemed much more boisterous and much more in the, sort of, real world. And I was a dreamer. I wanted to play the piano, and I wanted to draw. But it was easier to write, so I did.

I grew up in a farming family, tenant farmers, sharecroppers and dairy people. My mother and father both worked in the fields and both milked the cows. My mother, of course, carried forth the whole family tradition — making clothing, tending the house and the garden and all the things that women traditionally do. We always lived in the country and that turned out to be really a wonderful thing. The houses were awful, but the beauty of the country was so fine.

*In 1976, in Ms. magazine, you wrote that you have no doubts about being a writer, but you have always had doubts about making a living by writing. How difficult, as a black woman from the South, has it been for you to become a writer and to earn your living as a writer?*

I really didn't have great difficulty, as difficulties go, becoming a writer or publishing. I went to Spelman College for two years and then I went to Sarah Lawrence, where I had a very fine teacher, the poet Muriel Rukeyser, who recently died. I wrote some

poems, really because I was having various kinds of difficulties and I simply wanted to make it through the night and the next night and the week, if possible. So, I wrote poems that seemed to come out of that feeling. I had just come back from Africa, so the poems were full of African images, and I had also just been working on voter registration in Liberty County, Georgia, so the poems were full of that, too. In any case, I put these poems under her door — she had a little cottage in the middle of the campus, and then I more or less forgot about them. But she gave them to her agent, who gave them to Hiram Hayden, who was an editor at Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, and he took them, and then Harcourt Brace published my next five books.

So I didn't have any difficulty publishing. The difficulty comes from a lack of distribution from major publishing companies. I've had to really struggle with them to make them distribute my books. And then the payment is really very small, especially in the beginning. For my first book, the advance was \$250. You really cannot live on \$250 for very long, so I had to do other jobs. For instance, I worked for the welfare department in New York, and I taught, and I did various things to earn the money that permitted me to write. And it's only been in the last five or six years that I've earned my living completely by writing. Just to have something published is wonderful, but it is not the end of it by any means. You really need to be able to support yourself.

*Do you think you have been somewhat ignored, as a lot of black men and women have been ignored, by the literary establishment?*

Well, I suppose you could say that. Except in my case, I have not been ignored by the people who matter to me. I have always had wonderful responses from women, black women and white women, and other third world women. I have not really cared even to be reviewed by certain white male literary persons who I would imagine, and do in fact, control the literary scene. I've felt very good, actually, about my rapport with my audience.

I always wanted to be an honest writer. I always wanted to be an honest person, and I think that whatever I write comes out of that. So, if I

sit down to write about my experience, I try very hard not to censor myself, which most women do, because they really are still concerned about what people will think.

I don't know if I can explain how things can be autobiographical without having happened to me. . . . It's just that they exist in my consciousness. For instance, the first short story that I wrote and published, in 1967, is a story called "To Hell With Dying," and it's about an old man, Mr. Sweet, who dies. There was a man named Mr. Sweet, but then nothing else happened. You know, it's autobiographical only in the sense that he existed, but then the rest is imaginary.

The poems in *Good Night Willie Lee* were deliberately published even though they are very personal, because I wanted to publish the poems that I feel most women never publish, the poems when they talk about failed love affairs, and a sort of cynicism, and a rage about a relationship. Those are personal poems, but once having published them, actually once having written them, they no longer strike me as being particularly personal, because I know that they apply to other women, just as well as they do to me. So that, when I read these poems, women respond as if they wrote them themselves, and actually that's exactly what I wanted to accomplish.

*And you weren't concerned at all that millions of people around America might be reading about a failed love affair of yours?*

But they have failed love affairs, too. And I think if they can see that you can live beyond having failed anything, then they would feel a lot better. The tendency has been, in earlier women's poetry, to write as if, when something fails, you just crawl into your little corner and die. Well, that's ridiculous. When you fail at something, you hop up and get in your car or get on your bicycle and you move right along. That's life.

*Do you think that there is a body of literature called women's literature that is unique?*

Oh yes, I do. I think that is because women really do see the world differently from men.

*You write very much as a Southerner. Beyond just giving a backdrop for your stories, how has the South affected your writing?*

Well, the first thing that comes to mind is really landscape. I think that if I had been brought up in New York City, I would not write stories with the land so much a part of them — trees being so big, and silence being so necessary, and birds being so present. I think, of course, that growing up in the South, I have a very keen sense of injustice — a very prompt response to it. And I think that is in my writing and in the things that concern me.

*You've written some about why you stayed in the South to write during the Civil Rights Movement.*

Well, I didn't think I could have been accurate to the events of the Movement if I had lived in New York, where I was living right after I graduated from college. But to really write well about the spirit of the Movement, which was what was of interest to me, I had to be there. I had to be not only in the South but in Mississippi. It seemed to me to be the heart of the spirit. That is why *Meridian* is such a strange book. I think people think of it as slightly weird, or very weird. But it is, I believe, very, very accurate in terms of capturing the spirit and the spirits of the people who made the Civil Rights Movement.

*Do you think people think that Meridian is weird because of the mysticism and the spirituality, almost, of the main character, Meridian?*

People who have an extreme sense of responsibility and a very deep awareness of injustice, people who really suffer, because things are not right, are perceived by many people as being deranged. This means that most of the leaders of the Civil Rights Movement were deranged people, in the minds of people outside of the South who were not really aware of the kinds of character that we saw during the '60s.

*How much is Meridian you?*

Well, people always ask that, and it is very hard to answer. If you're talking about the spirit, then she would be a lot like me, I think, but her life is really quite different, and her circumstances, too. Whereas she was pregnant at 17 and gave up her child, I was living in Jackson and had my own child and was married to an attorney. So the circumstances were different, but I think there's a lot of the same spirit.

I now live in San Francisco, and it's very different from the South, and yet in terms of beauty, there are certain similarities. I went down to visit my mother this weekend [in Eatonton] and I made a wrong turn off the highway and went down a road in Monticello that I had never seen before. It was just strikingly beautiful. In California there is a similar kind of just wonderful, beautiful landscape. The difference is probably that I feel more free in California than I've ever felt anywhere.

*People say that there is a lot of violence in all Southern literature, and there is some in your writing, also. Can you speculate on why we have so much violence both in our Southern culture and, I think, in our writing?*

I think we basically write what we see, and if there's violence to be seen, it's violence that we write. And I really become annoyed with people who ask the question as if the violence is created by the writer. And it's not just in the South that there's violence. America is really a violent country, horribly violent. The difference between television, for instance, and the Southern writer, or any writer, is probably just that we look at it from a moral point of view. You know, the TV has people shooting and chasing and killing and so forth, and it's really to sell aspirin and clothing and cars. But when we look at it, we're really trying to see what it's doing to the people involved in the violence.

I don't think the South is a more violent region. And I think if people had a deeper understanding of the rest of the country, they wouldn't either. For instance, the Filipinos and the Japanese and other people who came to the West Coast to become migrant workers really suffered the same kinds of discrimination and brutality and hardship that people in the South have suffered. There's a wonderful Filipino poet, Carlos Bulosan, who wrote a book called *America Is in the Heart*, and he talks about some of the beatings and the shootings and the killings that he saw and that he actually suffered himself as a migrant worker in this country. You think about various parts of the West and the Northwest where there were Native Americans who have been treated very violently. So it is really a violent country and it always has been. I mean, it has been since its founding as a country.

*As an observer and a reporter of the Southern character, how do you see that we have changed since the height of the civil-rights days, as a region and as a people?*

Well, I think it is much easier to travel about in the South without feeling terrorized, as I felt as a child. However, I think, and this is mentioned in *Meridian*, there's a line in there where an old black man says to a younger black man that "I've seen rights come and I've seen em go." There's a way in which progress is sort of cyclical — you progress and then you sort of go back, and then you have to have a whole new struggle. I think that is what is happening now. I think that there is so much regression going on in the South, and in the rest of the country, but I suppose it's sharper here [Atlanta] because of recent things, like the murder of these black children.

I think that psychologically black people have advanced. I don't think we'll ever be the way we were before the Movement. But I think that we are also very much out of work, and everything has to have an economic base. You have to be able to feed and clothe yourself and your children before you can really think clearly. And that worries me very much. But I think that we, fortunately, understand that struggle is a necessity, and that struggle is a possibility, and that, in any case, struggle is inevitable, and that we will have to continue fighting for every square inch that we get in this country.

*Obviously, your writing is richer because of your active involvement in the Movement. What do you think, though, are the scars that were left behind, both personally and reflected in your writing?*

A deep cynicism about the possibility of some people to change, or a deep cynicism about the possibility of us, as black people, ever changing them. And actually some of the people who won't change in a good way are black people, too. On the other hand, and on the good hand, there is a kind of optimism that I have, based on what I saw of the courage and magnificence of people in Mississippi and in Georgia during the Civil Rights Movement. I saw that the human spirit can be so much more incredible and beautiful than most people ever dream

it can be, that people who have very little, or people who have been treated abominably by society, can still do incredible things, amazing things. And not only *do* things, but *be* great human beings. And that was very nice to see.

*Did your involvement slow down your writing or hamper it in any way?*

Well, actually, the writing had to become the involvement. I discovered that I could not really give to the Movement, or anything, all the time and energy that it would require, and that my ability really was in writing and that was what I should do. And I should stop feeling guilty about it. I used to go to demonstrations and always feel that I was not even there, in a way, that I was really just eyes viewing it. I finally realized that it was because I knew that I should be writing and so I did.

*Did you have problems meshing that with your involvement and activism?*

Oh yes, yes. Because when you're very active, you can become so angry, for one thing, that you could never really write it well. The anger has to simmer down some before it can become something on the page that people can really deeply read and respond to. So now, when I think of my activism, it is really the writing that I do rather than anything else. One of the things that I've been doing more in San Francisco is writing about things like pornography and sado-masochism, and it is through writing about those things that I join with women who are more active, who may be demonstrating against violent pornography and sado-masochism.

*I want to ask you about the creative process: what spurs you on and what dampens your creativity?*

I don't know. I think that Flannery O'Connor said once that the artist must have the habit of art, and that's a sort of reflective state of mind. Something that you don't really do yourself, I guess, it's just that you're sort of aware of things in such a way that when something good hits you, you more or less know it. I mean, if an idea comes in the course of the day, if it is a good one, you feel it, and you pursue it. But what dampens that, I don't know, unless it is some humdrum activity, or work, or the inability

to deal with an idea when it does come. There are times when I don't write as much, but I don't think of it as writer's block. I think of it as a time when I probably shouldn't be writing, and I should be doing something else. I mean, after all, writing constantly is no guarantee that you're writing anything that anybody needs to read.

*How is your writing changing over the years?*

I think, believe it or not, it's becoming even more direct. I say that because people often say, "Well, you know, you're really very direct," as if there should be more subtlety. But I think, as I write, I have a real consciousness of where we are as a people and as a globe in this age of nuclear action and reaction. I don't think that there's a whole lot of time for subtlety, when directness will serve. So I think I'm always moving toward more and more clarity and directness.

*What kind of a future do you wish for your own daughter, Rebecca?*

Oh, the future I wish for my daughter isn't possible in this society, so really the most that I could wish for her is that she overcome the society in some ways, in all ways if possible. And that she manage to have a really good life and a good time, and happiness, even though this society is sick and racist and sexist, and, you know, doomed in many ways. I hope that she does not have cancer from radioactive fallout. I hope that her children are not malformed because of the pollution in the water, and in the air. I hope that she can be healthy and I hope that she can have joy. But I hope, I suppose most of all, that she will not stop struggling to have happiness and joy in her life, because she deserves both. □

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*Krista Brewer lives in Atlanta, where she was born, and is on the staff of the Clearinghouse on Georgia Jails and Prisons.*

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## Note to a Dark Girl

i slip into black houses slip out of black slips black lace  
black pearls and slip under your black fire burn into silvery  
black rose buds slip into your skin and begin to sew up  
black holes black hurt spots slip into black muscles and  
realize that black bones hold up the mythical universe give  
back black strength through black kisses and experience  
black desert love. Experience unpoisoned black languages  
unphotographed black breasts possessed by black babies  
to listen and survive off black breath black discovery  
heavy with black voices praying to black angels singing  
black poems inside black nights black womb infused with  
dark sperm nightmare black nightmare again black baby  
black death black hunger black poems to fill the womb  
black wind to guard against the rain black angels to cause  
black salvations black springs black female child promising  
life.

— Jaki Shelton

# Speaking for Ourselves

## BLACK WOMEN WRITERS OF THE '80S

by Sondra O'Neale



As far back as the birth of distinctively American literature — Washington Irving's short story romances and James Fenimore Cooper's novels — African slave women were the least identifiable human entities. Black men in contrast received a few "minor" roles: steady the plow, drive the coach and have supportive "yes sar massa"s readily available. But the ebon woman, always portrayed as stoutish, mute and stupid, was never allowed to venture beyond the back burner of the back stove of the back kitchen in the early American writer's pen and, more pointedly, in his mind.

To say that pre-modern writers were more vulnerable to such neglect is no excuse. Even today, with few exceptions, the black woman is still the least developed character in national and regional literary culture. Nor is "prior" sexism an adequate explanation. Two hundred years after Irving and Cooper, when American art had progressed from European emulation and sputtering definitiveness to internationally acclaimed forms, American heroines such as Henry James' Isabelle Archer, Nathaniel Hawthorne's Hester Prynne, Theodore Dreiser's Carrie, Stephen Crane's Maggie and Edgar Allan Poe's Lenore were complex women who were influenced by multi-faceted forces and who acted from motivations which were always more compelling than their environs. Thus as individuals, and not stereotypes, they were free to develop beyond societal restraints or traditional literary molds.

As for black male characters, Mark Twain's Huck has his "Jim Baby," who, though appearing to be the typically depicted fawning slave, has so much ingenuity that he is able to hustle a white boy "massa" as a cover for escape. In William Faulkner's works, Lucas Beauchamp and Sam Fathers are black men — even though much is made of their near-white black blood and, in Sam's case, Indian heritage — who are respected as men, even creating acceptable arenas in which to challenge and usually dominate white men. Later, Richard Wright would conduct an entire

symphony of the black man's rage in *Bigger Thomas*, Ralph Ellison would set forth one black male character's naiveté and simultaneous intellectual capacity in *The Invisible Man*, and James Baldwin would command national praise in his many novel and essay definitions of black male selfhood. But the task of creating a black American heroine in depth, of detailing the anguish of her unique dilemma, of delving into the mystery behind her Herculean spiritual strength, has remained for that select group of black American women writers whose creative statements reveal that only in "speaking for ourselves" will the world ever begin to comprehend the infinite source and personal horizon of collective black American feminine experience.

If there are traditional ways of viewing black women in American and, more cogently, Southern literature, they can be arranged in three stereotypical groups: the ever-present Aunt Jemima image; the tragic mulatto fixation; and the sensual animal type. One does not have to look far to find the familiar and simplistic "Mammy" who is also usually shown as prayerful Mother Earth, ever full of mercy, love, sacrifice, seldom angry or vengeful toward her captors and above all never seeking a way of escape. She is Uncle Tom's wife, Aunt Chloe, in Harriet Beecher Stowe's cabin — an incredibly stoic woman who waits for him to endure all manner of "cheek-turning" and "back whipping" only to receive his dying spirit years later. She is Butterfly McQueen's sweet voice calling, "Miz Scarlett, Miz Scarlett" through repetitive reels of movieland. And she is Faulkner's Dilsey, expected to bring spiritual vision to the self-inflicted judgment of her psychotic white "family." Filled with prophetic spirit, this pathetic "angel" of simplicity, whom they believed was sent by God to cradle white life in perpetuity, is shown rising above all Compson sins to view "de power and de glory." "I seed de beginnin, and now I sees de endin," she says wistfully, still in the enchantment of her vision — the "endin," however, is not of her own self-effacement but, she hopes, of the Compson's crucibles. The last we hear of Dilsey, it is again

John Sumner

to comment about "them" and not "us": "They endured." Unfortunately — when one considers the works of such Southern authors as Eudora Welty, Carson McCullers, Flannery O'Connor, Walker Percy, Allen Tate, Robert Penn Warren, *et al* — the Dilsey-type character is also most of what "endured" in American fiction as a united image of a black woman's supposed total capacity and potential.

The problem with Aunt Jemimas, fair-skinned tragic pariahs and desirable sex objects, is that they prohibit authentic character development within a novelistic world in which an author professes to attain "truth." These predictable models are also intended to prescribe all that the black woman is and should even hope to be in white society. The aesthetic standard of beauty in Western culture has always been white skin, blond hair and blue eyes. Thus the black woman was historically only seen fit to rear, scrub and make nations of masters and slaves. She moreover could be available when those masters tired of worshipping their self-made and fragile icons — white women — and reached for more "devilish" features, supposedly intrinsic to black skin, which better satisfied the lust of their hearts. Untouchable aesthetical perfection in the white woman was to be admired, but male physical needs demanded a dispensable body. The black woman, as her younger "Mammy" self, the willing waste receptacle for all excesses, could provide it. And in literature, as in life, she could be shuffled between white men and black men and their offspring; but the art form could never admit that perhaps, in the midst of existing for others, she was really someone else, carving a different image upon her own soul, even sculpting a superior scope for her own daughters.

Perhaps most devastating to the black feminine image in modern literature is the "star" role of this darker quasi-animal female: the sensual being. White Southern authors especially turned the black woman into a modern creation of the medieval misconception that darker-skinned persons were more passionate and that they could be fully understood in solely sexual terms. For instance the 1940s produced the unlikely love affair in Lillian Smith's *Strange Fruit* and the absurdity of Roth McCaslin's mulatto third cousin begging him to return her love and acknowledge their child in William Faulkner's "Delta Autumn." Earlier Northern white writers, Carl Van Vechten in *Nigger Heaven* and Gertrude Stein in *Three Lives*, had drawn the same sensual characters in mulatto women single-mindedly enthralled with men who not only looked white but who, more importantly, thought white in regards to black people. Mark Twain's sex-wise Roxy in *Pudd'nhead Wilson* is yet another early version of a racially confused black woman who thinks only in sexual terms. Roxy, probably correctly, believed that her son, conceived from a secret liaison with her wealthy white owner, could not as a slave achieve the full potential of an aristocrat. So Twain had her switch him with the owner's other son, whom brought up as her own. In 20 years, Roxy reaps the disaster when, after an easy life gained through various sexual favors with white men in the community, her own son sells her down the river — even after she tells him of his true identity.

The most blatant of these attempts to portray the black woman as sexual beast is Robert Penn Warren's *Amantha Starr* in *Band of Angels*. Like most white writers who try to expand black female roles, Warren presents a black woman whose major goal and motivation is to be white. He draws upon the usual tragic mulatto theme of a child

reared to believe that she is the favored offspring of rich plantation owners only to suffer the shock of recognition that she is not only black but also a slave. (Twain used this theme in *Pudd'nhead Wilson* as did Faulkner and Stowe; the nineteenth-century author William Wells Brown in *Clotel: Or the President's Daughter*, 1853, the first novel written by a black American; and Frances E.W. Harper in *Iola Leroy: or the Shadows Uplifted*, 1892, the first novel written by a black woman in America.)

When, as a young woman who harbored benign disdain for her father's African slave servants, *Amantha* discovered that she was one herself, she cried:

*Listen — you've got to listen . . . it's all a mistake — it isn't right — and it can't be true, it can't happen to me, not to me . . . I wasn't a nigger, I wasn't a slave, I was Amantha Starr — Little Manty — Little Miss Sugar and Spice.*

Her suspension between white race and black reality continues throughout the story. She is passionately attracted to at least four white men: one as his willing slave mistress; two as sensual temptress who taunts men to wild acts of murder and revenge; and one as a "passing-as-white" subdued, dutiful and utterly miserable wife. The reader is never sure why *Amantha* passes from one man to another. A craving for sexual relationships which provide a touching identity with whiteness is the only plausible reason. The only black man within her reach, *Rau-Ru*, is an overseer in her first lover's plantation; but although she briefly escapes from the Civil War with him near the end of the novel, she never knows him as a human being, a fellow slave or a passionate lover. Ultimately any critical search for a realistic, complex black woman in Southern literature, would lead one to conclude that the answer is not *Amantha Starr*. Whatever causes lead to the character's shallow development, it is clear that Warren did not just portray a black woman who wanted to be white; he created a white woman whom he was trying to make black.

The critical issue is a matter of perceived realities: few white writers have ever known who black people were nor what they wanted. To admit human possibilities such as equal intelligence, similar emotions, needs for love, a likewise capacity to hate and harbor revenge — was perhaps too unsettling to themselves or to their readers. Thus societal suppression of black humanness was mirrored even more violently as, through force of pen, Southern white writers continued to create worlds with insufficient atmosphere for black women to express more than stock sensuality or mammyism.

Tragically, the explosive rage of black male writers even forced them to embrace this suppression as a means of dramatically decoding glimmers of black consciousness. Once such men as Wright, Ellison, Baldwin and Baraka had unleashed centuries of rage against the dominant society, emotions were too spent to explore love, or beauty, or the aesthetics of femininity — subjects befitting relationships which unoppressed men would be free to cultivate in their literature. The black male writer had to reflect the realities of black life wherein the man's first duty was just to keep himself and his woman alive and next to resist their sub-human placement in the world, and occasionally, where safety permitted, to demand from the white world more than just bread, but dignity, hope of graduation from a life

of subjugating mentality for their children.

For the black male writer to show just how reprehensible black experience is, for him to force beauty from anger, art from violent imagination, drama from mutual frustration — he fell inevitably into the same trap as his white male counterparts. For instance, Richard Wright reached in the “stock” cabinet for the dependable, religious, unfeminine black grammie and turned her into the stifling, emasculating enemy. Wright’s women are either marshal mother figures who, as preparation for the white world, badger him to imitate their hysterical madness, or else they are mono-minded sexual beings who inhibit his aspirations.

James Baldwin tries harder. But even in his broader world, women are simply appreciated appurtenances to help a young man find his way. And this is also the function of black women in Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*. Unlike the glamorous, wealthy white women who aid the ambitious hero in his move up within the Communist Party, Southern-style mammy figures like Mary Rambo are visible only long enough to feed, clothe and comment on the youth’s “superior” leadership qualities. In this regard Mary is no different from Faulkner’s Dilsey or Warren’s Aunt Suki; these characters are simply non-persons, sort of mechanical comfort machines, indispensable to the hero’s existence but having no existence of their own. In his essays Baldwin suggests that the racial hell in American consciousness makes it impossible for a black man to function, in life or in art, toward a woman as he would. In fact Baldwin admitted that the task of presenting a total black woman would remain to the black woman author herself.

Other black men writing in the ’60s and beyond still did not find the times acceptable enough to leave the black nation’s oppressive condition as subject matter for their art. So heroes went off to fight wars at city hall, in picket trenches and in corporate worlds, but generally heroines remained in “stock”: unborn, aborted, minimized. When one considers female characters in some of these works — i.e., the hellish char woman in Ishmael Reed’s *Flight to Canada*; the sado-sensuous, pseudo-political object in John Wideman’s *The Lynchers*; and the strong, spiritually supportive women, like Miss Jane Pittman, in Ernest Gaines’ novels and short stories who continue to fulfill the black woman’s expected role as underpinning Southern society — it is apparent that their collective growth has not kept pace with the development of black men whom the writers have made more equal to themselves.

One cannot criticize Baldwin, Ellison, Wright or any other black male writer for first attacking apartheid’s moral corruption in American life. Nonetheless their efforts to grant literary emancipation to the black man leave readers uninformed about stunted black women characters who, left behind, metaphorically stare at the ubiquitous walls of a literary institution which has produced fully known, loved and often complex enough to be loathed white women, but has negated the possibilities of such images among black women in America.

But if the years of the ’60s and beyond opened doors of opportunity for ethnic writers in general, they were no less inviting to black women artists. After 300 years of being “wallpaper,” “mattress cover” and “pot holder” in American literature, the time has come for Dilsey to move over, for her great-great-granddaughters are now

speaking, praying, being, not for any Compsons but for themselves. Black American women writers are moving collectively and, though largely unrecognized, have historically moved against the prevalent stereotypes of their literary legacy. They have refused to deploy the Aunt Jemima image; rather they have employed heroines who maneuver constantly to avoid being anyone’s lacky. If any feminine passion is displayed, it is directed toward black men, not white ones. And since Frances Harper’s first book, black women have written novels which more vividly illustrate the anguish of alienated mulatto women who either sacrifice themselves to better conditions for all black people or else portray the schizophrenic idiocy of attempting to conform to the white world by “being” white.

During the pre-depression Harlem Renaissance, several black women novelists emerged in segregated cultural circles who turned the mulatto motif upon its ear. In *Passing* and *Quicksand*, Nella Larsen showed that there can be no fulfilled feminine existence as long as a woman’s possibilities are confined to the lightness or darkness of her skin. In one Larsen plot, suicide or murder is inevitable for women who try to arrange their lives with these masks. And while the first three novels of Larsen’s contemporary, Jessie Fauset, may have been designed to authenticate the righteousness of what in the twentieth century had become respected middle-class mulatto lifestyle, Fauset’s last novel, *Comedy: American Style*, sets forth the tragic unraveling of such fairytale pretenses.

Today the novel of that period which scholars of black American literature most applaud is Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. That book, now back in print, is having a revival through the rediscovery work of novelist/poet Alice Walker and critic Robert Hemenway. Hurston’s heroine Janie Starkes refuses to inhabit the middle-class status of “light enough” mulattoes in the deep South. Janie posits that black women, regardless of their hue, owe their allegiance to black people because there is neither value nor future in attempting to be white. The one passionate love of her life is not an affair of lust but a warm, tender relationship with a black man named Teacake who takes her to the Florida bayous to experience authentic black life. After his death, Janie is contented because she knows the full liberation of being expressive, well-loved and complete — even without man or child in her life. Her artistic ability to command the folk art of this “real” black existence also makes her the second of many multi-faceted women characters to follow in novels by black American women — characters who find maturity and self-expression in some form of artistic creation. Frances Harper’s Iola Leroy was the first.

In 1966 Margaret Walker, in her prize-winning novel on the Civil War, *Jubilee*, makes a similar statement. Walker draws upon generations of family folklore to produce a woman who, though she is a slave, is able to identify herself as more than just someone’s maid and, when free, is able to establish a more acceptable world for herself, her husband and her children. Vvry, who lives to see the destructiveness that antebellum culture placed upon the “untouchable” white woman, endured and transcended the mold with which the same institution would inhibit her development as a spiritually resourceful and passionate woman. Throughout the work the reader marvels as Vvry makes choices which define and enlarge

her own being, regardless of the most grueling circumstances typical of slavery and reconstruction.

Similarly Alice Walker's *Meridian*, Gayle Jones' *Corridgora*, Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*, Sarah E. Wright's *This Child's Gonna Live* and Toni Cade Bambara's *The Salt Eaters*, among others, are novelistic structures which allow Southern black women characters room to explore, to grow, to rise above convoluted, preconditioned paths which define who they are and what they should be. Autobiographically, writers like Ann Moody and Maya Angelou, in *Coming of Age in Mississippi* and *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, exhibit what the Southern experience is actually like for black girls and women. They give testimony that the first thing a young black girl must overcome is the culturally imposed psychological longing to look like a white girl. Angelou opens her biography with memories of a young black girl who was typically caught in the schizophrenic horror:

*Wouldn't they be surprised when one day I woke out of my black ugly dream, and my real hair, which was long and blond, would take the place of the kinky mass that Momma wouldn't let me straighten? My light-blue eyes were going to hypnotize them, after all the things they said about my daddy must of been a Chinaman (I thought they meant made out of china, like a cup) because my eyes were so small and squinty. Then they would understand why I had never picked up a Southern accent, or spoke the common slang, and why I had to be forced to eat pigs' tails and snouts. Because I was really white and because a cruel fairy stepmother, who was understandably jealous of my beauty, had turned me into a too-big Negro girl, with nappy black hair, broad feet and a space between her teeth that would hold a number-two pencil.*

And Moody explains that modern Southern black women, even in maturity, still cannot accept the same tenets of feminine definition, roles and fulfillments as white women. For black women characters and writers, the task is still primarily to free a race:

*I sat there listening to "We Shall Overcome," looking out of the window at the passing Mississippi landscape. Images of all that had happened kept crossing my mind: the Taplin burning, the Birmingham church bombing, Medgar Evers' murder, the blood gushing out of McKinley's head, and all the other murders. I saw the face of Mrs. Chinn as she said, "We ain't big enough to do it ourselves," C.O.'s face when he gave me that pitiful wave from the chain gang. I could feel the tears welling up in my eyes. . . . "We shall overcome some day." I wonder. I really wonder.*

With this same anguish and intuitive yearning for a higher calling than mammyism, skinism or sexism, Alice Walker's heroine *Meridian* sacrifices herself entirely — her health, her "looks," her lover, her children, any "normal" future of home, hearth and husband — to free black people in the South as a civil-rights volunteer. Her self-effacement is necessary for black liberation and has nothing to do with conforming to stereotypes traditionally drawn by an alien culture. Gayle Jones' *Ursula* in the hidden ghetto of Lexing-

ton, Kentucky, also discovers her sexuality, not as an artificial character who knows nothing of a black woman's struggle but as a formerly frigid wife who overcomes sexual inhibitions of her own volition. That the mulatto woman must also obtain sexual wholeness, regardless of the legacy of miscegenous white fathers who look upon black women as objects of sexual exploitation and who leave frigidity as one of the many psychic scars upon their daughters, is Jones' bittersweet secret in *Corridgora*.

Today black American writers are even redeeming those images of slave women which have been allowed to remain despicable emblems of shame on the blotter of racial consciousness. One example is Sherley Anne Williams' forthcoming novel, *Meditations on History* (a segment of which is collected in Doubleday's *Midnight Birds*, edited by Mary Helen Washington). Odessa, one of the captured leaders of a slave rebellion in early nineteenth century Alabama, is allowed a stay of execution because she is pregnant. Williams uses exquisite imagination to portray what the black woman's slave experience must have been like: a condescending white journalist who has just finished a volume, *The Complete Guide for Competent Masters in Dealing with Slaves and Other Dependents*, is trying to pick Odessa's mind so that he can write another volume on how slaveowners can prevent insurrection. He learns that the masses must not only fear strong young bucks but also small "docile" women like the fierce Odessa; that she, aware of his sado-sexual attraction to her, has been psychologically manipulating him instead of the other way around; and that she has cleverly used his "childish," erudite interviews, which assumed her ignorance, subservience and powerlessness, as a ruse to plan her escape. But his discovery comes too late. Odessa is rescued by the same community of escaped slaves which she risked her life to free. One empathizes with Odessa's kinetic love for the sensuous Kaine, whom the massa kills, her insistence to have Kaine's child despite the anti-life odds of slavery, and her will to triumph over the literal hell of plantation existence. Instinctively the reader knows that Williams has created a more authentic slave heroine of whom black readers can be proud and from whom white readers can gain insight.

Yes, the issue is perceived reality. Other segments of literary society attempt to perceive what the black feminine experience is like while black women authors write from knowledge and informed imagination. These writers speak for the modern, liberated black woman who refuses to fashion herself after shallow patterns or to offer misrepresentative art. Dilsey may have seen the beginning, but the new black women writers see the end — the end to all Dilseys and their passing white world — because the black woman has always known that women like Dilsey, *Amantha* and *Roxy* never really existed at all. □

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# A Citizen of Florida

by Cheryl Hiers

Until I was 10, there was nothing peculiar about a woman wearing a hat to church — for weddings, funerals or Sunday services. Then someone somewhere decided hats were out. That news, I'm sure, took awhile to reach our small coastal town, and more time to be mulled over and debated by the ladies of the town. Those concerned were astonished that anyone would invent such a notion. Why would one *want* to go hatless to church? Nevertheless, one Sunday a few young women suddenly turned up bare-headed at First Baptist. Their hair, having been rolled tight at Marlene's the day before, popped out boldly in tiny corkscrew curls.

No one said a word.

The next week more young women dared the Inner Sanctum without head cover and, for all I could tell, without the least bit of embarrassment. The wives and older women shot glares at them, but gradually, Sunday by Sunday, they too succumbed to the new style.

Clinging to tradition reveals one's age, I guess they reasoned. Which in a way was true: by the time I was 12 only the really elderly ladies stuck to their millinery, fashion or no fashion. Yet even those traditionalists observed the old order only in so far as their trips to church demanded. The rest of the week they displayed scalp

to the sun and sky, just as their less-modest counterparts ventured to do even on the Sabbath.

There was one woman, however, whose reputation was known to nearly all in our town because of her unique stance on the hat issue. The beach lifeguards, the citrus growers, the farmers and even some of the tourists were familiar with Mrs. Hannah Avant's name. She was an old real estate lady. No one had ever seen her without a hat on her head — whether in sunshine, rain, lightning storms or high winds. Once during Hurricane Deborah, a city electric man reported Mrs. Avant chasing her cat around the yard, one hand stretched forth tempting the feline with a shrimp while she pleaded, "Kitty, kitty, here kitty," and the other hand pinning her hat on her head to spite the gale.

Why would Mrs. Avant persevere to keep her head shaded even in a hurricane? People in the town proposed various theories, some plausible, some far-fetched.

The "old dog, no new tricks" argument maintained that Mrs. Avant was brought up like a lady and was too old to change her ways. And since, in her time, ladies would as soon appear in public stark naked as without their hats, she still wore a hat 60 years later despite fluctuations in fashion.

Then there was the "vanity, vanity, all is vanity" assessment that claimed Mrs. Avant had suffered scarlet fever as a child and lost a great patch of hair on the top of her skull. Hats protected the bald spot from the sun and, more importantly, protected her pride.

The "in memoriam" opinion, an unlikely explanation I believe, averred that Mrs. Avant's father had boasted a head of wavy hair of which he was immoderately proud. Everyone warned him time and again to wear a hat when out in the fields (he was one of the first Samsula farmers), but he suspected a hat would press his hair down and maybe even cause it to fall out. So one heat-killing July day while heaving watermelons on a wagon, Mrs. Avant's father glanced up to see the "bear stalking the field." The bear caught him before he knew it, and he fell over dead. Mrs. Avant from that day on, some people will swear, wore a hat in memory of her father and his dear head of black hair which no one in this world will see again. But it seems to me that a hat would be a tactless way of remembering a loved one who by his own stubborn refusal to wear such an article possibly brought about his own death. As I said, though, there are some who will swear by this version and some who will swear by the others.

Mrs. Avant had been an old woman for 20 years when hats became passé. That she still kept up the custom awoke people to the reality of her age and led some of them to forgive her somewhat for her personality. But her active role as a real estate agent, her reputed wealth, her stinginess and, later, her unpopular position on a community matter tended to make people forget she was tipping 80. Most didn't mind spreading a little gossip about the old lady, or taking in a little.

I grew up among the speculations over her hats and the rumors of her riches. Fortunately or not, I also grew up among pretty regular sightings of Mrs. Avant herself. She lived alone on a white sandy road not far from my own house. The road was called South River Drive and was hell to ride a bicycle on. Twenty feet down it, the sand would shoot out beneath your tires like a magician's tablecloth and leave you without traction or any hope of pedaling on. The road ran for just one block along Indian River, then



*Illustrations by Leah Preiss*

turned abruptly in corners at both ends. Beyond each corner mangrove swamps bushed out — giving South River Drive and Mrs. Avant's large wooden house the appearance of a way-station hacked out of the wilderness. In the river before the house stood a private pier with a "keep off" sign and a boat ramp Mrs. Avant never used herself since she didn't own a boat. Except for her river-house which faced westward over the pier and water, her block of land was undeveloped. A biologist, my father once said, could study all the stages of forestation by just visiting Mrs. Avant's place. Marsh grass sprouted in one section; cedars grew in another spot, and pines in yet another. And finally, reigning at the heart of the estate were the kings — the giant live oaks. Mrs. Avant owned them all and the whole city block of land beneath them.

Every day for two years my brother and I had to plow our bicycles through the sand of South River Drive to

deliver a newspaper to Mrs. Avant. Sometimes we'd catch glimpses of her early in the morning squirting water on her hibiscus bushes. She'd stand tall, slightly humped at the shoulders, but thick and imperturbable as a bridge piling. Her head supported an enormous black sun hat so massive you'd think it would tip her balance. A fine arc of water sprayed out from the hose in her hand and refracted the morning sunlight into a shifting rainbow that moved as we moved. The sight impressed us. But we learned to pass it as rapidly as we could, which wasn't rapid enough considering we had to walk our bicycles, not ride them.

My brother would argue with much conviction that Mrs. Avant despised children — an opinion he picked up from local gossip that was not unsupported by Mrs. Avant's actions. She spoke out vehemently against new school taxes and, on the personal plane, she refused to recognize my brother's and my existence. When we walked by, clearly in sight, she wouldn't say "hello," turn her head or even flick the stream of water slightly out of its sun-catching arc. And we could never approach her for our paper money: she would leave it in her mailbox at the end of the driveway — it was always the exact amount wadded in a pale green envelope and secured tightly with one of our own red rubberbands. She never left a tip.

Mrs. Avant wasn't lacking in sentiment; she just preferred not to dilute it in everyday discourse, I guess. She channelled an almost insane energy into keeping up her property and her cats. At least once a year, she summoned Mr. Wheeler to clean the Spanish moss out of the oaks and check the trunks and limbs for diseases. She mowed the grass herself, clipped the hedges and raked her sand driveway. Her hibiscus were tended so assiduously the blooms could have won "Best of Show" in the town's flower contest, if she had chosen to enter them. Cats were apparently the only creature she allowed herself a fondness for, and her fondness approached madness. She'd risk her life — as she did in Deborah — just to save one's life.

We all have a yearning to last longer than our bones; people just go about trying in different ways. And when a truly odd way emerges, it's hard to recognize or hard to accept. I suppose that's why Mrs. Avant was considered merely a stingy old widow who wouldn't douse you with her garden hose if you were on fire. We couldn't see at the time that she had a goal beyond the aggrandizement of land and fortune. Not that a purpose redeems her. But part of her infamous meanness stemmed, I believe, from an intolerance for diversions that might tempt her off the track of what she really held dear.

Towards the end of our paper-route days there was a lot of grumbling we heard from door-to-door and around the town about Mrs. Avant owning half the beachside and refusing to sell the choicest lots until the prices skyrocketed. At 79 she was acting like she still had a fortune to amass for later.

My brother and I resigned from the newspaper business after 25 months of loyal duty, right after the New Year and Christmas tips rolled in. We didn't see Mrs. Avant on a regular basis anymore. But two or three times a week, I'd walk down South River Drive to watch the shrimp boats go by or see the sunset. Occasionally, I'd see Mrs. Avant out sprinkling her hibiscus bushes or mowing her lawn. She'd ignore me as always.

One day when I walked by, she wasn't in sight, but a white pickup truck was parked out front of her house. Two

men sitting inside got out when they saw me. As I approached I read the title "Turnbull Trailer Park" stenciled on the truck door.

"You live around here?" they asked cheerfully.

"A couple of blocks over," I said.

"Know who owns this land?"

"Mrs. Avant," I answered. "Mrs. Hannah Avant. She owns the whole block."

"Think she'd be interested in selling it?"

"What for?" I asked suspiciously.

"We might be needin some more land," one of them explained.

"Well, Mrs. Avant would never sell this land," I replied earnestly.

"Even for a good price?"

"No! Not Mrs. Avant. This is her home. It'd be like selling one of her cats."

The men smiled at each other and climbed back in their truck. The one driving asked one more question.

"This Mrs. Avant an old lady?" he said.

"Yes. She's real old. She's nearly —" I began but stopped because the man finished it himself.

"She's nearly 85, right?" he said.

"Yes. I think so."

"Well, she can't last much longer," he declared and drove off. I stood in their dust cloud thinking what an ugly plot they had implied and how I would hate to see trailer homes pulled in under those oaks.

Then something moved over at the side of Mrs. Avant's house. One of the hibiscus bushes seemed to be shivering. Bravely, I edged right into the yard. Maybe it was a cat or a raccoon. . . .

Then the branches parted and the grinning face of Mrs. Avant emerged between two tangerine-colored hibiscus blooms.

"Hee, hee," she laughed and the lids of one of her trout-blue eyes bunched together. Not until she had disappeared inside her house did I realize she had winked at me.

The men from Turnbull Trailer Park had to settle for something else. They finally landed the deeds to the mangrove swamps beyond either end of South River Drive. They didn't erect trailers double-wide with porches, but a subdivision stamped out in uniform little yards was constructed on the north side, and there was rumor of a condominium planned for the south end.

Mrs. Avant may have been pestered by more land sharks after that (probably was, since her piece was in a prime location — halfway between the two bridges spanning the mainland and the beachside), but I didn't hear of anything else concerning her block until my senior year in high school. Then it was a very nasty business and Mrs. Avant's name suffered a lot of ill use.

The county had been growing and the school board decided the beachside needed a new elementary school. But there was the problem of the site. One of the board members knew of Mrs. Avant's block (but, as it came out later, he didn't know Mrs. Avant) and suggested an offer be made — not for the entire block, but just one corner of it. A formal letter of inquiry was sent to Mrs. Avant. Six weeks later there had been no answer and another letter was sent, asking for some response "as soon as was convenient." Mrs. Avant replied this time, informing the school board briefly that the place was not for sale.



The other potential sites had fallen through one by one so by the time the school board received Mrs. Avant's rejection, they were desperate. Some members suggested the matter be dropped, but one or two encouraged the superintendent himself to make a personal request.

"After all," they reasoned, "it is the ideal location."

So one Sunday afternoon the county school superintendent drove out to pay a visit to the one resident of South River Drive.

We wouldn't know what happened during that exchange except for the fact that this particular superintendent was, as my father put it, "a pompous pontificator" — a man keenly susceptible to the slimmest hint of insult to his person or position. He reported his version of the interview to all the county newspapers for "personal and public vindication."

The superintendent claimed he had cordially invited Mrs. Avant to reconsider selling "just a corner" of her land.

Mrs. Avant replied obdurately that she had no intention of selling.

The superintendent pressed her gently — reminding her, as he said, of "the great service she'd be doing the children of the community — the future leaders of our state and nation."

Mrs. Avant seemed to soften at that idea, and confessed that she didn't want to sell any part of the land unless she sold the whole block.

At this possible breakthrough, and believing Mrs. Avant was at last ready to negotiate, the superintendent expressed interest in buying the whole block, if the price were reasonable. He knew the school board could always use the land in one way or another. There was already talk of a new county media center, and land would be needed. So he inquired how much Mrs. Avant would consider selling for.

The old woman told him the price for the entire block was seven million dollars.

The superintendent chuckled and exclaimed, catching what he thought to be her humorous mood, "Why, that's a steal!"

"I know it is," Mrs. Avant said sternly. "But that's the price."

He realized then that she was serious. That she had baited him up to the end to demonstrate her contempt for him as a public servant and for the public he represented.

He left in a state of what he termed "shock at the

appalling lack of civic consciousness in some citizens." Moreover, "it was shameful that a professional like Mrs. Hannah Avant would denigrate her profession and *her character* by stooping to play cat-and-mouse games with the superintendent of public schools in Coronado County!"

All the papers but one ran the superintendent's editorial and the daily even published an editorial cartoon on the subject. It pictured an unmistakable Mrs. Avant peering out from beneath an umbrella-sized hat. She sat at a toll booth with an open palm stretched toward a small child. Behind her a county school house was drawn. The caption read, "Seven million dollars, please."

You'd think other parts of the county wouldn't be that intrigued by what one woman in one small town did or didn't say to the school superintendent on a Sunday afternoon in May. But political issues must have been scarce that spring, or else the cartoon irritated in just the right way, for letters rushed into the daily newspaper from all points, rural and urban. The editor of one weekly paper announced after the second week that letters on the "Avant matter" ran three to one against her.

"I agree whole-heartedly with the superintendent," one reader wrote. "The upper crust should force themselves to consider the plight of others in the world. . . ."

"Why didn't she say 'no' and let it go at that?" a puzzled resident of the county seat inquired.

"The rich are always arrogant. . . ." one man pronounced.

"Considering Mrs. Hannah Avant's long-standing war against raising school millage rates, it's no wonder she has taken another opportunity to display her antipathy to quality education," the junior high school principal explained. "The wonder is that the school board would consider asking her for anything, even the price of her land. . . ."

"At least she could have been courteous. . . ." a woman suggested.

A few letters expressed some support for Mrs. Avant, although in the end I suspect they only aroused more hard feelings.

The wife of the Methodist preacher reminded us that "it is no crime not to sell one's land." She exposed herself and her husband to quite a bit of criticism when she went on to say that "Mrs. Hannah Avant is one of our oldest citizens and should be respected for the stringent requirements she exacts from contractors who do buy her lots. . . . She has done more to conserve our land," the lady continued, "than the State Department of Natural Resources, and certainly more than the city council — a group which has proven itself by its recent zoning laws to be mere sycophants of Northern contractors. . . ." She finished up by chiding the school board for its last-minute planning. "Besides," she queried, "who is the school board to think it can have the best block on the beachside simply because it wants it?"

This letter prompted counter-responses from several organizations and individuals, including the Rotary Club, the PTA, the Garden Club, a local contractor, an unemployed laborer and a retired colonel.

The contractor wanted to know "exactly how Mrs. Avant had conserved land . . . and if her efforts to stifle the local economy with unreasonable building restrictions was conservation, was it worth it?" A construction worker then unemployed added his signature.

The PTA reiterated its support for the school board and the superintendent in "their tireless efforts to locate a site for the urgently needed school. . . ." They also wanted to remind some of the town residents that the school board had "only the interests of our children in mind. . . ."

The Garden Club spoke up for the State Department of Natural Resources which had "recently allocated generous funds for new roadside parks, complete with picnic tables and port-a-lets. . . ."

The Rotary Club defended the city council — "some of whose members were high-ranking officers in Rotary and sorely hurt by the letter intimating wrongdoing on their parts. . . ."

The retired colonel informed the community that he, too, "was one of the oldest citizens of the town," but he didn't use his age "as an excuse for displaying rudeness to public officials."

All this went on for a while and would have perhaps dragged on longer if some of our high school graduation antics hadn't gotten out of hand. Every year there would be pranks — mostly harmless, funny tricks. The year my brother graduated, a live chicken got deposited in the principal's office one Friday evening and wasn't discovered until Monday morning. A Volkswagen was disassembled and rebuilt on top of the gym roof. An alligator turned up snapping on the front lawn before the administration wing. Almost as a rule, the pranks centered about the school grounds, except for the ubiquitous spray-paint boasts that read "class of such-and-such-a-year rules." My year, however, the "Avant matter" occurring when it did inspired some Samsula farm boys to carry their pranks out to the citizenry — to Mrs. Avant's place and beyond the limits of mere fun.

When the news broke, it wasn't in the editorial column. The Sunday morning of our baccalaureate the police received a call from Mrs. Avant requesting that an officer drive out to her house.

She was found standing quietly by one of her huge oak trees, the black sunbonnet on her head.

The officer, a brother-in-law of Mr. Wheeler, asked what the problem was and she pointed to the tree. A white ragged line two inches wide circled all the way around the trunk about a foot up from the ground.

"It's been girdled," the officer said. Mrs. Avant nodded her head and asked him to file a report. She would prosecute.

He obtained what information he could from her and assured her the police would do all they were able. But he didn't expect much in the way of results. High school students probably, but hard to prove. He was sorry . . . he knew those trees didn't grow up over night.

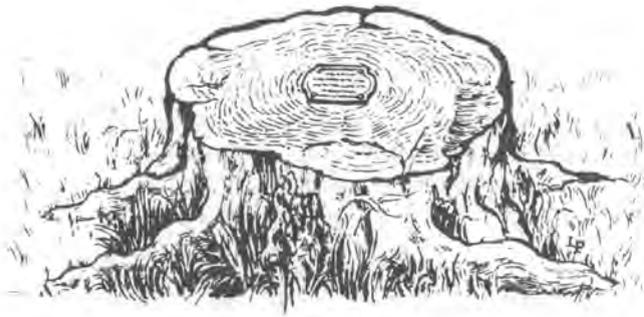
Before he left, Mrs. Avant asked him to tell Mr. Wheeler she'd like for him to come out the next day, with his saw.

"Do you mean to cut it down?" the officer asked. "It might not die. You should wait and see."

"It's already dying," Mrs. Avant answered. "When you do that to it, it has no choice but to die. Can't get any water, you know that, Mr. Ezell."

The story got spread about by Mr. Ezell and Mr. Wheeler and their wives.

Our high school principal, like Officer Ezell, suspected some students of the crime. He called a special assembly for the graduates and reproached us all, but most of us felt lousy about the whole thing anyway. In fact, town sen-



timent seemed to swing that week to Mrs. Avant's favor. The matter with the school board didn't pop up once in the papers until Friday. Then, at last, Mrs. Avant wrote a letter in her own behalf.

Not a word about the tree. The letter consisted of one sentence, and it didn't do a lot to promote the tenuous good will the town had started to feel for Mrs. Avant since her oak was killed.

She wrote, "It is my land and I will do [here the editor inserted four asterisks] well what I please with it." She signed it, "Hannah Leslie Baker Avant."

The summer passed quietly. Mr. Ezell was right — the police never turned up the vandals and gradually the matter was forgotten.

September came and I left for college up North. Mrs. Avant dropped from my thoughts, but not completely. Whenever I pined for home, the beach and warm weather, sooner or later the image of Mrs. Avant peeping out between those tangerine blossoms would pop before me and I'd wonder if she were still around.

On holidays home, I would always walk at least once down the road to her place to check if things had changed. They hadn't. The house might have a new coat of paint. A cat I didn't recognize might dash across the yard. But nothing much else would be altered.

Towards the end of February of my junior year, I received a letter from my mother informing me, along with the news that "spring has arrived here" and my father "has planted his garden peas," that "Mrs. Avant has died of pneumonia."

I arrived home in June and my mother elaborated.

"Mrs. Avant died in her own bed," she said. "She hired a nurse so she could go home."

"Who got the land?" I asked.

"The state."

"No," I groaned. Mrs. Avant left no children, but I had hoped she might have some relatives that would carry on. But if the state had acquired it, no telling what would be done with it. A public auction probably.

"It's not like that," my mother assured me. "She fixed it up so legally tight that the land can't be touched without an act of Congress, and even then, I doubt they could change it." She paused and smiled.

"Well?" I pressed.

"She willed that block and the house to the Florida Historical Society. All of her other property and assets are being sold to put into a fund to keep the house and those cats," my mother stopped and chuckled, "and all the progeny of those cats. *In perpetuity.*"

"What about the house?"

"To be kept like it is. The Historical Society is to manage it as a museum."

I started laughing, too.

"She spited the school board with her last breath," I said. Then something occurred to me.

"Is she buried there?" I asked.

"Not buried. She requested a cremation and the ashes to be thrown from the end of the pier onto the river."

My walk to Mrs. Avant's the next day happened to coincide with a field trip excursion by local school children. They stood in a crowd before the front door, stamping little sandaled feet and twitching while a young woman I had never seen before lectured them on what they were visiting. Here and there indifferent cats lay dozing.

I moved up to hear the woman's words.

"And that," she announced proudly, "is the Intracoastal Waterway. It starts way up in the state of New Jersey and comes all the way down the East Coast, passes here and goes on to the tip of Florida. This part's called the Indian River because long ago Indians lived here."

A boy raised his hand.

"Yes," the woman said. "You have a question?"

"Indians don't have houses," he said defiantly.

Some of the other children snickered.

"I didn't mean the Indians lived in this house," the woman explained. "It's been built since their time, but even so, it's very old. The trees you are standing under *were* probably here when the Indians lived."

The children turned their heads back to peer with respect at the over-hanging limbs. I strolled away then, attracted by an open space in the network of branches and leaves. I found a tree stump as I expected. Its diameter must have been five feet or so. In the center a small plaque had been bolted. It read:

THIS HOUSE AND THIS LAND IS BEQUEATHED  
AS A GIFT TO THE PEOPLE OF THIS STATE  
IN THE NAME OF HANNAH LESLIE BAKER  
AVANT, A CITIZEN OF FLORIDA FOR  
NINETY-THREE YEARS

"The person who did live here," I heard the woman say as I turned back to the group, "was a kind old lady who loved cats and took great care of them." For effect, the woman pointed to a huge tom who began licking himself just as the children turned to stare.

"Her name was Mrs. Hannah Avant," she continued hastily. "She was a charter member of Coronado Methodist Church, a prominent real estate agent and an admirable, loving woman respected by all who knew her. Her generosity has given us a piece of Florida as it used to be."

She went on solemnly for a while about how Florida used to be and she might have even mentioned something about hats and dying of heatstroke in a watermelon patch.

I didn't catch it all because I was wondering if Mrs. Hannah Avant's ashes, her mean, parsimonious old ashes, were blowing then over the water and pier, coming to glaze the children's toes and fingers and perhaps penetrate a part of them as deeply and easily as the air breathed in beneath those ancient winking live oaks. □

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# TALES AND TELLERS: STORYTELLING IN THE SOUTH

by George Holt

**D**espite the flurry of interest in and assertion of ethnic identity which emerged in the 1970s, the process of cultural homogenization inexorably progresses — in the South as well as in the rest of the nation. Like many other Southerners, I view this transformation with regret. I am especially attuned to the changing character of the region because of my work as director of the Office of Folklife Programs of the North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources. My job is to promote public awareness and appreciation of North Carolina folk culture. It seems plain to me from years of conversations with this state's folk artists that a breakdown is occurring of the traditional culture of the South — an inevitable consequence of greater mobility, urban development and the growth of mass communications.

The South is by no means a monolithic culture zone. I am continually amazed by the diversity of expression within my own home state. But one overriding characteristic serves to unify the region culturally and it especially saddens me to see this weakened: Southerners' extra measure of respect for the spoken word, a special love of the verbal arts. One hears evidence of this strong oral tradition everyday, in rich dialects, accents and cadences. Words, and the skillful use of words, seem less a means to an end than objects of pleasure in themselves.

The authors of the articles and stories in this section offer their thoughts on a prominent and precious feature of Southern oral culture — storytelling. At the heart of each piece lies the author's recognition of the importance of the storytelling tradition in his or her development, along with an expression of deep concern for the survival of this vital part of our regional personality.

Bobby McMillon and Alice Walker give us passionate personal accounts of their relationships to stories and storytellers. McMillon, here writing down his thoughts on storytelling for the first time, provides an eloquent, story-like rumination on his deep love for the art and, along the way, surveys some of the storyteller's intricate skills and techniques. His focus is on the storytellers who have meant the most to him: those everyday people from his community who entertained him and countless others for hours on end with their tales. Alice Walker, from a different but no less moving perspective, tells how Joel Chandler Harris, the creator of Uncle Remus, and Walt Disney, who put Uncle

Remus on the screen in his film "Song of the South," effectively destroyed the meaning and beauty of a great part of black oral culture for her and for countless other black children. Her testimony, along with Zora Neale Hurston's folk tale, attests to the centrality of storytelling and the oral tradition in Afro-American culture.



Philip Gould

In Jill Oxendine's loving sketch of Kathryn Windham, the noted collector and teller of tales, we hear the words of a professional storyteller who has been at the forefront of the recent effort to preserve the storytelling art. Included with this piece is a discussion of the National Association for the Preservation and Perpetuation of Storytelling and Windham's own version of the well-known tale "Railroad Bill."

Finally novelist David Madden recounts his childhood experiences as the neighborhood storyteller and discusses the significance of storytelling to his fiction. To illustrate his points, Madden includes excerpts from his autobiographical novel, *Bijou*. These excerpts remind us that much of the best Southern literature has roots deep in the oral tradition.

Perhaps the essential fact about storytelling to be distilled from this collection of essays and stories is that the significance of the art lies not so much in the content of a particular story — that which may be recorded or written down — but in the very personal and special relationship of the teller to his or her audience. The full meaning of this relationship may be beyond our abilities to put into words, though we know that somehow it is of fundamental importance to our humanity. In a world increasingly dominated by the printing press and electronics, the meaning of that relationship is certainly worth pondering.

# The Old Man Was a King- Or Something

by Bobby McMillon

*A feller wanted to marry this man's daughter. Said he told the boy first he'd have to find two or three worse fools than he was. So he took off down the road and after a while passed by a barn where they was a man going in and out pushing an old empty wheelbarrow. He stood there watching a little bit and finally asked the man; said, "What you a doin'?" "Well," he said, "I got some wet hay in the barn 'n don't want it to rot or get wet, so I'm just toting out some of that shade in there and carrying back sunshine to dry it out!"*

*Well, that feller allowed this'n was fool enough for one so he lit again and fore long he heard the awfulest squealing and grunting ever was, sounded like all hell was busted loose. Looked off to one side and there was a man beating the pure devil out of a young boar at the foot of a big oak tree. "Buddy, how come you're beating that poor hog like that?" "Poor hog my eye! All that mast [acorns] up there and this damn thing's too crazy to climb up and get it. But hit will once't I beat him up there!" So that made number two fool. They was more to it. I reckon*

*that feller got his girl in the end. Now her daddy – seems like the old man was a king or something. Mother used to tell it but I just can't recollect all that tale.*

**T**he darkly complected furniture worker at the Broyhill Pacemaker plant in Lenoir, North Carolina, wiped sweat from his forehead as we faced the present reality of driving screws into the base rails that semi-circle the dressers made in our cabinet room division. In spite of the heat, behind those sparkling eyes a cool breeze of memory was blowing away the foul fumes of wood stains and the stink of hot glue and replacing the shrouded, polluted sun of today's world with a clearer, cleaner one which shone for him once more on the fields, streams, woods and home of his childhood in the 1930s and '40s.

*They was one – mighta been the same one, I forget now – where the feller had to do so many jobs before he could marry the girl. And the king, or whoever, told him he'd have to plow this great big 40-acre field real*

*soon, maybe by dinner or supper. Before the feller started though he took a drink the old man gave him – didn't know they was something slipped in it to work him [loosen his bowels]. Well, pretty soon he felt it coming and seen what was going on – hadn't much more than got started, neither. So, knowing sure he'd lose if he didn't do something quick, he dropped his britches below his hind end, tied his galluses [suspenders] to the plow arms, squatted a little while follerin the mule, and just let her fly! He got the job done in time, too.*

If there were more tales of this sort, Mr. Kirby didn't recall them at that time. He quit his job at the plant soon afterwards and I haven't since had the opportunity to speak with him. I hope that day's conversation may have led him to pass these tales on to his family.

Mr. Kirby should not be thought of as one of those fleeting carriers of tradition that many academics (and other collectors of folklore) seem to be always on the lookout for, ere they all become extinct. To me he is a

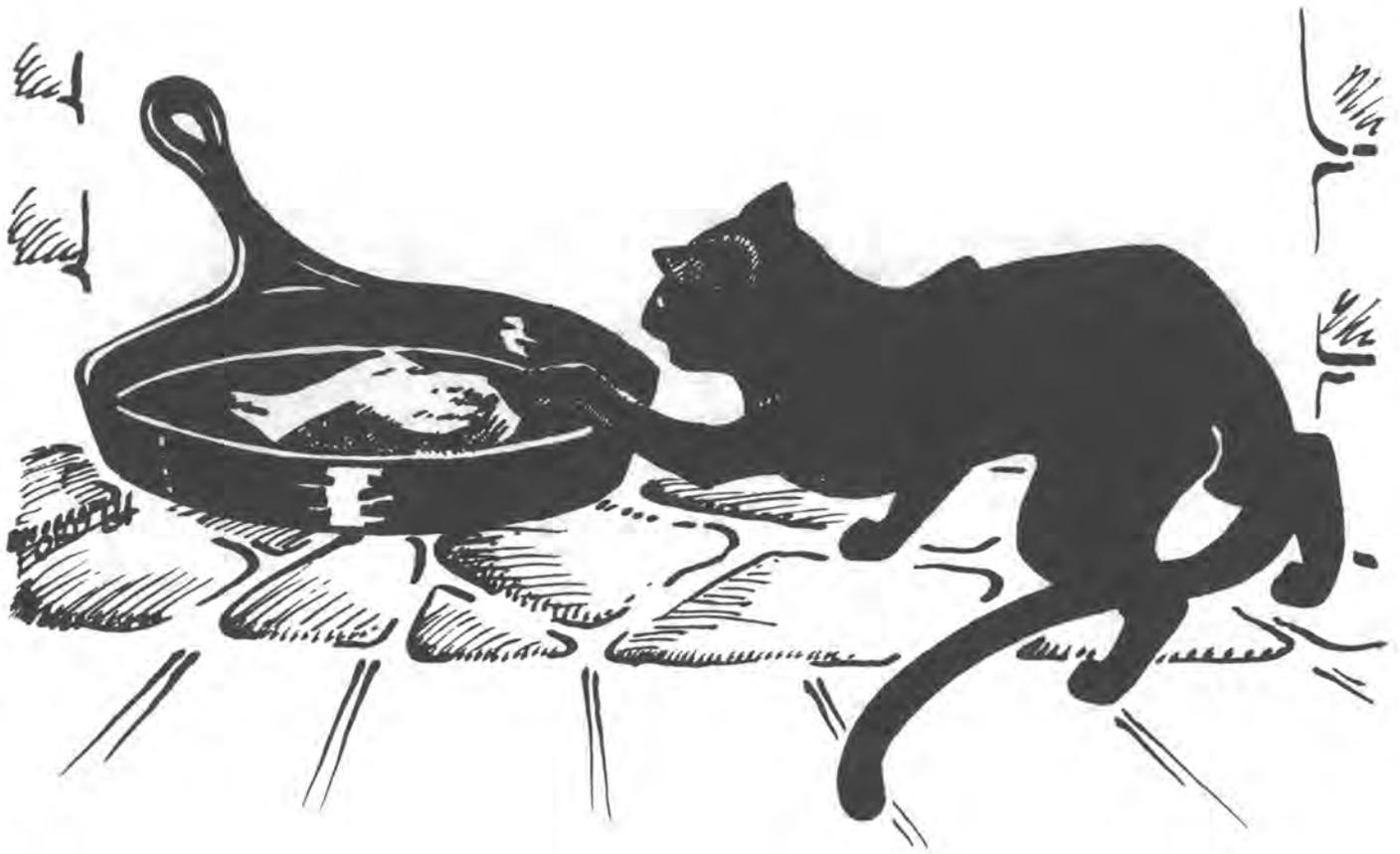


Illustration by Patricia Ford

friend and a neighbor who, because of our close association at work and my enthusiasm for such things, was willing to share some of his personal memories of times gone by. I could perhaps have expounded to him what little I knew of the German “marchen” or mentioned that his stories bear resemblance to certain features of the *Norske Folkwentyr*, but to have done so would have been meaningless to him. Mr. Kirby needed no explanations about the special, age-old quality of his stories; such remarks would have served only to break the spirit and feeling of the moment, as surely as Sir Walter Scott’s printed ballad did when shown to an old woman for recognition, who upon seeing it remarked that the song would never “be sung mair.”

*“Riddle to my riddle to my right,  
Where was I at this time last Satur-  
day night?  
All that time in a ivory tree  
A’looking for one but along came  
three.”*

Oral folk literature is subtle; it has many faces. When you look at one facet of oral tradition, other sides appear, many of which are jewels — valuable not so much for their antiquity, but for the way they are conveyed by the teller and for the impressions made upon the listener. Thus, although oral traditions may not always play a great part in the sweep of a person’s everyday life, they are actual and living within that life; these traditions are offshoots of human existence and experiences, born in the deeps of time and passed on through untold generations in one form or another. Ever in a state of flux and change, these forms seem to take on new shapes but are really only variations of older models. The purist may lament the disappearance of age-old dialect and primitive patterns of speech, but I’ve yet to find myself in an area in which folktales and their kin are not expressed in ways that warm a person’s heart and soul.

Probably the greatest mistake made by researchers in collecting and assimilating oral tales is in burdening the tales with many symbolisms and interpretations that really aren’t there,

and in overlooking how the tales are intimately bound up with the tellers. It’s true that for the scholar there are interpretative problems to be solved, but for most of us in the everyday business of living, these problems shouldn’t interfere with the enjoyment and absorption of stories as a natural part of life. In schools and libraries, many treatises express opinions as to origins of folk tales and how they proliferated throughout the world. These works are important as records and as models for further research, but paper cannot reproduce the sound of the spoken word, nor can it express the degree to which the tellers’ whole range of experience, their lives and innermost feelings, are tied up in their lore, and vice versa. The only truth to be found is that what remains or continues of this heritage should be taken simply for what it is, nothing more nor less. As the most illiterate backwoods storyteller alive could attest, the knottiest problems have the simplest answers. Moreover, he or she would know it is foolish to complicate such beautiful pictures with questions like: “When and where?” “Why and how?” — when the answers are: “Here

and now," "What does it differ why," and "Like this."

*"And the giant hollered, said,  
When ye comin back to see me,  
little Nippy?" "Never, you son of a  
bitch!"*"

There is a watershed in North Carolina which is one of the most sheltered areas in the Appalachians, completely encircled by high, green mountains and drained through a narrow gorge by a "clear, purling stream." Luckily for tradition, no major railroads or other outside forces bringing swift economic and industrial changes have ever entered this region to alter the basic cultural patterns prevalent there. Here one may yet listen to lonesome strains of some of the most hauntingly beautiful love songs, or ballads, still in oral circulation. A willing ear might also hear the tale of "Little Hornet and Big Hornet," versions of Chaucer's "Miller's Tale," or the one about how little Nippy caused the giant to cut his daughter's head off.

In a similar locale not so far away, near Beech Mountain, Stanley Hicks can tell about Boatingham the soldier, once captured by the Cherokees, and his final revenge. Sister Hattie Presnell knows the one about the pioneer woman who went out to call the cow and from a distance noticed its strange appearance and bellowings. She brought her husband to the scene, and he immediately shot the beast; upon inspection of the carcass they found it to have been neatly skinned with the body of a dead Indian, hatchet in hand, beneath.

Most of these tales are not considerable in length — that varies with the one doing the telling. Personal anecdotes, jokes, riddles, sayings, beliefs, speech and customs form the traditional storytellers' craft, and their ability to get a tale across is a natural art. Timing and surroundings play key roles, and the individuals' knack for spinning yarns old or new may cause them to pop in something unique to themselves at any time. Since many oral tales have roots in the dim past, they exist today mainly in corrupted forms and have often split apart into short anecdotes or mere fragments of incongruous recollection, though this isn't always the case. The teller seldom blends the tales unless it comes

naturally.

*I allers thought a lot of the old  
womern. She was a good person  
— and truthful. She told me one  
time about. . . .*

The tellers' belief that their tales actually happened gives genuine atmosphere and a sense of reality to the listener. Throughout my lifetime until his death several years ago Isaac Hopson of Green Mountain, North Carolina, was the same as a real grandfather to me. "Paw" told me one of old Mrs. Oxentine's tales one time about a family who came through this part of the country from some place way off. On the journey they stopped off overnight at an old house by the wayside. While the head of the family was frying a piece of ham in a skillet on the hearth, a black cat ran in and began scratching at the meat. After several attempts to chase it away, the man took a knife and cut the cat's paw off, and found a woman's hand with a ring on one finger lying in the pan. Paw said Mrs. Oxentine might've told what happened afterwards but he had forgotten anything further except he'd understood the story to have been one of her experiences or that of someone she knew in her lifetime.

Versions of tales like this are legion; whether they developed spontaneously or sprang from one source doesn't matter, for all of them are right. What does matter is that Paw made the tale come alive for me. I can still see him in his chair, knocking ashes from a well-used pipe, and hear his resonant voice, now silent, conveying pictures in my mind through the melody of his words. And now Paw and his tales live on — though he tarries to tell them in that world over "yonder" — in the memories and lives of his children, grandchildren and me.

*Under gravel I do travel, over  
white oak leaves I stand  
Ride a filly that never was foal-ed,  
and hold the mare within my  
hand.*

Not everyone has had the pleasure of spending his or her life among the ridges and hollers of the Upland South, learning ways and traditions handed down through each generation

— nor would everyone care to, which is as it should be. If I have overstated many points in this article it is because these things mean a great deal to me and can't be emphasized enough, because so little is known or understood at large today about a beautiful literature of the folk that has always been with us. There is a simple but adequate classification system for our stories — there are booger tales, haint, witch, bear and pant'er tales — but this continuing legacy cannot be precisely catalogued or defined. Neither may oral literature be labeled "illiterature," which is to say the property of the unlearned, for no one class of people, either educated or unlearned, may lay claim to exclusive use of the folk process. Mountains and other natural barriers contain no boundaries of this heritage. Outside obvious localized cultural and environmental conditions, there is an inherent sameness in all people that binds us to our past and our present, the stream of which flows with us ever onward toward the future. On the passage boats of our ancestors came the old King of so many tales. He was ever inscrutable, designing, cheating, murdering, occasionally benevolent, but always himself. Today we still see his faces: politician, preacher or whoever, the King's with us yet. Whether disguised in joke or elaborated on in colorful tale, the truth about the King is there. Take the trouble sometime to spend a while on the porch of some mountain home and hear him still talked about and exposed for what he always was and is, for the old King is — us! And to us belongs a literature in which life contains the knowledge of all that we have ever been, or are, or ever hope to be. □

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*Bobby McMillon, from Lenoir, North Carolina, is currently a folk artist-in-residence at Mitchell Community College in Statesville, North Carolina. Having learned, as a child, much of mountain culture from his relatives in eastern Tennessee and western North Carolina, he is a long-time collector and performer of the songs and stories of the Southern Appalachian mountains.*

# UNCLE REMUS, NO FRIEND OF MINE

by Alice Walker

About three years ago I was asked to write an essay on folklore and what it had meant in my own writing and my own thoughts and my own development, and so I started thinking about that. I started doing research, and I became very depressed. Now I became very depressed because, when you think of folklore in America, you have to think of Uncle Remus and you have to think of Joel Chandler Harris. I went to the library to start work on Joel Chandler Harris partly because he was born in Eatonton, Georgia, which is also my home. I had deliberately not thought about that; it was really too painful to think about. And as I read his letters, collected by the wife of his son, I realized that the subject was too painful for me to write about in an essay. So the essay is still on the shelf, but I did take some notes, and I want to share those notes with you.

Joel Chandler Harris is, of course, billed as the creator of Uncle Remus. Uncle Remus told the stories of Br'er Rabbit and Br'er Fox, all the classic folk tales that came from Africa and which, even now in Africa, are still being told. We too, my brothers and sisters and I, listened to those stories. But after we saw "Song of the South," we no longer listened to them. They were killed for us. In fact, I do not remember any of my relatives ever telling any of those tales after they saw what had been done with them.

When Joel Chandler Harris was a young boy in the 1850s and 1860s, he went out to work as an apprentice for a newspaperman on the Turnwold Plantation. We knew this place when I was growing up as the Turner place. It now has a historical marker and often, driving past it, I stop and look at the house — a nice, big, white Southern house —

and the marker that says all of the things about how Joel Chandler Harris created Uncle Remus.

In *Life and Letters of Joel Chandler Harris*, published in 1918 by Houghton Mifflin, Harris' daughter-in-law, Julia Collier Harris, told his story. She wrote: "When the work and play of the day were ended and the glow of the light-wood knot could be seen in the negro cabins, Joel and the Turner children would steal away from the house and visit their friends in the slave quarters. Old Harbert and Uncle George Terrell were Joel's favorite companions, and from a nook in their chimney corners he listened to the legends handed down from their African ancestors — the lore of animals and birds so dear to every plantation negro. And sometimes, while the yellow yam baked in the ashes, or the hoeecake browned in the shovel, the negroes would croon a camp-meeting hymn or a corn-shucking melody. The boy unconsciously absorbed their fables and their ballads, and the soft elisions of their dialect and the picturesque images of their speech left an indelible imprint upon the plastic tablets of his memory.

"Here, too, he heard stories of runaway slaves and 'patterollers.' But Joel noticed that the patrol never visited the Turner Plantation and when, during the war, vague rumors of a negro uprising began to circulate, Mr. Turner only laughed, for he claimed that 'the people who treat their negroes right have nothing to fear from them.'

"Thus passed the months and years at Turnwold and it was during these colorful days that the creator of 'Uncle Remus,' of 'Mingo,' and 'Free Joe' received those vivid and varying impressions of the old regime and of the customs of its mansions and its cabins, — pictures of a period that passed away long before he became known as the creator of

types rich in humor and poetry, and redolent of the soil to which they were bound by a thousand ties of love and sorrow, of bounty and privation."

She goes on to say, "The great popular success of the legends was a matter of strange surprise to their author." (This was around 1887, after Harris had published these books, these tales, of Uncle Remus.) "He said, 'It was just an accident. All I did was write out and put into print the stories I had heard all my life.' When asked by an interviewer if any particular negroes suggested the 'quaint and philosophic character' whom he had built up into one of the monuments of modern literature, he replied, 'He was not an invention of my own, but a human syndicate, I might say, of three or four old darkies whom I knew. I just walloped them together into one person and called him 'Uncle Remus.'"

The daughter-in-law also writes: "Before leaving the subject of the first volume of Uncle Remus stories, I cannot refrain from quoting a paragraph of the introduction in which Father touches on the prowess of the hero Br'er Rabbit, proceeding to link up his salient characteristics with the psychology of the negro. It is in reference to the almost invariable conquest of the fox by the rabbit that the author says, 'It needs no scientific investigation to show why he, the negro, selects as his hero the weakest and most harmless of all animals and brings him out victorious in contests with the bear, the wolf, and the fox. It is not virtue that triumphs, but helplessness. It is not malice but mischievousness. Indeed, the parallel between the case of all animals who must, perforce, triumph through his shrewdness and the humble condition of the slave raconteur is not without its pathos and poetry.' Finally, the reader not familiar with plantation life is counseled to 'imagine that the myth stories of Uncle Remus are told night after night to a little boy by an old negro who appears to be venerable enough to have lived during the period which he describes — who has nothing but pleasant memories of the discipline of slavery.'"

Then she goes on to say — this wife of the son of Joel Chandler Harris — "I have been asked many times if my husband, the eldest son of the family, was the little boy of the stories. He was not. And strangely enough, Father never told these stories to his own or any other children."

But the stories were wildly successful. They were in every household, practically, across America. And Mark Twain, in *Life on the Mississippi*, tells of an encounter between Harris and a group of children: "He deeply disappointed a number of children who had flocked eagerly to get a glimpse of the illustrious sage and oracle of the nation's nurseries. They said, when they saw this man, 'Why, he's white!' They were grieved about it. So, to console them, the book was brought that they might hear 'Uncle Remus' Tar-baby story from the lips of Uncle Remus himself, or what, in their outraged eyes, was left of him. But it turned out that he had never read aloud to people and was too shy to venture the attempt now."

I think I know why he did not read or tell these stories to his own children. I think I know why he never said them aloud to an audience. I think he understood what he was taking when he took those stories and when he created a creature to tell those stories. There are very few people who were slaves who have "nothing but pleasant memories of the discipline of that institution."

Both of my parents were excellent storytellers, and wherever we lived, no matter how poor the house, we had fireplaces and a front porch. It was around the fireplaces and on the porch that I first heard, from my parents' lips — my mother filling in my father's pauses and he filling in hers — the stories that I later learned were Uncle Remus stories.

The most famous Br'er Rabbit tale is also the most enigmatic, the story of the tar baby. In order to catch Br'er Rabbit, whom he wishes to eat, Br'er Fox makes a sort of doll out of tar. (In Africa, the doll is made out of rubber, hot rubber.) Br'er Rabbit sees this tar baby beside the road and tries to get it to speak to him. And it can't, of course. In his frustration, he hits it with his hands and feet and is soon stuck fast.

Br'er Fox comes out of hiding and says, "I've got you now."

Br'er Rabbit says, "Yeah, that's true." But you know Br'er Rabbit is thinking all the time. When Br'er Fox says perhaps he'll cook him for dinner in a big pot, Br'er Rabbit breathes a sigh of relief. "That's fine," says he. "For a minute I thought you were gonna throw me in the briar patch."

Br'er Fox, of course, had not thought of this. "Maybe I'll roast you on a spit," he says, thinking of dinner, but wanting it to be a dinner only he can enjoy.

"Hey, that's cool," says Br'er Rabbit. "That's a lot better than being thrown in the briar patch."

"What is this briar patch business anyway?" Br'er Fox is thinking. "Maybe I'll make rabbit dumplings," he says, licking his chops.

"Dumplings? Delightful," says Br'er Rabbit. "Just please, please, whatever you do, *don't* throw me in the briar patch."

Now we begin to suspect that Br'er Fox's hatred of Br'er Rabbit is greater than his hunger. It is more important to him that Br'er Rabbit suffer than that he himself be satisfied. Of course, he runs and finds the nearest briar patch and flings Br'er Rabbit into it. Once unstuck from the tar baby and on the ground, Br'er Rabbit laughs at Br'er Fox and says, "I was born and raised in the briar patch, born and raised in the briar patch." And of course he gets away.

No matter how many times I heard this story as a child, I always expected Br'er Fox to be able to use his considerable intelligence to help himself, rather than expend all his energy trying to harm Br'er Rabbit. But my parents' point, and that of the story, was: this is the nature of Br'er Fox, and a smart rabbit will never forget it.

Needless to say, my parents had never read these stories anywhere. They had come down to them orally and were passed on to their children orally. Since none of us ever read Joel Chandler Harris, we experienced his interpretation and the stories of our own folk culture in other ways.

In Eatonton, Georgia, to this day, there is a large iron rabbit on the courthouse lawn in honor of Joel Chandler Harris, creator of Uncle Remus. There is now and has been for several years an Uncle Remus museum. There was also, until a few years ago, an Uncle Remus restaurant. There used to be a dummy of a black man, an elderly, kindly, cottony-haired darkie, seated in a rocking chair in the restaurant window. In fantasy, I frequently liberated him using army tanks and guns. Blacks, of course, were not



Illustration by Patricia Ford

allowed in this restaurant.

The second interpretation of our folklore that we experienced was the movie "Song of the South," an animated story of Uncle Remus and the little white children to whom he told his tales. Our whole town turned out for this movie: black children and their parents in the colored section, white children and their parents in the white section. Uncle Remus in the movie saw fit to ignore, basically, his own children and grandchildren in order to pass on our heritage — indeed, our birthright — to patronizing white children who seemed to regard him as a kind of talking teddy bear.

I don't know how old I was when I saw this film — probably eight or nine — but I experienced it as a vast alienation, not only from the likes of Uncle Remus — in whom I saw aspects of my father, my mother, in fact all black people I knew who told these stories — but also from the stories themselves, which, passed into the context of white people's creation, I perceived as meaningless. So there I was, at an early age, separated from my own folk culture by an invention.

**I** believe that the worst part of being in an oppressed culture is that the oppressive culture — primarily because it controls the production and dispersal of images in the media — can so easily make us feel ashamed of ourselves, of our sayings, our doings and our ways. And it doesn't matter whether these sayings, doings or ways are good or bad. What is bad about them

and, therefore, worthy of shame, is that they belong to us.

Even our folklore has been ridiculed and tampered with. And this is very serious, because folklore is at the heart of self-expression and therefore at the heart of self-acceptance. It is full of the possibilities of misinterpretation, full of subtleties and danger. And in accepting one's own folklore, one risks learning almost too much about one's self. For instance, if you read these tales, you will see throughout them various things about us that we have to accept because they are true reflections, but they're painful. My view is that we needn't pull away from them because of the pain. We need simply to try to change our own feelings and our own behavior so that we don't have to burden future generations with these same afflictions. There's a lot of self-criticism in the folklore, for instance, and things that are really, sometimes, unsettling.

Joel Chandler Harris and I were raised in the same town, although nearly 100 years apart. As far as I'm concerned, he stole a good part of my heritage. How did he steal it? By making me feel ashamed of it. In creating Uncle Remus, he placed an effective barrier between me and the stories that meant so much to me, the stories that could have meant so much to all of our children, the stories that they would have heard from us and not from Walt Disney. □

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*Alice Walker is a novelist and poet. An interview with her appears on page 12 of this issue.*



Illustration by Patricia Ford

# A PIECED-UP ROCK

by Zora Neale Hurston

*In the talk excerpted above, Alice Walker also celebrated the efforts of those who preserve her people's folk tales in non-alienating ways. A pioneer among them was Zora Neale Hurston, who spent years of her life collecting and writing about such stories. In Mules and Men, published in 1935 by J.B. Lippincott, Hurston tells of her tale-seeking journeys in Florida's black communities. The story repeated here was told on an evening of "lying" – as the local term for storytelling had it – fed by gingerbread and buttermilk, on a porch across the street from a prayer meeting, interrupted by the church bells of another congregation across town. Hurston offered the opinion that "It's too bad that it must be two churches in Eatonville. De town's too little. Everybody ought to go to one." And then she tells what happened next:*

They wouldn't do dat, Zora, and you know better. Fack is, de Christian churches nowhere don't stick together," this from Charlie.

Everybody agreed that this was true. So Charlie went on. "Look at all de kind of denominations we got. But de people can't help dat 'cause de church wasn't built on no solid foundation to start wid."

"Oh yes, it 'twas!" Johnnie Mae disputed him. "It was built on solid rock. Didn't Jesus say 'On dis rock Ah build my church?'"

"Yeah," chimed in Antie Hoyt. "And de song says, 'On Christ de solid rock I stand' and 'Rock of Ages.'"

Charlie was calm and patient. "Yeah, he built it on a rock, but it wasn't solid. It was a pieced-up rock and that's how come de church split up now. Here's de way it was:

Christ was walkin' long one day wid all his disciples and he said, "We're goin' for a walk today. Everybody pick up a rock and come along." So everybody got their selves a nice big rock 'ceptin' Peter. He was lazy so he picked up a li'l bit of a pebble and dropped it in his side pocket and come along.

Well, they walked all day long and de other 'leven disciples changed them rocks from one arm to de other but they kept on totin' 'em. Long towards sundown they come 'long by de Sea of Galilee and Jesus tole 'em, "Well, le's fish awhile. Cast in yo' nets right here." They done like he tole 'em and caught a great big mess of fish. Then they cooked 'em and Christ said: "Now, all y'all bring up yo' rocks." So they brought all they rocks and

Christ turned 'em into bread and they all had plenty to eat wid they fish exceptin' Peter. He couldn't hardly make a moufful offa de li'l bread he had and he didn't like dat a bit.

Two or three days after dat Christ went out doors and looked up at de sky and says, "Well, we're goin' for another walk today. Everybody git yo'self a rock and come along."

They all picked up a rock apiece and was ready to go. All but Peter. He went and tore down half a mountain. It was so big he couldn't move it wid his hands. He had to take a pinch-bar to move it. All day long Christ walked and talked to his disciples and Peter sweated and strained wid dat rock of his'n.

Way long in de evenin' Christ went up under a great big ole tree and set down and called all of his disciples around 'im and said, "Now everybody bring up yo' rocks."

So everybody brought theirs but Peter. Peter was about a mile down de road punchin' dat half a mountain he was bringin'. So Christ waited till he got dere. He looked at de rocks dat de other 'leven disciples had, den he seen dis great big mountain dat Peter had and so he got up and walked over to it and put one foot on it and said, "Why Peter, dis is a fine rock you got here! It's a noble rock! And Peter, on dis rock Ah'm gointer build my church."

Peter say, "Naw you ain't neither. You won't build no church house on dis rock. You gointer turn dis rock into bread."

Christ knowed dat Peter meant dat thing so he turnt de hillside into bread and dat mountain is de bread he fed de 5,000 wid. Den he took dem 'leven other rocks and glued 'em together and built his church on it.

And that's how come de Christian churches is split up in so many different kinds – 'cause it's built on pieced-up rock.

*These paragraphs are reprinted from Mules and Men by permission of Harper & Row Publishers, Inc. Copyright ©1935 by Zora Neale Hurston. A much lengthier excerpt, including this story, may be found in the Hurston reader edited by Alice Walker, I Love Myself When I Am Laughing . . . And Then Again When I Am Looking Mean and Impressive, published in 1979 by the Feminist Press.*

# Kathryn Windham: “SOMETHING I WANTED TO TELL YOU”

by Jill Oxendine

It's a tradition at the National Storytelling Festival in Jonesboro, Tennessee. When the autumn moon is high and all the listeners have gathered close round a crackling fire, Kathryn Windham will lovingly share a ghost tale, filling the air with a lilting Alabama accent that is as thick as homemade apple butter. She's asked to return every year because she's the

kind of teller who has as many tales to tell as there are listeners to hear them.

Kathryn Windham of Selma, Alabama, collects the stories that still haunt the valleys and peaks of our Southern mountains. She is the author of 13 books, including six collections of ghost tales, four cookbooks, two histories and one on superstitions.

*courtesy NAPPS*



Her history textbook, *Exploring Alabama*, is used in several schools, and her *Alabama: One Big Front Porch* won the Alabama Library Association Award for the best non-fiction book of 1975.

An organization in Selma recently honored her by presenting a “Kathryn Tucker Windham Girl of the Year Award.” The townspeople know that her life is exemplary for area Southern women, that she is one of those whose obvious love of life and people enables her to accomplish anything she sets out to do.

As the unofficial matriarch of the story revival movement, Windham was the first member of the National Association for the Preservation and Perpetuation of Storytelling (NAPPS), and she has served on the organization's board of directors since its conception in 1975.

Kathryn believes in telling stories and preserving them. She sees this as a way for people to renew their humanity in an age dominated by modern mechanics and superficialities.

“I think there's a hunger for that one-to-one relationship that storytelling is,” she said, leaning in closer for emphasis. “When you tell a story, you're giving a part of yourself. That's the reason we're having this revival. People are hungry for something basic and real. They come to the festivals because they want this tale that somebody has been saving to share with them – that's the feeling of a good storyteller, that this is something I've been wanting to tell you.”

But the simple sharing of a tale does not encompass the whole of Kathryn's purpose. It acts rather as

# NAPPS

The First National Storytelling Festival in Jonesboro, Tennessee, was conceived by local businessman Jimmy Neil Smith, a young man who loved to hear good stories. He got the idea as he and some friends listened to storyteller Jerry Clower on a car radio one day. "Why not get a group of storytellers together in Jonesboro and see what happens?" he said excitedly.

At first the idea of a "national" festival seemed too far-fetched, especially for a small town like Jonesboro. But with the help of a local civic group, the first festival was held. What resulted was an explosion of energy, a coming together of the old and young, the past and the present, in a passionate sharing of the spoken word.

That was seven years ago. Since those early days the annual event has come to be recognized as a culmination of all facets of the art. And the National Association for the Preservation and Perpetuation of Storytelling is now the spearhead for a national revival of the art.

The association, founded in 1975, and better known as NAPPS, sponsors the national festival and a national conference on storytelling every spring. In September, 1977, it put into daily operation the National Storytelling Resource Center, which contains a resource library and archive housing one of the most comprehensive collections of audio and video storytelling recordings in the nation.

The effort to save storytelling from extinction is well underway, but there is much left to do. Those interested in finding out about membership or other services of NAPPS should contact it at P.O. Box 112, Jonesboro, Tennessee 37659.

a pleasurable by-product. The real impetus lies in the authenticity, the real blood and guts that were spent in the making of the tale. What concerns her is that many of the stories are slipping away and with them a well-spring of strength and knowledge. Indeed, it is a reverence for all that has gone before that is at the core of Kathryn Windham, something she most likely acquired from growing up within a close-knit Southern family.

"When I was growing up we never had any money," Kathryn said. "But we always had books, and my father was the finest storyteller I've ever listened to — a natural storyteller. We had a big porch on our house and we would sit out on the porch after supper on summer nights and my daddy would tell stories. I knew tales about my grandparents and uncles, about people who lived before I was born.

"I knew about them and I knew who I was. . . . I think storytelling is part of what it's all about," She paused, letting a faint smile spread across her face. "I was the youngest of the family and I think Papa enjoyed me more. He'd take me with him to historical sites, where Indians had

fought or where Civil War encounters had been. There wouldn't be anyone there but my daddy and me, but the whole thing would come alive. So to me that's what storytelling has always been, a personal thing — a sharing of something that's important to you."

Kathryn grew up during the 1920s in Thomasville, a small, unpretentious town on the southwestern edge of Alabama. After high school, she attended Huntingdon College in Montgomery, taking a job there after graduation with the *Alabama Journal*. Then she moved on to become state editor and feature writer for the *Birmingham News*. She had a good job and a promising future, when she met and married Amasa Benjamin Windham.

Both Benjamin and Kathryn wrote. Both were sensitive, creative and hardworking. Then in 1955, Benjamin suffered a heart attack and died. Suddenly Kathryn was left a widow with three small children to bring up alone. She was 37 years old. When Dilcy, her youngest, entered public school, Kathryn returned to newspaper work, this time in Selma. And, after several years had passed, she began work on her volumes of Southern ghost tales.

"I kept coming across these ghost stories," she says, "and everywhere I went people had more and more stories to tell. It didn't matter that most folks don't believe in ghosts. The important thing was that they be collected and preserved."

Soon the project consumed most of her time. Every weekend was spent following up on some purported occurrence of the supernatural, some strange unexplained happening. She would listen to different ghostly accounts, then check local histories related to the events of the story.

At the same time her interest was whetted by some rather bizarre happenings at home — footsteps that clumped when no one was around, doors that slammed mysteriously, rockers that rocked all by themselves. It didn't take Kathryn and her family long to conclude that some disembodied, free-floating something had taken possession of their home.

Kathryn's eyes sparkle when she speaks of her ghost, Jeffrey. He is a pleasurable diversion from the more serious reality of her mission — that of preserving the stories that vividly reveal how the events of the past serve to alter the people and the ongoing happenings of the future.

She sees how her own upbringing in Thomasville and the many hours of storytelling at her father's knee affected her own view of the world. She believes a similar process dramatically affects the works of many writers who grew up in the South.

"I believe that Southern writers have been lastingly influenced by stories they heard as children — writers like Eudora Welty, William Faulkner and Flannery O'Connor. For example, they got some of their characters from stories they heard. I think they learned to listen and become aware of the dialects, inflection of voice, the ways of expressing things or the rhythm of the language, which you do become aware of by listening to stories.

"Storytelling has aroused their interest in people and in things around them. And it accounts for the fact that there are so many good writers who have come out of the South. They deal more successfully with how people are related to the place in which they grew up. I think the two are inseparable. Where you spend the formative years of your life marks you for the rest of your life, and I think Southern

writers are more aware of that than others.”

Kathryn is now preparing another volume of Alabama ghost stories and has plans for several books — one about women who commanded steam ships and another on Southern folklore. She also wants to continue her work in NAPPS and with the Tale Telling Festival, an annual event in her own town of Selma.

But no matter where she goes or what she does, Kathryn Windham will always know that she is still that

skinny tow-headed girl from Thomasville, carrying with her the memories of her father settling down on that old wooden porch to share just one last tale or two. And for the rest of her days, she will, in all likelihood, spread the good news of storytelling as she remembers it.

As Kathryn says in her book, *Alabama: One Big Back Porch*, “The tale tellers don’t all look alike and they don’t all talk alike, but the stories they tell are all alike in their unmistakable blend of exaggeration, humor,

pathos, folklore and romanticism. Family history is woven into the stories. And pride. And humor. Always humor.” □

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*Jill Oxendine is a free-lance writer who produces the NAPPS monthly newsletter and works part-time in public relations for the Quillen-Disher College of Medicine in Johnson City, Tennessee.*

## Railroad Bill: THE BLACK ROBIN HOOD

Somehow nobody can tell a story about Brewton without at least mentioning Railroad Bill. He didn’t have anything to do with courthouses or cats — unless you believe the tales they tell down in south Alabama about how Railroad Bill could change himself into a cur dog or a fox or a sheep or even a cat when the law got too close to him.

Railroad Bill started running from the law when he and a deputy sheriff had a misunderstanding about a Winchester rifle Bill owned, and Bill wounded the deputy with the gun. Bill caught a freight train to take him away from the place. Riding freight trains got to be a habit with Bill. So did stealing from them.

He’d break open a boxcar while the L&N freight train (Bill was partial to the L&N) was lickety-splitting along, and he’d throw out whatever struck his fancy. Then, later, he’d walk back along the tracks and collect his loot. Some of the stolen goods he used himself, some he sold and a lot he gave away.

Many black families living along the L&N tracks hardly ever had to buy canned food when they went to the store. They’d help Bill — tell him when the sheriff was getting close and let Bill sleep in front of their fire and such — and he’d see that they had something to eat.

Bill got so bold and so bad about stealing out of boxcars that the rail-

roads put detectives on his trail, and every sheriff in south Alabama and northwest Florida was out to get him. Got so that a man didn’t stand a chance of getting elected sheriff if he didn’t make a solemn promise to catch Railroad Bill.

They all promised, but they didn’t catch him. Black folks said the law wouldn’t ever catch him because Railroad Bill was magic: he could turn himself into any kind of animal he wanted to any time he needed to. That’s what they said.

Bill could do tricks. He had traveled with a little three-monkeys-and-an-elephant circus for awhile, long enough to learn how to walk on his hands and to swallow an egg whole and cough it back up without even cracking the shell, and such as that.

When he heard that Sheriff Edward S. McMillan was after him, Bill knew he was going to need all his tricks. He wished Mr. Ed wouldn’t try to catch him, even wrote the sheriff a note and asked him not to come. “Please don’t come after me. I love you,” the note said.

But Sheriff McMillan didn’t pay any mind to that note. He went after Bill and hemmed him up, and Bill shot and killed the high sheriff of Escambia County.

Then Bill really had to run. But he kept on looting boxcars and spreading the loot around.

The sharecroppers and turpentine workers and the hands at the peckerwood sawmills talked about Railroad Bill and made up songs about him and laughed at the white folks thinking they could catch a trickster like Bill. Every time they heard about another one of Bill’s pranks, they added another verse to their songs.

“Ain’t nobody gonna catch that

man!” they’d say. “Can’t kill Railroad Bill.”

Bill did get killed though, got shot dead before he had time to work his magic and change himself into an animal and run free.

The railroad officials and the law put Bill’s body on a train and took it all over south Alabama. The train stopped at every town so folks could come look at Railroad Bill’s body and see for themselves that he was really dead.\*

The blacks came and they looked at the body laid out on the rough boards, but they knew Railroad Bill wasn’t dead. Not really. He couldn’t be dead, not him.

Years later, during the Great Depression, when the government was sending commodities to hungry folks to keep them from starving, some of the hungry folks down around Brewton just laughed and laughed. They knew the government didn’t send the food: Railroad Bill left it for them.

So that stray cat hanging around the railroad station in Brewton — it could be a direct descendant of one of those Pollard cats. It could be Railroad Bill.

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*In 1980, The Labor Theater of New York made the legend of Railroad Bill into a musical play which they now present around the country.*

\* There is a recurring story that little Ed Leigh McMillan was taken down to the railroad station in Brewton to see the body of the man who killed his father. Ed Leigh, they say, picked a bitterweed blossom from a clump growing up through the chert along the tracks, and he put the yellow flower in Railroad Bill’s mouth. Only thing is, bitterweeds don’t bloom in March. That’s what comes of investigating a good story too closely.

# Under the Pleasure-Dome

by David Madden

Since childhood I have been fascinated and influenced by storytelling. I can remember as a boy listening for hours as my grandmother told me stories: tales about the wildcat that fell down her mother's chimney into a vat of water and she boiled it down to "rags and molasses;" and about Captain Rudd putting out a big hotel fire, then sitting down to eat breakfast in his undershirt at a table with six high society ladies; and about the time she was riding the trolley and looked out the window, mortified to see her husband and her son pulling a circus wagon they'd won in a poker game.

It was not long before I was imitating my grandmother's storytelling techniques and strategies. I was soon the neighborhood storyteller. As dark came on, kids gathered round me on my steep porch steps to hear my versions of movie or radio heroes. When rain or snow kept us indoors at recess, I leaned against the blackboard and told the class more tales about Huck and Jim. As we sat on the tracks, waiting to hop a freight to a swimming hole out in the country, I told the adventures of a kid who was a fantasy projection of myself. In a dormitory cell in the juvenile home where my brother and I lived while my mother was hospitalized, I told ghost stories, while kids huddled under my quilts and under my cot, risking a whipping.

Before I ever read any fiction, I had already written 2,000 pages of stories, radio plays, movie scenarios and poems. *Bijou*, an autobiographical novel, depicts the transitional year, 1946, in Knoxville, Tennessee, when I was a 13-year-old movie usher, telling stories while writing them, enthralled by the movies, and only just beginning to read. A year later, I had read Wolfe, Hemingway and Joyce; their literary techniques overwhelmed the effects of the oral storytelling compulsion.

As I worked for 15 years on novel and play versions of *Cassandra Singing*, I was not very conscious of the enduring effect upon my writing of the techniques of the oral tradition, not even as Cassie, an invalid girl who lives in her imagination, and Lone, her brother, who pursues a life of action on a motorcycle, tell each other stories.

Writing "The Singer" (unrelated to *Cassandra*), in which movie and oral storytelling images compete and conflict, I became acutely conscious of my debt to the oral tradition and celebrated it in my dramatic readings. While giving about 300 readings of my fiction, North and South, over the past 13 years, I became increasingly aware of the almost mystical relationship between storyteller and listeners, and the profound effect that a well-told story has upon listeners' imaginations.

In a novel of the same name, I describe the "Pleasure-Dome" — "a luminous limbo between everyday experience and a work of art." The listener enters the Pleasure-Dome, as Lucius — the central character of *Bijou* — sometimes did

while listening to his grandmother, only on those rare occasions when storyteller and listener interact most powerfully. It is the essence of that experience that I try to preserve in my fiction.

My fascination with the dynamics of storytelling clearly manifests itself in my work, where I have not only dramatized storytellers and their art, but in writing about them have worked out literary equivalents of oral technique. In my novel *Bijou*, there are a great variety of oral storytelling relationships, in various contexts, with other media interacting: movies, radio drama, plays, popular and literary fiction and poetry, songs, games. Folklore and popular culture, like two decks of cards, are shuffled together, enhancing and conflicting with each other.

*In this scene, Lucius' grandmother Mammy's storytelling is prompted by the family's perusal of a large collection of movie stills a girl has just bestowed on Lucius. The family retells the stories of movies and alludes to episodes in their own lives.*

Sitting in her favorite chair across from the front door, looking like Wallace Beery, Mammy reminded Lucius of the summer nights during the war when they sat in the open doorway in the blackouts and scanned the sky for German planes, telling stories by the bomber's moon.

"Mammy, tell 'bout the time Gran'paw Charlie beat up the principal."

"He didn't beat him up, honey."

"Tell it, tell it," said Bucky, sitting on the magic carpet in front of Mammy.

"Well, children, the way it was, the principal sent little Luke home one day with this note to Gran'paw Charlie, sayin', 'Mr. Foster, it has been brought to my attention that your son has poured library paste all over Mrs. Rankin's erasers. I must insist that you accompany your child to school in the morning. Bring a switch with you, as I want you to be present when I give Luke a whipping.'" Mammy bent her head and rubbed her nose to recall the scene. "Boys, I tell you, when Gran'paw Charlie read that note, he hit the ceiling." Bucky looked up at the ceiling, Lucius looked up. "He stormed and he raged from room to room of this little ol' house, yelling, 'that g.d.—'"

"He may a been just a little feller," said Momma, "no taller'n you, Lucius, but he had a bullhorn voice. Used to go out and stand in the backyard and holler for Luke to come on in for supper and Luke, curb-hopping at Howell's Drug Store, would hear him all the way through the woods, across Crazy Creek to Grand Boulevard and Luke'd come running lickety-split."

"Irene, I'm telling this."

"Well, pardon me for living."

"So, next morning, Charlie says to Luke, 'Son, go cut me two switches!' 'Two?' 'Don't wrangle with me. I said 'Two,' now git 'em.' So little ol' Luke drags hisself over to the hedge outsyonder and breaks off two switches – I was watching from the kitchen winder, wondering what Charlie was up to myself – when all of a sudden, Luke threw them switches down, and broke off a littler one and a bigger one, and come back in the house just a-smiling to beat the band. Looked like he'd figured something out, but I didn't know what it was till Luke come home that afternoon and told me."

Knowing what was coming increased Lucius' fascination.

"Way it turned out, was this. Gran'paw Charlie marched hisself up to Clinch View Elementary, little Luke trottin' behind – and he was almost by then as tall as his daddy – but Charlie was just like a buzz saw when he got wound up. So he sashays into the principal's office, and this old man looks across his desk at this sawed-off little feller. 'Wait outside, sir, until I'm ready to see you,' says the principal.

"Well, he ort'n a done that. Should a kept his mouth shut and let Charlie talk. Charlie raises up on his toes – wore a size six shoe that's even too small for *you* now, Lucius – and in that deep, cocky voice of his, says, 'Mr. Turner, you will see me *now*, for I have come just like your note says, and I have brung two switches.' 'Two switches?' asked Mr. Turner . . . and a hatefuller man you never met. Wore *out* a switch on Earl the second year *he* went. Dead now, ain't he, Irene?"

"I don't know *nothin'*."

"So, anyway, Charlie says, 'Yes, sir. One for you to use on my boy, and when you g'done, I'm a-gonna use t'other on *you!*'"

"Then did he whup him, Mammy?" asked Bucky.

"Don't know, honey. That's the end of the story."

*Later that same night, as their parents fight, Lucius distracts his little brother, Bucky, with a story he is writing.*

**I**n the back room that Gran'paw Charlie built on when he and Mammy moved in, in Luke's bed, Bucky, sticking his feet straight up under the sheet, asked, "Tell me a story, Lucius?"

The room's only window was open, the honey-suckle-laden air came through the latched screen door.

"Once upon a time . . . there was a mouse! And his name – was – Mighty Mouse!" Lucius announced dramatically, and paused, as Bucky, thrilled, kicked his feet rapidly, his body shuddering with delight. "The end."

Bucky whined. "Tellllll it, Lucius."

"One morning Laurel and Hardy woke up. . . . The end."

Bucky whimpered. "Looooo-shus!"

Somebody in Mammy's room pounded on the wall.

"Lucius, you all shut up in yonder!"

"Mammy, make Lucius tell me a story!"

"You all pipe down now, or I'll come in there with Gran'paw Charlie's belt."

"Momma!" yelled Bucky. "What's you and Daddy whispering about?"

"We'll put it in a milk bottle and give it to you in the morning."

"In the old days of the West," whispered Lucius, "lived a Mexican prince, and when it got dark, he turned into

. . . Zor-ro! . . . The end."

Bucky growled and kicked.

"Okay, Bucky, I'm going to *tell* this one. The moon was shining bright on the prairie and coyotes were howling on one of the buttes above Tombstone, when a lone rider appeared on top of another butte, like a shadow, against the big, big moon. And reckon who it was?"

"Zorro?"

"No."

"The Durango Kid?"

"No. It was – Buck Jones!"

"Oh, boy!"

Anticipating Bucky's reaction made Lucius giggle. "The end."

Bucky let out a loud, body-wracking, throbbing cry-whine.

"I said, You'uns hersh!" yelled Mammy. "I got your momma squabbling with Fred in the living room and you all raising a ruckus in yonder."

"Get under the sheet," Bucky whispered in Lucius' ear, his breath smelling of stale blow gum.

Lucius pulled the sheet over their heads.

"While the Sea Remains," Lucius announced, and whispered some background music. "The Adventures of Sam Gulliver."

"Oh, boy, you gonna tell the rest of it?"

"Remember somebody shot him in the belly."

"And he woke up in a dungeon on this ship."

"Yeah, and for weeks the only person he sees is this doctor. Well, the doctor wouldn't answer any of his questions about Jonathan Crockett or the little man or the Indian in the cave, and he got so he was madder'n hell, so

*David Madden*



*Chuck Farmer*



David Madden

David Madden's grandmother

when his belly got healed, he got hungry for the smell of the ocean, being a sailor, so he called in one of the guards that stood outside his door. And all of a sudden the door jars open and this great big monster steps in, his eyes bloodshot with hate, a dagger in his hand ready to make sliced baloney out of Sam's neck. Sam sees a chain and grabs it and slams it into the big guy's chest and a swift kick in the jaw finished it."

"Then what did the *other* guy do?"

"He come charging in wearing these brass knucks, and Sam threw him over his shoulder. He locked the door, then strolled down the deck just like he was one of the crew."

"And then he dived off and swum back home."

"No, too far out, so he decided to take his chances when they docked, if he lived till then. So he goes into the mess hall and starts talking to this little French cook. 'Say, where we bound?' 'Africa.' Then the cook turns around and his mouth falls open. 'You a sailor on board, ain't cha?' 'Yeah, why?' 'What cha got that bandage on for? You're Wyatt Thorp. Get the hell out of here, you son of a bitch, or I keel you!'"

"Shhhhh," said Bucky.

Lucius listened with Bucky under the sheet, then peeled it down to hear more clearly the yelling in the kitchen. Something crashed against the wall.

"Irene, that better not be one of *my* dishes!" yelled Mammy, from the bedroom.

"I have dishes too, Mother! *Some* things in this house are mine, you know."

"*Too* many things! I wish you'd take what's yours and move it out of my sight!"

"Don't worry. I'd do it tonight if I had even a cardboard box to move *into*."

"Till then, you'uns hush that racket. I got to open that cafe at the crack of dawn. Thanks to Fred and poor little Luke," she began to cry, "they's peace in all Europe and Asia, too, but not two minutes a whirl at 702 Holston Street."

Bucky started whining. An ache in his throat, Lucius said, "Stop that belling, and listen," and pulled the sheet over their heads and patted Bucky's shoulder.

"So, Sam just stood there, wondering who the hell Wyatt Thorp was, and why the cook called him that. The little French cook must of thought he was dangerous because he came at him with a butcher knife. But ol' Sam grabbed his wrist and slid his arm around his neck and twisted his arm behind his back. 'Say, what gives, Buster?' Sam asks.

"It seems like ever' time he asks a question, he gets clipped from behind. Which is what happened, and when he opened his eyes, it was a filthy sight. He was in the ship's dungeon again. . . . Tune in tomorrow night for the next episode of the thrilling adventures of Sam Gulliver in 'While the Sea Remains.' This is WXOL signing off. 'Oh, say can you see. . . .'" Lucius stood up in bed and saluted, and Bucky smothered his giggles with a pillow over his face.

*In this last episode, Lucius tries to impress Mammy, the expert storyteller, by telling her the story of a play he is writing.*

**L**ord, Lucius, you sure *you* ain't in some kind of trouble? Ever'body else is."

"Naw, I'm just having trouble getting started on this play I'm writing."

"A acting play?"

"Yeah."

"What's it about?" Mammy asked, absently, fixing chicken and biscuit dumplings. "Too bad it ain't quite warm enough, we could eat outside under the mimosa. Did you see that marble table the Chief set up?"

"Yeah, saw it last Sunday. Looks good. . . . What do you think of my title?"

"Your what?"

"My title — of this play I'm writing. I named it 'Call Herman in to Supper.' Sound good?"

"Yeah, I reckon so."

"It's about this little boy named Herman, and he lives up in the Smoky Mountains with his momma and daddy and his gran'paw, who's blind and deaf, but he can talk, see."

"Lord have mercy, I meant to tell the Chief to bring some country butter on his way in."

"And his daddy — whose name is Will —"

"That was *my* daddy's name. . . ."

"I know it."

"Now, listen, I don't want you writing nothing about *my* family."

"No, Mammy, it's just the name. But he works in this coal mine, see. . . ."

"Well, my daddy wouldn't go *in* a coal mine if you vowed to shoot him."

"But what he really wants is to be a farmer, like his daddy was."

"Now, you're gettin' hot. My daddy owned half of West Cherokee at one time, had it all planted in corn."

"Let me tell you, now. . . . So his wife — Cora's her name — thinks she might have cancer."

"She's a goner. Ain't no cure for it."

"Except she's probably pregnant."

"Now, you hush that kind a talk in my kitchen." Hurt, Lucius sat down at the table and played with the broken shells from the boiled eggs Mammy was shearing into the dumplings.

Shortly, Mammy said, "Is that all they is to it?"

"To what?"

"To the story."

"No, it goes on to where it's a day in the fall and supper's 'bout ready, Cora's fixing it, and Will comes in, and he ain't found no job and they're poor and hungry and all she's got on the stove is beans, and Will starts talking mean about Gran'paw, 'cause all he does from morning till night is rock in the rocker and spit tobacco juice in a lard can, and when it comes time to eat, and he smells beans cooking, he calls for Herman to come lead him to the table. So Cora tells Will to call Herman in to supper."

Mammy went over to the stove and fiddled with the candied sweet potatoes, and Lucius followed her and stood by as she bent over the oven to put the corn bread in it.

"And Herman doesn't answer, so he says he's gonna give Herman a whuppin' for being late, and Cora says he better not be down there at the creek again. See, he's just about four years old. And Gran'paw keeps calling Herman to lead him to the supper table, 'cause he smells them good ol' beans cooking, and it bothers the fool out of Will. Will keeps talking about blowing up the mine, and it worries Cora, then he'll threaten to shoot himself, then *all* of them —"

"Don't, Lucius. . . ."

"He dreams of growing stuff next spring, and when Cora finds a bottle of whiskey in his pocket, he tries to get away from her as she comes at him with a stick of firewood for wasting what little money they got on moonshine, and she hits him with the stick where he's got the bottle in the back pocket of his overalls, and Gran'paw smells it and whines for a swaller of it. Then Will gets worried about Herman, so he goes out looking for him, and Cora looks at herself in the mirror and talks to her daddy about when she was young and happy —"

"I thought he couldn't hear?"

"Well, he can't, but she just gets to talking to him — sort of to herself. . . . Then she gets out this wedding dress. . . ."

Mammy rattled coal from the bucket into the cookstove. "Chief's gonna get me one of them lectric stoves, soon's we get married. Boys, won't that be the berries?"

"Want to hear the rest?"

"I'm listening."

Lucius followed Mammy around as she moved about the kitchen, running water, stirring stuff in pots.

"Well, she looks at herself in the mirror and it starts her to crying to see how run down she looks."

"Them mountain girls go fast, honey. Your gran'paw Charlie took me over the Cumberlands to Harlan in 19 and 21 before the first railroad, and girls five years younger than me looked old enough to be my mother."

"Anyway so — Really? I always like to imagine what it's like in Kentucky. Did you see *Trail of the Lonesome Pine*?"

"Sure did, but it ain't like that."

"Oh. . . . Well, so, Will come back in, and he didn't find Herman. And so they dream about things, how it might be if he was to plow in the spring, and then they fuss again, and ol' Gran'paw cranks up to whine for Herman again, and then this neighbor of theirs, named Hank, comes in, and he sort of beats around the bush, but Will and Cora feel what it is he's going to say, and —"

"Better not nothin' happen to that little Herman, now. . . ."

"Well, wait and see — and so, he says, he was fishing down at the bridge and he saw something in the water, floating —"

"Now, Lucius, you hush."

"Mammy, it's just a story."

"I don't care! That poor young'un!"

"So Cora and Will run out to the car — it's a old-timey T-model Ford — and Hank sorta ambles out, and it gets real quiet on the stage. . . ." Sensing the fear and sadness he had excited in Mammy, Lucius was thrilled, eager to make it show even more in her mouth and posture and gestures. "And then ol' Gran'paw stops rocking, and he says, 'Hermie, Hermie, boy, Gran'paw's hungry.' " Imitating the old man's voice, Lucius noticed Mammy stopped turning the sweet potatoes and held a dripping fork, looking at him, her mouth open, the heat from the oven making sweat burst out on her forehead. "Come on over, and lead ol' Gran'paw tuh the supper table. Aw, man! Smell 'em beans, son? Ummmmph! Come on over, Hermie, boy, Gran'paw's a-waitin' to eat. Got good ol' beans fer supper. Hermie. . . . Hermie, boy. . . ." And then he slowly leans back, relaxes, moans a little — as the curtain comes down."

Lucius and Mammy looked into each other's eyes.

"For the Lord's sake, Lucius, will you tell me where in this world you *get sich* stuff as that?"

"Oh, I was just walking down a railroad track past these ol' poor people's houses, and the sun was going down, and it was real chilly and I could smell the coal smoke, and I heard his voice calling Herman to come in to supper, and it just *got* me."

"I never heard such a tale in all my borned days. Do you have to make it so sad? Can't the little feller turn out not to be drowned after all?"

"That would spoil the whole thing."

"You already got the story wrote?"

"Play. No, I sort of made up part of it as I was telling it to *you*."

"Then it ain't too late to change it. Why can't it be a log?"

"Why can't *what* be a log?"

"That the man saw a-floating towards the bridge."

"Oh, Mammy. . . ." Lucius drifted into the living room, sat on the flowered davenport, hunted for the book and the show pages among the Sunday paper spread out around him. □

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*David Madden is writer-in-residence at Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. He is the author of eight works of fiction; a Civil War novel is in progress. His grandmother died a month after he wrote this piece. He dedicates it to her memory.*

## Surviving Brothers

Somewhere inside this body  
the sun is so bright I follow my shadow  
into a field of wild sedge, all golden  
windblown, and taller than I stand.

I take two handfuls, tie them together  
then two more, until there is a hut.  
The shade inside is cool and dark.  
I slip in, back against the ground, barefoot.

A redwing blackbird lies on one of the knots.  
I close my eyes, dream of Fletcher, the butcher's knife  
the words my mother spoke to my father  
when they thought I was asleep.

"Mary and Phil were in the living room  
when in comes Fletcher, stumbling through the hallway  
banging against one wall and then the other.

"He comes into the living room singing loud  
and Mary says, 'Son, you're drunk, go to bed.'  
Well, he looks at her and laughs. He just started to laugh  
and kept on with that caterwaul until he woke Phil.

"Phil got up and tried to guide him to the bedroom  
but Fletcher wasn't having none of that and he swung at Phil  
and Phil shoved him flat against the hutch, and Mary says  
Fletcher turned around swinging a butcher's knife  
and hollered, 'Come on brother, come and get me!'

"Phil tried to take the knife away and they started to wrestle.  
Fletcher slipped and Mary screamed and Phil went down on him.  
When Phil got up there was blood all over his undershirt.  
Fletcher didn't move. Mary said she knew he was dead, God help her.

I can still remember that blackbird flying off.

Years have passed since the night of your death  
and I have never seen where they buried you  
but I have not forgotten your green eyes and red hair.  
I hardly knew you, but you were beautiful.

A few hours after the funeral, Phil came home  
got in your '57 Chevrolet and headed straight for the Bottoms.  
He drove up the ramp, jumped out and let it dive into the Mississippi River.  
He broke his arm trying to get out of that car.

To this day his right arm is a web of dead nerves.

— Ron Price



# Notes Toward a Supreme Regionalism

by George Scarborough

**W**hat happens on one small limb of the tree is all I can ever know of the whole tree. But what I know is pretty much what everyone else knows, wherever the inhabited limbs are, whether at the bottom of the tree, near the middle, or at the top of the tree. There is, after all, not that much difference in the limbs.

Writers, I think, try deliberately to separate themselves from centrality. Of course, there's regionalism. I tell you what my limb is like. You tell me what your limb is like. Another tells us both what yet another limb is like. All of us are rather like the blind men recounting the regions of the whole elephant. But we must remember that a limb is a limb, wherever it is located, at the bottom, near the middle, or at the top of the tree. It is the tree we should be interested in, the whole tree, while writing our best descriptions — poems, novels, essays, plays — of our own individual perches. That the views are somewhat different necessarily from the different locations, no one with perception can deny; but they are, at the same time, similar enough in essential respects to be all one limb. That is, good writers should be able to extrapolate the whole tree from their particular segments of it.

Here is where universality creeps in. Here is where your really good story about one limb is a good story about another limb and another limb. So you may have your cake and eat it too, you regionalists; for if you are any good at all as a writer, you will, in the very act of writing about your locality, transcend that locality by force into a community of limbs where all stories have a great deal in common, more similarities than differences, at least so far as the human spirit goes. You can't help being universal anymore than you can help being local or regional if you write truly about what you know best. And that's the only kind of writing that counts. So it's all really small talk about definitions, boundaries, limitations, geography in literature. Of course it's nice to be distinct and distinguished by a local habitation and a name. But the feeling is a delusion. There is, after all, only one locality, and one name. And that locality is earth and that name is humanity.

In my own writing I give you a mythic county which, like all mythic things, is based on the real: there are real mountains there, real rivers, real rocks and trees and meadows with their real flowers — chiefly the daisy, the day's eye, as the old Anglo-Saxons had it because of the golden face and the flaring white corona of petals. It's good to begin with the reality of a flower and proceed from there

to a larger field of the real. So I give you these realities behind the dream, and I give you real people behind the dream of the people encountered in my writing, chiefly in my poems and my one novel. Long ago I realized that one small county would be all that I would ever know about the universe, and all that I would ever need to know, just as I early recognized the fact, in spite of my dabbling in several foreign languages, that only one language would I ever know, the others merely serving in the understanding of that one language, my own.

Put, then, that county and that tongue together, plant my feet in that familiar mud, add a predilection for mythic forces by which I mean a fondness for all things in poetry — all things *are* poetry — and what is more natural than that from love of a place and its native speech should emerge, or appear as an island rising in the midst of waters, another country, another speech, one adumbrated above the other, as if each encouraged and emboldened the other to become other than each was in the beginning? Not the caricature then of a county, nor yet the hyperbolization of a people, but the imaginative uses of what was and still is my own: that piece of land in the southeast corner of Tennessee called Polk County, whose blue mountains, blue pine-woods, green-blue sulphate rivers in their beds between banks overgrown with the ubiquitous willow, going seasonally from brown to gold to green to gold to brown again, and whose red clay roads and purple sedge hills, and many a thing else, made of the place as much a color as a substance, as much a dream as a reality.

It was a land I loved, a land I love still, though much of it has changed through industrialization and the advent of radio and television and the money now to buy newspapers (late still, of course, because of the county's still largely rural nature and the slowness of the mails). We lacked all those means of communication in the county I write about, and, of course, did not really miss them, not noticing their lack. Happily, since the county remains largely as it was, despite inroads from outside, the interstate highways still pass it by. There is still to be seen, in some lonely place between a mountain and a river, a man spreading manure beyond the roar and smudge of the vacationers speeding by on their way to Southern comfort and happiness on the spoiled beaches of the states to the south. The people in my county remain pretty much the same: that is, what they once were and have been over the millennia, human beings.

So I have shaped in my mind and in my writings an adumbration, an overshadowing, of that county, writing

out its life sporadically as the urge came, so that by now I have in the body of my work something of a portrait of a time and place — which is a portrait, in effect, of all times and places — now somewhat lost to the general American knowledge and imagination. Even transformed counties, while being mythic counties — Faulkner’s in prose, mine largely in verse — are apt to run to seed, but it is always a human seed. We know these counties fail and expire, that there are no permanent raintrees, whether in Indiana or Tennessee. My county itself never succeeds much, certainly not as Faulkner’s has. It may be that, as one editor said, “You can’t get here from there.” But that is the editor’s disbarment. Perhaps I never wanted to be where he is, finding my own place a place of sufficient world. Be that

as it may, I give you my county. Take it for what it is: a regional place without the restrictions of regionality. Over the tallest mountain there, in the deep, once-unpolluted blue, a door opens momentarily in the horizon and a bird — a dove — flies forth, and returns with the news not of a new land but of other similar land, farther on. □

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*George Scarbrough is a poet whose work has appeared in numerous anthologies and magazines, including Poetry, Harper’s, The Atlantic, The New Republic and Southwest Review. He has been a reviewer for the Chattanooga Times for 40 years, has taught school and farmed to earn a living, and is now finishing a novel, a book of verse and several volumes of journals. He lives in Oak Ridge, Tennessee.*

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## Tenantry

Always in transit  
we were always temporarily  
in exile,  
each new place seeming  
after awhile  
and for awhile  
our home.

Because no matter  
how far we traveled  
on the edge of strangeness  
in a small county,  
the earth ran before us  
down red clay roads  
blurred with summer dust,  
banked with winter mud.

It was the measureable,  
pleasurable earth  
that was home.  
Nobody who loved it  
could ever be really alien.  
Its tough clay, deep loam,  
hill rocks, small flowers  
were always the signs  
of a home-coming.  
We wound down through them  
to them,  
and the house we came to,  
whispering with dead hollyhocks  
or once in spring  
sill-high in daisies,  
was unimportant.  
Wherever it stood,  
it stood in earth,  
and the earth welcomed us,  
open, gateless,

one place as another.  
And each place seemed  
after awhile  
and for while  
our home:  
because the county  
was only a mansion  
kind of dwelling  
in which there were many  
rooms.  
We only moved from one  
room to another,  
getting acquainted  
with the whole house.  
And always the earth  
was the new floor under us,  
the blue pinewoods the walls  
rising around us,  
the windows the openings  
in the blue trees  
through which we glimpsed.  
always farther on.  
sometimes beyond the river,  
the real wall of the mountain,  
in whose shadow  
for a little while  
we assumed ourselves safe,  
secure and comfortable  
as happy animals  
in an unvisited lair:  
which is why perhaps  
no house we ever lived in  
stood behind a fence,  
no door we ever opened  
had a key.  
It was beautiful like that.  
For a little while

— George Scarbrough



## Death by Dynamite

I went out to the wheat that  
was gold beside the river  
under the hulk of a blue mountain  
and said O golden wheat, bed-  
straw stuck with the gold guard-  
hairs over the shelly bread he  
worked so hard for,  
you killed my grandfather  
as surely as cockle grows.  
For you revealed nothing when  
the haulers of bright fish,  
companions of loaves, tossed  
the hot, percussive sticks into  
the glinting river waves.

You disclosed nothing when in  
the aftermath of day, going  
home, in your rough bound sheaves  
they thrust away the costly,  
contraband fire, among the fine  
filaments of leafy gold they  
hid away his death.

O golden grain I said to the sweet  
ripe field beside the shining  
river, while the mountain loomed  
blue as a water gentian under  
the gold overhang of the drooping  
bank, roofing the wondrous  
dark cerulean flower,  
you bereft me of him whom I  
never loved because I never  
knew, who came fatherstrong in his  
own beautiful, sweaty prime  
with the great ravening  
rapturous machine chewing  
the bouncing sheaves

until O golden wheat blowing  
in broad gleaming waves  
up the western hill to where  
the sun abides in streamers  
hardly rivalling your grassy gold  
an iron tooth flamed out and  
ate his brooding heart.

— George Scarborough

illustration by Renée Robison



## The First Glaciers

When the first glaciers melted and  
the flood washed away the seas, mother,  
you were there with your Bible  
reading your first Corinthians,  
lips silently moving as you turned  
the wafer thin pages.

Your eyes were clear holes of transparent water  
where I swam, unknowing,  
until the fire.

The Baptist preacher would scream from the pulpit,  
pounding a fevered fist,  
red-faced as the Indians in my schoolbook  
dancing half-naked around a fire.

(Mama I wanna go home  
eat roast beef and green peas  
and watch tv)

Berkeley nights were foggy and cold  
and I had a lover

who threw bricks at cop cars and  
made love through the afternoon.

We never talked of marriage, or children.  
There were certain taboos.

We walked midnight streets on psychedelics  
measuring time by the fading of colors.

A friend with scars on his inner wrists  
would cook dinner in the morning —  
beans in an iron pot on a two-burner stove.

The curtains stuck to the steamy kitchen windows  
and we peeled them away from the glass  
to watch the sun rise.

But I called you, mother, from pay phones at proper hours  
across two time zones to the Bible Belt  
and never woke you, never caught you at dinner.  
Mostly we were still:

me in a glass booth on Telegraph Avenue  
one hand pressed against the free ear  
to shut out traffic and friends  
while you let the Sunday dishes soak.

— Kay Sloan



# Are You Looking, Cousin Dell?

by Regina M. K. Mandrell

**S**ue was dead and Cousin Dell was making her shroud.

The days of my staying in bed with my sister so that people would not think she was really sick were over. Sue had always wanted me to stay in bed, too, on those days when her “poor little mortally wounded heart,” as our old doctor had told Mama, was so bad. I always did, for my big, lovely 14-year-old sister had been my idol as far back as I could remember. Now she was no more.

And frail, little wispy Cousin Dell, with her agile, tiny fingers, was busily stitching in and out on the soft, creamy cashmere — her bright, buttony eyes following the needle with a certain fixedness that fascinated my 11-year-old imagination, as the shadows of the fading January sunlight made grotesque figures on the heaps of material.

Cousin Dell was an institution in our family at such times. As soon as the word ever got around among our big family connections that the Death Angel had paid a visit (and it seemed often — epidemics and disease took a heavy toll), she moved in.

Her tiny, dark figure domiciled itself inconspicuously in the corner of Mama’s bedroom, where to the quiet comings and goings and soft weeping and chattering of bereaved relatives and friends, her needle plied its sorrowful task. Bewilderment mingled with fright as I sat on a little stool by Mama’s machine, watching the bright, beady eyes dart from stitch to stitch until the long row became the side seam of my sister’s gown. The nimble fingers flew hither and yon in swift, calculated course, like the hummingbirds in the obelias outside the dining room window. I wondered if Sue could see me.

The sullen day faded into evening as Cousin Dell tirelessly put pieces together and fashioned sleeves and ruffles,

until when I saw my sister for the last time, the terrible, deep hurt was gentler — for the creamy cashmere and the lacy ruching made her look just like an angel, and I now had the feeling that what Mama had told me about meeting her in heaven was really true.

And all through that shadowy half-century-ago childhood, my cousin Dell moved in as regularly at our family bereavements as did our mortician, until the great Industrial Age finally moved in ahead of Cousin Dell to take over her task of love, and expertly and efficiently present handsome ready-made gowns for The Last Sleep — to be selected to your liking, stiffly and presentably fit — but with none of the gentle stitches nor aura of ritual of Cousin Dell.

As far back as I can remember, she had always figured as an important branch in the rambling ramifications of our family tree, although I do know that Papa said the connection was getting a bit dim, her grandfather having been a first cousin of Papa’s grandfather. But by our Southern ways, a few generations removed made none the difference, as long as one stemmed from the same forebears.

On Sunday afternoons, whether they be hot and sultry of a summer, or brisk and invigorating of a fall when the wind whipped in from the Gulf, Papa would always summon the younger of the clan to go for a walk with him. Invariably, these strolls led either down to the wharf of our seaport town to see and go over the new ships that had put into port during the week (and we were always welcomed by those elegant ambassadors of good will, the gracious Captains), or to visit with Cousin Dell in the lower flat of the once-beautiful old antebellum home, now generously let out, in apartments, mostly to fallen aristocracy, of whom our Cousin Dell was, definitely, part and parcel. Here, in the far corner of what was the former grandeur of the dining room, was Cousin Dell’s hemstitching with its

surrounding tables piled high with bits and packs of materials which generous clientele had brought for her handiwork.

The machine was never opened on Sunday, but we all sat around while Papa and Cousin Dell discussed the comings and goings, marriages and offspring of our big connection. Restlessly, I would pull off my Sunday patent leather baby doll slippers and wiggle my cramped, hot toes, and watch the poor marble fawn, toppled from its fountain base in the front yard, where it lay pitifully prostrate, and wondered why someone did not come to its rescue and place it aright on its former pedestal of grandeur.

But as I grew older, I was to know the true Cousin Dell story.

She was 16 that summer when Meredith Cassel came South to regain his health after a bout with tuberculosis contracted while he was in medical school.

I loved to hear her tell about the afternoon he put his fraternity pin on her and asked her if she loved him. She replied: "I'll ask Mama!"

But love and marry him she did. I watched her dimmed eyes twinkle as she told how her Meredith asked her deaf father for her in very loud tones: "Mr. Hamilton, can I have her?" Lizzie, the cook, darted out backway, shouting, "I heard Mister Meredith ask for Miss Dell and I'm gonna narrate it around!"

Life moved swiftly and tragically for Cousin Dell the next dozen years.

The two babies who came were not very strong, and Cousin Dell grew up very quickly, with the responsibility of the babies and Cousin Meredith, too. Disappointed at having to abandon his medical career, he hated the bookwork which chained him to the mill-supply house as much as he loved his duck hunting and fishing expeditions week-ends. And when Meredith was accidentally killed in the hazy dusk of an early Saturday evening down by the marshes as his foot triggered his gun when he stood to take aim at a bevy of ducks, her cup of sorrow was running over.

Gradually, however, there came to her new strength — as it does to those about whom Victor Hugo says: "Sorrow is an astronomer and shows us the stars."

Now she took things in her own hands.

"Wayne," she confided to Papa, "I'm going to have my own business." Then she found the flat in the Salsworth Place and moved in what lock, stock and barrel remained.

She had heard about the new hemstitching machine on the market. Papa went with her to see and help her buy it. With it she believed she could support her two boys.

Papa printed for her the neat "HEMSTITCHING" sign, and I've a notion the proud pillars of the old Salsworth Mansion heaved a groan as the tacks were driven to support the sign that was to support Cousin Dell's little household.

And so began her business. In the shadow of the imposing old columns of the Cathedral, she lived for half a century, making trousseaux for the city's belles and ever plying her needle.

With the constant padding in and out of her customers, she kept her finger on the pulse of the city's heartbeat as surely as she did on her hemstitching machine. Histories and happenings of the families for whom she worked were hers to know and enjoy as she deftly adorned layettes and bridal outfits and graduation frocks and, always, time out for the "going away" gowns of her infinitely large family

## Why I Write

No best seller am I, but now, at three score and 10 plus, recalling that dim childhood of years ago and the turbulent, restless subsequent years, I realize that my writing has been my secret ally, my confidant, my unhampered source of expression. At times, during deep distress, it has been my only mode of emotional survival.

As the twelfth of 14 siblings and the only survivor, it has been my release in sadness and joy, my most gratifying tool of communication. Through diary, letters, memos, it has served me as priestess and prophet of accomplishment and creation.

It was my mainstay during long periods of confinement with a terminally ill family member. It has been something I could share with friends who asked for assistance: a letter to an elderly prospective father-in-law asking for his daughter's hand in marriage (boy got girl!), a series of lectures for an army officer, letters of application, reporting. Scholarships, household articles, pleasure trips, cash, all have come our way through my writing efforts.

My joy and interest in writing have enabled me to carry on business effectively and maintain a wide circle of friends — all through correspondence. I have garnered and organized a wealth of historical information in genealogical materials which will be a legacy for my family and vital to our area. It has helped give me a "voice" in my community and strength in political and civic circles.

In September of 1979, when a violent and terrifying hurricane hit our area — devastating homes and lands alike — my pen brought release to my taut and shattered nerves and myriad anxieties, as I wrote, by candlelight in my basement, the story of that night.

All through life, my love of writing has enabled me to express and share feelings and thoughts which otherwise might have been silent.

And now, in my later years, it is priceless. I need nothing but pen (or typewriter) and paper to express, to recall, to relive, to dream.

With my love for writing, I continue to sing the song in my heart!

— Regina M.K. Mandrell

connections.

And then one day, long after her little boys were grown and on their own, they came and closed the hemstitching machine, and took down the sign. For Cousin Dell had finished her last trousseau.

There were services at the Cathedral, and then at old Magnolia Cemetery. All the kith and kin from far and near had gathered there, for somehow or other the valley of the shadow has a way of thickening bloodlines.

And I remember how heavy my heart felt, as for the last time I looked at Cousin Dell. Not so much because she was gone — for she had earned this sweet rest — but because the Industrial Age had moved in and made Cousin Dell's "going-away" gown. □

# THE CHEROKEE CONNECTION

Marilou Bonham-Thompson

*"If it is not of the spirit, it is not Indian." The grandfathers have said so. "Speak of the spirit in symbols or in silence. Only listening ears will hear." The grandmothers have said so. I ask you to remember.*

It is difficult to go against the advice of the grandmothers and speak about my Cherokee heritage in straightforward prose because I understand the warning implicit in their words, as well as the reason behind it: deaf ears destroy.

Raymond, a wiry and seasoned journalist, warned me in a different way. "Most Americans have concrete minds. They don't know a symbol from a hole in the wall. If you can't explain things to them in terms of the Gross National Product, forget it. Right?"

"Mostly right. But Raymond, some Americans believe. . . ."

"Some. How many? Enough to make any difference? Look at the Tellico Dam controversy here in Tennessee. The Cherokee fought that dam for 15 years on the grounds of spiritual and human rights. And what happened?"

"They got crushed by concrete."

"You know why. With no power and no money, they went against the big interests. You wrote three articles about it. You gave the facts, but your basic appeal was to the spirit, to the conscience. You should have stuck to the dollar. . . . In this society, the dollar's the bottom line."

"I was asked to write from the Cherokee point of view, and the grandfathers have said. . . ."

"I know what they said. But the Indian point of view is obsolete. Indians are being phased out. You said it yourself in the Tellico article. 'The waters are rising for us all.' The spirit is out, technology is in. Solid concrete. That's the way it is."

Raymond goes to the newspaper office every day. Some of his best stories come back with the editor's "public not interested" scrawled across the top, but he keeps working for what is humane and just. Raymond has "listening ears." He is a crack in the concrete.

There are many people like Raymond, but they are in the minority. The overwhelming mindset in America is: get the GNP up and all will be well. Reduce everything to its category and eliminate what is irrelevant. Keep it rational. Keep it objective. Keep it concrete.

But the grandfathers have said, "If it is not of the spirit, it is not Indian." Is this way of thought obsolete? Are the first natives of America being phased out because they are irrelevant?

There are signs to the contrary. Native American art is beginning to boom. *Hanta Yo* is a best-seller. A play about Black Elk is opening in New York. More people are visiting reservations, buying crafts. These things indicate an objective interest. But do they mean more support for Native American issues and an increasing acceptance of the Indian way of thought? Are there more people with listening ears?

How to answer these questions? As a poet of Native American descent working in the South, I'm wary of ignoring the grandmothers' advice and stepping from poetry into prose. From my experience at Tellico and elsewhere, however, I know that deaf ears destroy. Perhaps straightforward words will help cultivate more true listeners.

"If it is not of the spirit, it is not Indian." The grandfathers have said so. Because it is of the spirit, the Indian way of thought can pass through generations, through ethnic mixes, through different languages and still

retain its essence. As they say in my native Appalachia, "Indian blood is strong." I have listened to my blood, to my mother and her father, who are of Cherokee descent, and to the silent voice of the mountains. This is what they taught me:

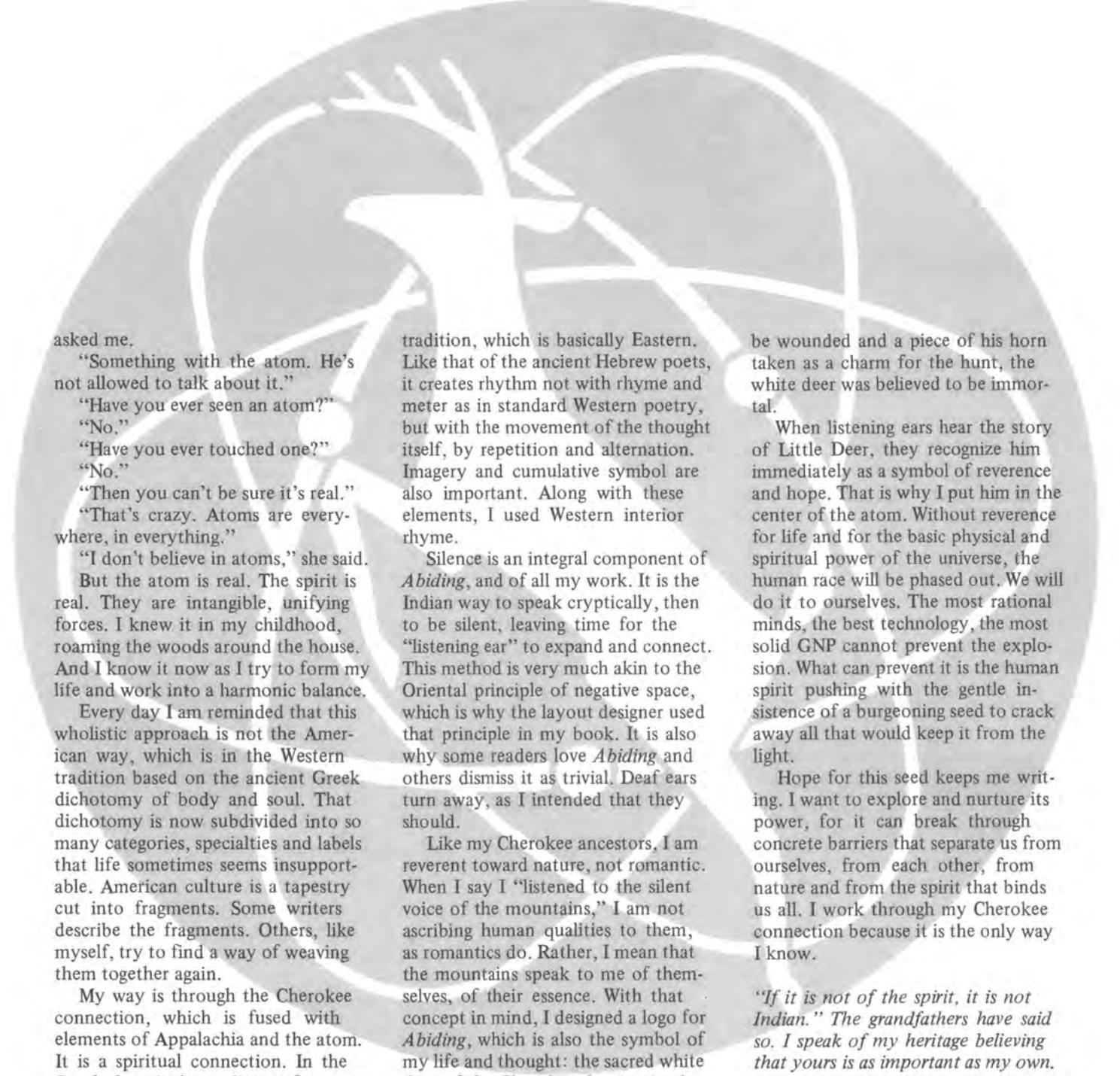
*All are related in spirit; each has a part in the whole — be reverent. Keep your body, mind and soul as one. Understand nature and live in harmony with it. Remember that life moves in a circle: past, present and future are one; death is part of life; the spirit never dies. God is a spirit.*

This way of thought is my still-center, my inner force. It shapes my life and work. If I had grown up in a traditional Southern town, I might not have been able to withstand the pressure from a different cultural set. Fortunately, in 1945, my family moved from Knoxville to Oak Ridge, Tennessee. I was nine years old, just the right age to absorb the rhythms of the atomic frontier.

There were no traditions, no paved streets, no class structures, no sidewalks, no private clubs, no "old families" controlling things, no one to say, "It's always been done this way." From across America 75,000 people had come to build a new community. They brought different customs, ideas, religious beliefs. Most important, they brought youth and flexibility. I was free to create a life pattern to suit myself.

A given of that pattern was the reality of the intangible. Life in Oak Ridge revolved around an invisible power — the atom. My friends and I accepted it as a matter of course. My cousin, who was visiting from West Virginia, could not. (Her father was in the coal business.)

"What does your daddy do?" she



asked me.

"Something with the atom. He's not allowed to talk about it."

"Have you ever seen an atom?"

"No."

"Have you ever touched one?"

"No."

"Then you can't be sure it's real."

"That's crazy. Atoms are everywhere, in everything."

"I don't believe in atoms," she said.

But the atom is real. The spirit is real. They are intangible, unifying forces. I knew it in my childhood, roaming the woods around the house. And I know it now as I try to form my life and work into a harmonic balance.

Every day I am reminded that this wholistic approach is not the American way, which is in the Western tradition based on the ancient Greek dichotomy of body and soul. That dichotomy is now subdivided into so many categories, specialties and labels that life sometimes seems insupportable. American culture is a tapestry cut into fragments. Some writers describe the fragments. Others, like myself, try to find a way of weaving them together again.

My way is through the Cherokee connection, which is fused with elements of Appalachia and the atom. It is a spiritual connection. In the South there is the tradition of concern with the spirit: among both blacks and whites it rests solidly in orthodox religion; among some blacks it is more wholistic, reaching back to African roots. Nevertheless, it is wiser in the South, as elsewhere, to speak of the spirit as the grandmothers advised, in symbols and in silence. My first book of poetry, *Abiding Appalachia: Where Mountain and Atom Meet*, was published in 1978. In content it is obviously in harmony with my origins. In form the harmony is less apparent because it is less familiar.

I followed the Cherokee oral

tradition, which is basically Eastern. Like that of the ancient Hebrew poets, it creates rhythm not with rhyme and meter as in standard Western poetry, but with the movement of the thought itself, by repetition and alternation. Imagery and cumulative symbol are also important. Along with these elements, I used Western interior rhyme.

Silence is an integral component of *Abiding*, and of all my work. It is the Indian way to speak cryptically, then to be silent, leaving time for the "listening ear" to expand and connect. This method is very much akin to the Oriental principle of negative space, which is why the layout designer used that principle in my book. It is also why some readers love *Abiding* and others dismiss it as trivial. Deaf ears turn away, as I intended that they should.

Like my Cherokee ancestors, I am reverent toward nature, not romantic. When I say I "listened to the silent voice of the mountains," I am not ascribing human qualities to them, as romantics do. Rather, I mean that the mountains speak to me of themselves, of their essence. With that concept in mind, I designed a logo for *Abiding*, which is also the symbol of my life and thought: the sacred white deer of the Cherokee, leaping in the heart of the atom.

I found the myth of Little Deer in James Mooney's 1887 book *Myths and Sacred Formulas of the Cherokee*, which he translated from the sacred books of Swimmer, a revered shaman of the Eastern Band. According to the legend, every hunter knew that if he killed a deer and failed to perform the ritual of pardon, Little Deer would come, swift and invisible, to cripple him for life. Only the greatest masters of the hunting mysteries ever saw Little Deer, and then perhaps only once in a lifetime. Although he could

be wounded and a piece of his horn taken as a charm for the hunt, the white deer was believed to be immortal.

When listening ears hear the story of Little Deer, they recognize him immediately as a symbol of reverence and hope. That is why I put him in the center of the atom. Without reverence for life and for the basic physical and spiritual power of the universe, the human race will be phased out. We will do it to ourselves. The most rational minds, the best technology, the most solid GNP cannot prevent the explosion. What can prevent it is the human spirit pushing with the gentle insistence of a burgeoning seed to crack away all that would keep it from the light.

Hope for this seed keeps me writing. I want to explore and nurture its power, for it can break through concrete barriers that separate us from ourselves, from each other, from nature and from the spirit that binds us all. I work through my Cherokee connection because it is the only way I know.

*"If it is not of the spirit, it is not Indian." The grandfathers have said so. I speak of my heritage believing that yours is as important as my own. We are one. I ask you to remember. □*

*Marilou Bonham-Thompson is a Memphis writer whose Abiding Appalachia: Where Mountain and Atom Meet (St. Luke's Press) is the first book of poetry and prose to come out of the experience of growing up on the atomic frontier in Oak Ridge, Tennessee. She has also written widely about the Cherokees' battle against the Tellico Dam. "Coal Field Farewell" first appeared in Gayoso Street Review; the other poems are from Abiding Appalachia.*



## Coal Field Farewell

"Mama, I'm goin' now . . . to church."  
His quiet words trailed smoke-like  
and curled around her at the stove.  
She watched the heating skillet —  
black as the mine's mouth, black as  
her man's face when they'd brought him up,  
black as a rotten lung.  
The silent ritual had begun and her  
son stood by the door — skin so white,  
hair with raven's sheen; tall he was and lean.  
She'd told him before, "A man earns his own way."  
And now the day was here — he was fifteen.  
She remembered him at four saying,  
"If I was bacon in a pan, what would you do?"  
"Why son, I'd tend you careful-like  
and lift you out. I'd lift you out for sure."

". . . to church," he'd said and knew she'd seen  
the suitcase cached among green laurel.  
"Mama . . . ?" Their eyes met.  
"Go along now," she said. And then  
his step was on the path. Too tired for tears —  
with ten children more to rear — she laid a  
strip of bacon in the pan, watching it careful-like  
and listening to the deepest hollow of her heart.

## Women Die Like Trees

Women die like trees, limb by limb  
as strain of bearing shade and fruit  
drains sap from branch and stem  
and weight of ice with wrench of wind  
split the heart, loosen grip of roots  
until the tree falls with a sigh —  
unheard except by those nearby —  
to lie . . . mossing . . . mouldering . . .  
to a certain softness under foot,  
the matrix of new life and leaves.  
No flag is furled, no cadence beats,  
no bugle sounds for deaths like these,  
as limb by limb, women die like trees.

## An Indian Walks Within Me

An Indian walks in me.  
She steps so firmly in my mind  
that when I stand against the pine  
I know we share the inner light  
of the star that shines on me,  
She taught me this, my Cherokee,  
when I was a spindly child.  
And rustling in dry forest leaves  
I heard her say, "These speak."  
She said the same of sighing wind,  
of hawk descending on the hare  
and Mother's care to draw  
the cover snug around me,  
of copperhead coiled on the stone  
and blackberries warming in the sun —  
"These speak." I listened . . .  
Long before I learned the  
universal turn of atoms, I heard  
the spirit's song that binds us  
all as one. And no more  
could I follow any rule  
that split my soul.  
My Cherokee left me no sign  
except in hair and cheek  
and this firm step of mind  
that seeks the whole  
in strength and peace.

## Star Vision

As I sat against the pine one night  
beneath a star-filled sky,  
my Cherokee stepped in my mind  
and suddenly in every tree,  
in every hill and stone,  
in my hand lying prone upon  
the grass, I could see  
each atom's tiny star —  
minute millions so far-flung  
so bright they swept me up  
with earth and sky  
in one vast expanse of light.

The moment passed. The pine  
was dark, the hill, the stone,  
and my hand was bone and flesh  
once more, lying on the grass.

# CHICANO WRITING: Beyond Beginnings

by Carmen Tafolla

**T**he awarding of the *Premio Casa de las Américas* to Rolando Hinojosa in 1976 for a chicano novel, *Klail City y sus Alrededores*, shook to awakening the U.S. literary world. The *Premio* is to Latin America what the Pulitzer is to the U.S., and this international literary award has never been taken lightly by those at the forefront of world literature. Chicano literature, on the other hand, has frequently been taken lightly in the U.S. literary world, and major language associations have hesitated to accept it as an appropriate area for research and attention.

This disregard did not surprise those who had for years alleged that "world literature" classes in U.S. colleges and universities reviewed to excess the literatures of England, France and Germany while ignoring the rapid succession of innovations in style and thought surging out of Latin America (and the rest of the Third World and U.S. minorities). Curiously enough, this occurred while literary critics in France and Germany were focusing on modern Latin American masterpieces and begging for more. The entire situation taken into account, it was hardly shocking that U.S. critics argued that chicano literature was not "quality literature" and that they based this finding more on what they heard than on what they read.

**T**he *Premio*-winning *Klail City* (later released in the U.S. as *Generaciones y Semblanzas*) was not the first chicano *obra* (work) of its kind. For years, those in chicano circles had praised the sensitivity of Rivera's *And the Earth Did Not Part* and the character development of the haunting protagonists of *Bless Me, Ultima*. For years, chicano writers and readers had admired the dramatic texture of Estela Portillo Trambley's *Rain of Scorpions* and the *mestizaje* (blending) of worlds, languages and concepts in poetry by Alurista, Lalo Delgado, Ricardo Sanchez and Angela de Hoyos. The unforgettable poetic figures of *La Jefa* and *El Louie* in the work of José Montoya epitomized cultural realities, and the chicano reader responded with a fervent "*Los conozco.*" ("I know these people.") These early favorites reflected and defined the characters of the barrio, and we could all appreciate and see the pachuco-turned-soldier-turned-pool-hall-hero, "with all the paradoxes *del soldado raso* — heroism and the stockade."



Illustrations by Elihu Carranza, Jr.

*And on leave, jump boots  
shainadas and ribbons, cocky  
from the war, strutting to  
early mass on Sunday morning.*

*"Wow, is that ol' Louie?"*

*"Mire, comadre, ahí va el hijo  
de Lola!"*

*Afterward he and Fat Richard  
would hock their Bronze stars  
for pisto en el Jardín Canales. . . .*

Often for the first time in their literary lives, chicano readers would recognize characters from *their* cultural context — not stereotyped humble peasants and Hollywood hoods and revolutionaries, but guys from just down the street who were, after all, just “*el hijo de Lola*” (“Lola’s son”) hocking their war medals for something to drink. Heroic-tragic figures whose lives fell short of what society asked of them and whose dreams far outreached what society could offer them.

Amidst the everpresent criticism that the mixing of English and Spanish reflected a linguistic deficiency (of “culturally deprived” individuals), linguistic masterpieces continued to be woven from the beauties and strengths of both languages. Doubled possibilities for alliteration and double-entendre were found in concentrated melanges of Spanish, English, “Texan,” Black English, even Mayan and Nahuatl word concepts. Imaginations exploded beyond limits, beyond conventions, beyond even our own beginnings.

Regional chauvinists continued to criticize our “Tex-Mex” and to treat it as a “language deficiency” caused by low educational or intellectual levels. And chicano writers continued to indulge in “language play” as an inventive and intriguing challenge for linguistic creativity. What had begun with reflections of our own bilingual reality — my own “*me senté allí en la English class*” and Delgado’s “Chicotazos of History” — turned into the formulation of totally new grammatical styles. Lexical creations sprang from an awareness of our own dually bilingual existence and from the discovery of new worlds of thought and literature — the Mayan, the Aztec, the Native American and so forth. Formerly we would, in our daily lives, hispanize English realities: “I missed” would resurrect in Spanish as “*mistié*,” “I flunked” would expand the traditional lexicon with “*flonquíé*,” and the “big, old thing” ending “*azo*” would turn a party in an English sentence into a *porazo* in a Spanish conversation. Now, those same traditions of interlanguage play would apply to the newly discovered language heritage. Acutely aware of the sounds of English, we would accent our Spanish to a mock-anglicized “free wholes” (for *frijoles*) and then play the reverse by accenting our English with the sounds of Spanish: *pino borra* for “peanut butter.” Now, reading through Aztec accounts of *teotl*, *mitotl*, *coatl*, *tomatl*, we exclaimed, instead of the commonplace “*Qué loco!*” (“Crazy!”), “*Qué locotl!*” And the new *mestizaje* of language yielded concentrated high-impact packs, like the three-word label of the moon by Victoria Moreno — “*vanilla, canela crescent.*”

The juxtaposition in selection of English, Spanish or a combination of both adds to the power of each word and to the entire verbal context. Some works are, by necessity, in English, utilizing the compact, business-like high-powered impact of each short jabbing word. The following poem by Sylvia Chacon is an excellent example of this style of writing and of the visual arrangement of the words. The format, together with the words themselves, seems chopped up like little pieces of spaghetti so that the meaning comes out not only from the context of the language but also from the shape and texture of the poem itself.

*I am  
the jealously entangled  
spaghetti  
you abstained  
from eating  
because  
I  
refused  
to be knifed  
and forked along  
in your eagerness  
to get  
the  
meat.*

The eloquence of Reyes Cardenas’ *Poema Sandino* was deliberately woven in an all-Spanish fabric. The profound personal sentiment, the political intent, the entire Spanish-speaking world’s contemporary political context add to what is already one of the most powerful statements ever made in chicano poetry. An excerpt:

*estas cosas que nos arrastran por el piso  
tenemos que pararas como un arbol seco de navidad  
tenemos que echarle agua hasta que le salgan hojas  
hasta que podamos hablar otra vez  
hasta que podamos mover al siglo. . . . .*

*pero nosotros, nosotros tenemos que resistir al tiempo  
levantar la pluma aunque sea con huesos  
tenemos que ofender a los que cierran los ojos  
que hasta páginas vacías ahoguen sus sueños dulces  
que despiertan tosiendo buscando aire.*

Translation, in poetry, is a dependent and limited form of expression. But, with apologies for this sacrilege, I offer this translation of the segment quoted:

*these things that drag us across the floor  
we have to stand them up like a dried-up Christmas tree  
we have to sprinkle water on them until they sprout  
leaves  
until we can speak again  
until we can move the century. . . . .*

*but we, we have to resist time  
lift the pen, although it be with our bones  
we have to offend those who close their eyes  
that even empty pages drown their sweet dreams  
who wake up coughing searching for air.*

Language mixture is an art as surely as any other manipulation of words, as evidenced in the beautiful flow and rich image-laden texture of the first few lines of “*Mis ojos hinchados*” by Alurista.

*Mis ojos hinchados  
flooded with lágrimas  
de bronce  
melting on the cheek bones  
of my concern  
razgos indígenas  
the scars of history on my face  
and the veins of my body  
that aches  
vomito sangre  
y lloro libertad  
. . . . .*



The early stages of chicano literature were full of identity assertions: "I am Joaquín, lost in a world of confusion," or "I am a Quetzal who wakes up green with wings of gold, and cannot fly," or "I am the Aztec Prince and the Christian Christ," or "I do not ask for freedom — I am freedom." But chicano literature has gone beyond its beginnings. It no longer simply asserts and defines an identity. It now paints its context, and carries out its visions. The identities of crazy gypsy, Aztec Angel, Mud Coyote and Crying Woman of the Night now go beyond their own definitions to live out their lives in the more fully developed mythological and social context of chicano literature.

The symbols and images have already become familiar — we speak a common mythological language. Critics such as Juan Rodríguez, Max Martínez and José Flores Peregrino have begun to explain and nourish the literary symbols. Flores Peregrino identifies and substantiates motifs, visions and symbols such as the mirror (symbol of self-knowledge), the creative serpent, *in lak ech* (Mayan principle of behavior) and, of course, the parent earth, *la tierra*, as birther, burier and healer. With a critical base for study, chicano literature can no longer be ignored by those unfamiliar with its symbols and settings.

The voice of the chicana poet and writer, the woman, is a strong one within this stream of expression. The powerful work of Margarita Cota-Cardenas, Evangelina Vigil, Estela Portillo Trambley and countless others provides a counterbalancing and whole image of our *entire* culture, not just the male perspectives of it. The chicanas remind us emphatically and eloquently of the healthy duality of indigenous cultures, in which the Creative Spirit is both a Mother God and a Father God, combining these two aspects of its reality in its power and sustaining spirit. Legendary Mexican figures, such as La Llorona, La Virgen de Guadalupe and La Adelita echo feminine voices of pain, protective power, action and valor. Real predecessors in chicana and Mexican history provide strong character bases for modern writers — women soldiers, colonels and a general in the Mexican Revolution, outspoken female intellectuals and writers, the everyday community roles of women leaders in our barrios who are *curanderas* (healers), political organizers and businesswomen. These images are reflected in our *obras*.

Yet the writings are not merely covered with roses and adulations. The awareness of sex-role oppression voiced loudly by the poet Sor Juana Unes de la Cruz in the 1600s is carried on by the modern chicana writer. A strong feminist protest of the treatment of human beings as objects to be bought and sold and owned is evident in the mischievously potent poem by Margarita Cota-Cardenas, who knowingly epic-izes one woman's life in the not-too-subtle image of a flower.

#### SOLILOQUIO TRAVIESO

*mucho trabajo                    ser flor*  
*a veces*  
*solitas*  
*y en camino*  
*concentramos muy fuerte       así*  
*arrugamos la frente*  
*para marchitarnos antes*  
*y al llegar al mercado       ji ji*  
*no nos pueden vender*

And, again, in poor but sincere translation:

#### MISCHIEVOUS SOLILOQUY

*it's a lotta work                being a flower*  
*sometimes*  
*all alone*  
*and on the road*  
*we concentrate real hard       like this*  
*we wrinkle our foreheads*  
*so we can wither before we get there*  
*and when we get to the marketplace       hee hee*  
*they can't sell us*

The unconquerable independence of the statement is but one example of the eloquence in chicana poetry. Most of these works speak not only to the oppression of human beings for reasons of gender, but also for reasons of color, culture, language, accent and philosophy. They protest the limitation of human beings' rights to full autonomy and personal development. It is a natural connection, for racism and sexism are simply different verses of the same song.



## Medecine Poem

Sickness lies around us like rotting feelings  
 splintering minds on the spears of a bored and  
 angry crowd  
 and splattering the faces of children with blood.

Sickness robs bandages to pay bombs  
 and build better rockets, better than those better  
 in a winning-game that never wins.

Sickness nabs young black children playing in  
 Atlanta  
 and lays their empty bodies, laughingly, by the  
 road  
 to match the brown notches in policemen's guns.

Sickness leaves health hiding in a grass-roofed  
 shack  
 in a Kickapoo Indian village  
 under the international bridge that holds  
 Eagle Pass, Texas to Piedras Negras, Mexico  
 where native peoples between two foreign  
 nations  
 use dual citizenship  
 to ward off dual dangers.  
 And health huddles, hides, in healing huts  
 of cardboard and grass,  
 never knowing which way to go to escape  
 the madness.

Our hurting and our healing must run in the  
 right direction  
 and swiftly, with quick looks backwards,  
 carrying with it always the medecine pouch,  
 intact, with human bonding.  
 For wars  
 and poems  
 must always  
 have an end.

— Carmen Tafolla  
 March 9, 1981

**I**n short, chicano literature has gone beyond beginnings in many respects — it has gone beyond a definition of our cultural origins, it has gone beyond the beginning stages of myth creation and symbol kinship, it has gone beyond its own awareness of the literary action itself, and perhaps most significantly to those who struggled for years to be read and to read — it has gone beyond the beginnings of its acceptance and recognition by the literary world as a whole. □

## Warning

Don't smell the smoke of a brown ghost  
 who keeps starving white  
 and dying brown.

He causes *mitotes* like a Texan Indian  
 and then goes through the winter  
 sucking on cactus skins and searching  
 for overlooked mesquite beans  
 gone brown.

Instead he finds Spanish missionaries too  
 eager to adore him, and nations too  
 foreign to respect him, and only one  
 or two  
 mesquite beans.

— Carmen Tafolla

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# Lines I Dare to Write: LESBIAN WRITING IN THE SOUTH

by M. Segrest

I did not know the word “homosexual” until I was 12 and read an article on the subject in *Life* magazine. It worked on me like a silent bombshell: this revelation that a whole group of people – enough for there to be a *word* for it – were powerfully drawn to members of their own sex. As I looked at *Life*’s sinister pictures of sad, scared men walking down long, dark, deserted streets, I saw that those feelings echoing, reverberating in me meant a life of loneliness and alienation. This knowledge overwhelmed me, so that I pushed it to the back edge of my brain, where I developed a secret homesickness – maybe I had always had it – for these people I could love, a conviction that some day I would find them. I told myself in private conversations that I had to “get away from home” (Alabama, the 1950s) to “be myself;” I figured it meant somewhere *far* away and *very* exotic – like London, England, or an island in the Caribbean. I resolved to travel. I got as far as Durham, North Carolina.

When I fell unmistakably in love with another woman, in Durham, in 1973 (at the age of 24), I was not sure that I had come far enough for this. But my brain was in open rebellion, not to mention the entire rest of my body and spirit. I sneaked over to the Intimate Bookstore in Chapel Hill to see what books they had on the subject (I had developed a habit of approaching books first, then proceeding sometimes to life). I was afraid to go to my favorite bookstore in Durham, because someone I knew might see and tell. So I bought the only books that had “lesbian” in the title and went to sit beneath the trees by the stone wall on Franklin Street. I read with a sinking heart as a clinical voice explained how lesbian lovemaking, and love, was basically “hollow” because there was no penis to insert into the lesbian vagina. That turned out to be the biggest lie I *ever* got told, but I sure didn’t know it then.

So when I went to my first Southeastern Gay and Lesbian Conference in Chapel Hill in 1977, I headed directly for the session on lesbian literature. There sat a whole roomful of lesbians, including two novelists (Bertha Harris

and June Arnold, flown in from New York) and Catherine Nicholson and Harriet Desmoines, the editors of a lesbian magazine in, of all places, Charlotte, North Carolina. It was like coming home.

Now this literature I stumbled into was very different, you had better believe it, from what I had been reading while struggling to acquire a Ph.D. in English. In graduate school, other miserable graduate students and I spent long

**N**o lesbian in the universe, I do believe, will tell you there’s nothing left to say. We have our whole lives to say . . .

hours of research on literary history, theory, symbolism and all, wondering over lunch in the cafeteria, day after day, why we put up with the sadomasochistic tactics of professors, why we and they were doing what we did. In my courses on twentieth century literature, I learned about how Ezra Pound invented “modernism” in the early part of the century and then forced it on everybody else because, as he explained, there was nothing new to say, only new ways to say it. His buddy T.S. Eliot went on to define poetry as the “escape from emotion.” With these two men, literature took a great leap into academic ob-

scurity, from which only scholars called “New Critics” could hope to rescue it. The modern writer became a suicide. As A. Alvarez’s book *The Savage God* documents, writers jumped off boats and bridges, blew their heads off with shotguns or stuck them in ovens, or slowly and loudly drank themselves to death. Most of the “great works” of this century traced the dissolution of Western white male culture, by male writers who could only identify with its demise. Just listen to the titles: *The Wasteland*, “The Second Coming,” *Autumn of the Patriarch*, *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, *Love Among the Ruins*. As graduate students, we sat around in despair trying to explain all this and lamenting that our own students, whom we taught as teaching assistants, didn’t lap it all up as we did — a failing we pompously explained as the “decline of literacy.”

With lesbian literature, I suddenly understood — perhaps remembered — how it’s supposed to be. No lesbian in the universe, I do believe, will tell you there’s nothing left to say. We have our whole lives to say, lives that have been censored, repressed, suppressed and depressed for millennia from official versions of “literature,” “history” and “culture.” And I doubt that many lesbians will tell you that poetry, or anything else, should be an *escape* from emotion. We have spent too much of our lives escaping our emotions. Our sanity has come when we turned to face them. The lesbian’s knowledge that we all have stories to tell and the ability to tell them lessens the suicidal modern alienation between “writer” and “audience.”

Lesbian literature — like all the best women’s writing today — is fueled by the knowledge that what we have to say is essential to our own survival and to the survival of the larger culture which has tried so hard to destroy us. The lesbian’s definition of herself is part of the larger movement by all women to define ourselves. It is a movement with such tremendous revolutionary potential that it has scared the bejesus out of just about everybody in the past decade. (Even the forces of reaction rally to protect their narrow version of “the family” — which is anti-feminist and anti-gay.) I am now teaching a survey of British literature using the *Norton Anthology*, and for its first thousand years not a single woman’s voice can be heard — though it is filled with plenty of usually hostile male definitions of what women are. When we women begin to define ourselves, then much of conventional literature (not to mention the rest of society) must be redefined, rejudged. Nothing left to say? My god.

So what does all this have to do with Southern literature? Potentially a lot. Southern literature is on the same dead-end track as the rest of the patriarchal culture. Essays often deal with questions like “Is the Southern novel dead?” and “Is there writing after Faulkner?” Well, I think there is. As Southern women writers redefine ourselves, a new literature could emerge. As Southern lesbians (and gay men) redefine ourselves, new insights emerge from a culture that show the worst features of American society writ large. (Oppression in the South has always been on the surface and easy to see.)

Southern lesbian literature can be traced back to the beginning of the century. It is a largely unacknowledged aspect of the “Southern Renaissance,” that burst of creativity beginning in the late 1920s when Southern writers finally began to look critically at their own culture. It extends into the ’60s wave of liberations: black civil rights, women’s and homosexual liberation. And now, for the first

time, some Southern lesbian writers are dealing with Southern lives and Southern themes in openly lesbian voices, in widely varying styles. What we have to say is important, and other Southerners should listen.

## Stage One: “Lines I dare not write”

**A**ngelina Weld Grimké, Carson McCullers and Lillian Smith are the earliest Southern and lesbian writers I can locate. Among them, they raise themes that later lesbians either develop or redefine.

Angelina Weld Grimké was the daughter of Archibald Henry Grimké, the slave nephew of the abolitionist Grimké sisters from South Carolina. She grew up in Boston and lived in Washington, D.C., from 1902 until 1926. Her love poetry establishes her lesbianism and shows the self-silencing that accompanied it — like this from “Rosabel”:

*Leaves that whisper whisper ever  
Listen, listen, pray!  
Birds that twitter twitter softly  
Do not say me nay  
Winds that breathe about, upon her  
(Lines I do not dare)  
Whisper, turtle, breathe upon her  
That I find her fair.*

“Lines I do not dare” — when a lesbian denies her self and denies her sexual energy, she denies her creative energy as well. Feminist poet and critic Gloria Hull finds these lessons in Grimké’s life:

*The question — to repeat it — is “what did it mean to be a Black Lesbian/poet in America at the beginning of the twentieth century? First, it meant that you wrote (or half wrote) — in isolation — a lot which you did not show and knew you could not publish. It meant that when you did write to be printed, you did so in shackles — chained between the real experience you wanted to say and the conventions that would not give you voice. It meant that you fashioned a few race and nature poems, transliterated lyrics and double-tongued verse which — sometimes (racism being what it is) — got published. It meant, finally, that you stopped writing altogether, dying, no doubt, with your real gifts stifled within — and leaving behind (in a precious few cases) the little that manages to survive of your true self in fugitive pieces.*

Grimké, who felt herself “crushed” and “smothered . . . under the days,” has received little critical attention, no doubt because of her triple jeopardy — she was black, female and lesbian.

The next two women I find are Lillian Smith and Carson McCullers. Writing in the Southern Renaissance, these two white women also adumbrate themes and traits that emerge more fully in later Southern lesbian literature. Like Grim-

ke's, their lives and work show the effects of lines they "dare not write." They also illustrate further the kinds of problems that lesbians encounter in trying to reconstruct their culture.

For instance, neither woman ever publicly defined herself as a lesbian, and both might be upset that I am now proceeding to do so. A recent biography of McCullers, *The Lonely Hunter*, by Virginia Spencer Carr, establishes McCullers' emotional ties with women, albeit in a disgustingly heterosexist way: "Reeves [Carson's husband, probably bisexual himself] was incapable of coping with his or his wife's sexual inclinations or of helping her to become more heterosexually oriented. Carson was completely open to their friends about her tremendous enjoyment in being physically close to attractive women. She was as frank and open about this aspect of her nature as a child would be in choosing which toy he most wanted to play with" (my emphasis).

Identifying Lillian Smith as lesbian presents more complex problems. As yet, there is no definitive biography, though there is the fact that she never married and that she lived and worked with a woman "companion" for decades. There is no way to prove a sexual relationship between them, nor is there a need to do so. This puritanical culture defines homosexuality as sexual activity only, so that it can then self-righteously condemn it, rather than seeing homosexuality as a question of emotional identity. (It's harder to be self-righteous about telling people they can't be who they are or love whom they need to.) I am sadly certain that many lesbians have lived out their entire lives fearing and repressing their sexuality. Smith's commitment to women, her analysis of oppression and the nature of her criticism of her surrounding culture are enough to show me her lesbianism. But my best argument comes from my gut — a sixth-sense way by which lesbians have always known each other, a way of knowing not given much credence by most literary scholars. And, in treating only two women from this period, I am being fairly discreet. For example, if Flannery O'Connor, of whose sex life there is no public record, cannot be put clearly into a "lesbian" column, it makes no more sense, and maybe less, to consider her "heterosexual." Her letters show that her closest emotional relationships seem to have been with women.

The lives and work of McCullers and Smith present instructive contrasts in white lesbian response to a repressive culture. McCullers, for most of her adult life, acted out what I believe was lesbian alienation (which is to say internalized homophobia) without the political insights into the culture she wrote about, insights so important in Smith's writing. Internalizing the values of a culture that pretends that only men can love women, Carson once wrote to a friend: "Newton, I should have been a man." She thought of her attraction to a female friend as "the devil at work" in her. She entered into a horrible marriage with a bisexual man and spent most of her adult life in self-destructive confusion.

It is little wonder that loneliness and displacement suffuse her writing and are seen as cosmic. I am not saying that all kinds of people are not lonely. But, as a lesbian, I know that we are lonelier than we have to be and that structures of society separate us unnecessarily. This awareness of the way patriarchal power structures limit people is absent in McCullers' writing, making many of her characters — and their creator — embrace the grotesque.

Lillian Smith is always interested in why and how people get warped. For 20 years she and Paula Snelling published *South Today*, one of the most outspoken, radical voices to oppose segregation in the '40s and '50s. Her *Killers of the Dream* is the most profound analysis I know of the causes and effects of racism on the whites who practice it. Smith's life and writing embody what later became the feminist manifesto: "The personal is political." She delved into her own life as a white Southern female and came up with a radical analysis of Southern — and of Western — culture, an understanding of the powerful links between sex, Christianity, economics and politics. But, unlike McCullers, Smith never lost her vision of personal and

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sarily.

cultural wholeness, nor stopped searching for "how to make into a related whole the split pieces of the human experience." This vision gave her hope for change. It made her into not only a writer but a radical and brought her into conflict with her whole culture. When she wrote, she put her life on the line. Her house was burned three times. But she proceeded to develop not only an anti-racist but a feminist analysis, seeing and establishing connections among the culture's various virulent forms of oppression.

Smith's analysis seems to me to proceed out of a Southern lesbian sensibility. Her main theme is repression. Influenced by Freud, she discusses the "hidden terror in the unconscious," and she traces the ways white culture built itself on lies, "A system of avoidance rites that destroyed not bodies but spirits." Her fiction gets its energy from exploring sexual taboos: *One Hour* tells the story of a doctor accused of molesting a child. *Strange Fruit* is the story of a tragic relationship between a black woman and a white man. In *Killers of the Dream* she analyzes "ghost relationships" between the races: white man/black woman, white father/unacknowledged child, white children/black "mammy," I can't help thinking she was sensitive to these because of the ghost relationships in her own life, between woman and woman, that she used *Strange Fruit* to explore obliquely.

Among them, Grimké, Smith and McCullers introduce themes and concerns that figure in later Southern lesbian writing and life: repression, the triple jeopardy of the black lesbian, the concern in both black and white work with the grotesque, the need for a political understanding to preserve life and sanity, and awareness (in Smith, at least) of the

# One-Straw Revolution

*for Mab and the Dragon*

*Scattering straw maintains soil structure and enriches the earth so that prepared fertilizer becomes unnecessary. This, of course, is connected with non-cultivation. My fields may be the only ones in Japan which have not been plowed in 20 years, and the quality of the soil improves with each season . . . the surface layer, rich in humus, has become enriched to a depth of four inches during these years.*

– Masanobu Fukuoka, *The One-Straw Revolution*

It's traditional to talk revolution:  
men have been doing it  
for years. This year we  
have been listening. We have seen  
too many of our friends die  
for being dark, or poor, or loving.  
We know we may be next, any day.  
And so we listen, and in the streets  
we hear old mills grinding pain  
into the taste of blood.

There's a formula for revolution:  
first you choose a flag, and then you die  
a hero in the streets. Only the color  
of the banner changes. My favorite  
was the green. You remember.  
That was the different battle, the one  
to feed the world. Brave new plants  
would blossom in the fields  
and children would grow sleek  
as new rice.

That was a lifetime ago. Now  
we understand the old plants are lost,  
the new seed cannot be saved. Each year  
the hybrids must be bought,  
and machines to plant and harvest,  
and chemicals to burn the ground.  
It was all designed that way:  
Ford tractors and DuPont mud,  
mainlining efficiency and poison.  
Machines need room to grow,  
so small fields become large:  
the hedges are removed. Weeds and birds disappear,  
tractors and wind move the earth at will.  
People too are surplus. They go  
to the cities to make more,  
and on the streets  
little girls make what they can  
of life before they die.

This year the talk is revolution,  
a quick shot to save the world.  
This year we are listening.

We want to believe this time  
it will be different. This time  
the change will last  
beyond the killing. Dreaming  
in the night, I remember  
they have done this before, and  
it has never changed enough.

I hear there are women in the west  
teaching their children to eat  
cactus, and in the east  
an old man is building  
a world of straw. I think  
there are worse things than growing  
old and poor and dark,  
worse things than loving  
straws before the wind.

On opposite ends of the country you  
my friends are plotting revolution.  
In the west you spent your day  
showing one more person how to live  
a little out of line. Years ago  
you kissed me and I walked out  
further than you could go, but you  
caught up with wonder.

And you in the class  
are teaching poems and novels  
and how to listen to what isn't  
said, and how to say it. You heard me  
into being, and still do.  
With you I have learned  
we don't always know what  
we have planted or how  
the harvest will come; But I know  
we are making a new land.

You in the office, you in the class,  
I in the hills, each of us  
in her own garden, we will work  
by the moon, by the month and year.  
We will be slow and strong  
as the moon pulling on the grain.  
We will grow darker and tougher  
and bitter as weeds pulling strength  
from deep roots; we will bloom the colors  
of all flags, and live as long  
as we can.

Down in the garden  
I am talking to the spiders.  
Eat well, spin healthy webs. I hear  
there are locusts coming.

This is how we make a revolution  
that lasts: Do nothing  
that is not necessary. Trust the weeds.  
Avoid the quick fix. Lay down one straw  
and another, and keep on living.

– Catherine Risingflame Moirai

interrelatedness of oppressions. Angelina Grimké died in 1958, “flattened” and “crushed” — to borrow Hull’s description. Lillian Smith died in 1964, in the midst of an energy for social change that was sweeping the South and that later would bring change to the rest of the country. It is from this burst of liberating energy, unleashed by black Southerners who said “no” to white racist ways, that the second generation of Southern lesbian writing emerges.

## The '60s and '70s

**T**he '60s brought what Grimké, Smith and McCullers had needed desperately: a feminist analysis of a sexist society that gave lesbians support and a basis for self-respect. As Sara Evans shows in her recent book *Personal Politics*, feminism first burst forth in the urban centers — New York, Chicago, San Francisco, Washington — but its roots were in the Southern Civil Rights Movement. There white women gained skills and self-respect (especially from examples set by Southern black women) but were denied roles commensurate with those skills by the male leadership as the New Left exited the South and took on Vietnam. In 1967 New Left women in Chicago pulled out to form the first autonomous women’s group working solely on women’s issues. By the next year this feminist movement had spread to New York and other major cities. In 1969 gay people rioted against police in Greenwich Village and the gay movement took off too. Lesbians gradually emerged in and out of women’s and gay liberation. An autonomous lesbian-feminist movement and analysis developed as lesbians began to define themselves, working not only on broadly based feminist issues, but also on rediscovering, extending and preserving a culture nearly obliterated by centuries of misogyny and homophobia.

Little of this took place in the South, but Southern emigrants to Northern and Western cities helped create this emerging lesbian-feminist analysis and culture. Like black people, lesbians — both white and black — had left the South in large numbers looking for increased freedom and safety. Rita Mae Brown’s *Rubyfruit Jungle*, a much-loved lesbian novel of the early '70s, traces the archetypal journey from the deep South to New York. Her departure is precipitated by the “apple-cheeked, ex-marine sergeant” dean of women at Florida State, who accuses the first-year woman of seducing “numerous innocents in the dorms,” various black women and men, and the president of Tri-Delta sorority. Rita Mae’s departure is probably characteristic of many other Southern lesbians who found themselves no longer welcome at home.

In the cities to which they migrated — especially New York and San Francisco — Southern lesbians such as Ti-Grace Atkinson, Rita Mae Brown, Pat Parker and Judy Grahn benefited from and helped give birth to the emerging movement. In New York Atkinson and Brown both bolted from the local National Organization for Women. Atkinson left protesting NOW’s hierarchical organization and soon helped form a group called the Feminists that went a long way toward articulating male oppression of women. She was also concerned with clarifying and purifying

women’s relationships with one another. The Feminists, influenced by socialism, tried to develop an egalitarian process within their collective. This dual focus — on men’s oppression of women and on women’s “lateral oppression” of one another — is characteristic of much lesbian-feminist analysis.

When Brown left New York NOW, the issue was its treatment of lesbians, and she went on with others in New York and Washington to found lesbian separatism. With Barbara Love, Sidney Abbott and March Hoffman, she wrote *The Woman Identified Woman*, articulating why lesbianism is a feminist issue, why feminists cannot exclude lesbians from the women’s movement. As she wrote: “What is a lesbian? A lesbian is the rage of all women condensed to the point of explosion. She is the woman who, often beginning at an extremely early age, acts in accordance with her inner compulsion to be a more complete and freer human being than her society — perhaps then, but certainly later — cares to allow her. . . . It is the primacy of women relating to women, of women creating a new consciousness of and with each other, which is at the heart of women’s liberation, and the basis for the cultural revolution.”

That women can and do love each other, that this love is an extension of loving self-respect, should not be so revolutionary an idea. But in patriarchal society it is. Brown went on to put the manifesto into practice, moving to Washington and forming, with 11 other lesbians, the Furies collective, a “bolshevik cell” of lesbians working together for revolutionary change — living together, sharing chores equally, sleeping on mattresses on the floor in the same room. In the first issue of *The Furies* newspaper, Ginny Bernson announced the group’s intentions: “We want to build a movement in this country which can effectively stop the violent, sick, oppressive acts of male supremacy. We want to build a movement which can make all people free.”

It was a decade of manifestoes, of huge intentions. Within two years the Furies had dissolved, split internally by class differences, but also by the magnitude of the problems they had taken on. “Change,” Brown reflected later, “is not a convulsion of history but the slow, steady push of people over decades.” When the Furies disbanded, many of its members went on to contribute to the growing network of lesbian presses, newsletters and journals that I stumbled across in 1977. This lesbian-feminist “cultural revolution” is the “slow, steady push” that survived the convulsions of the late '60s and early '70s.

“Women’s art is politics, the means to change women’s minds,” June Arnold explained in an interview in *Sinister Wisdom* in 1976. Feminism, like Marxism, seeks to ally art and politics. And lesbian-feminists soon realized that, to create our own networks to subvert patriarchal culture, we would have to seize some of the means of producing books. Southerners helped create a network of feminist presses and journals that emerged in the mid-'70s. For example, North Carolina novelist June Arnold, with Park Bowman, founded Daughters, Inc., in Vermont in 1972 to specialize in feminist novels. (In its eight-year history, Daughters published many books by Southern lesbians.)

Arnold summarizes her sense of lesbian literature gained from reading manuscripts submitted to Daughters: it is “a collective genius, coming from one woman’s poem, another’s comment, a scene from a chapter of a novel.

I think we are all in the process of writing together."

Meanwhile, out in San Francisco, four lesbian poets set out to revive "a militant tradition of feminist writing on the west coast." Two of these women, Pat Parker and Judy Grahn, were refugees from Texas. The white lesbian, Grahn, explains of her black lesbian friend:

*Our lives are parallel in some ways. We are both from the Southwest. . . . We both had ugly tin roofs and no room to wave your arms, in a country vast with space. We were both miniature cowboys in boots and big imaginations. We knew it was impossible for us to enter the world of poetry . . . and consequently we invented another world of poetry and became peers, and leaders, and friends.*

The world of poetry they invented, the language they reclaimed, is the "common language" of the "common woman," not the highly obscure and allusive language of much of modern poetry. In one of Grahn's poems,

*the common woman is as common as the best of bread and will rise.*

It is a language that can state the truths of women's lives with sometimes brutal, always loving simplicity. With it Grahn and Parker helped reshape the meanings of "lesbian" and "woman." As Grahn proclaimed at the beginning of her collected poems:

*look at me as if you have never seen a woman before  
I have red, red hands and much bitterness*

The poems of Grahn and Parker make it clear that a lesbian is primarily a woman who loves other women; in a world where women are not valued, are often maimed and killed by men, it is a love that brings great vulnerability and great anger. Grahn and Parker both wrote long, wonderful autobiographical poems out of this vulnerable anger and love. Grahn's "A Woman Talking to Death" rose out of her seeing a young man killed in a wreck on the San Francisco bridge, hit by a black man in a car when his motorcycle stalled. "I'm afraid," said the man whose car killed the boy, "stay with me, / please don't go, stay with me, be / my witness." Grahn says, "I'll be your / witness — later." Afraid, she leaves ("as I have left so many of my lovers") and later finds out that white cops beat the black man and that white courts sentenced him to 20 years "instead of life." This experience leads her to meditate on how she would bear witness to her own interrogation:

*have you ever kissed other women?*

*Yes, many, some of the finest women I know, I have kissed, women who were lonely, women I didn't know and didn't want to, but kissed because that was a way to say yes we are still alive and loveable, though separate, women who recognized a loneliness in me, women who were hurt, I confess to kissing the top of a 55 year old woman's head in the snow in Boston, who was hurt more deeply than I have ever been hurt, and I wanted her as a very few people have wanted me — I wanted her and me to own and control and run the city we live in, to staff the*

*hospital I knew would mistreat her, to drive the transportation system that had betrayed her, to patrol the streets controlling the men who would murder or disfigure or disrupt us, not accidentally with machines, but on purpose, because we are not allowed on the street alone.*

Pat Parker's "Womanslaughter" is a similar meditation on the murder of her sister by her sister's husband. The literary inspiration for the poem was Parker's reading of Grahn's "A Woman Talking to Death," a poem Grahn says her friend Parker "understood before I did." Parker's poem rages against the murderer, her brother-in-law, who got off with one year for "manslaughter" since his was a "crime of passion;" but the poem spirals out to include the lives of all her sisters:

*Men cannot rape their wives.  
Men cannot kill their wives.  
They passion them to death.*

*. . .  
I have gained many sisters.  
And if one is beaten,  
or raped, or killed,  
I will not come in mourning black.  
I will not pick the right flowers.  
I will not celebrate her death  
& it will matter not  
if she's Black or White —  
if she loves women or men.  
I will come with my many sisters  
and decorate the streets  
with the innards of those  
brothers in womenslaughter.*

Gone is the lesbian-as-grotesque, the lesbian isolated and alone. In Grahn and Parker the lesbian moves in the strength, the power, sometimes in the despair, of her love for other women.

Parker's poems also explore her identity as a black woman, a black lesbian. Gloria Hull wrote of Angelina Grimké: "Black, woman, lesbian, there was no space in which she could move." Pat Parker's poetry shows her creating her own space, empowering herself as a black person, a lesbian, a woman. She claims the strength of "the black woman . . . child of the sun, daughter of dark . . . survivor."

Parker also speaks to white lesbians who oppress her: "SISTER! Your foot's smaller, / but it's still on my neck." Advice "for the white person who wants to know how to be my friend": "The first thing you do is forget that i'm Black. / Second, you must never forget that i'm Black." Parker is a woman who must deal with multiple vulnerabilities: a black family that talks of "bulldaggers;" white lovers who evoke bitter memories of racism. Grahn's and Parker's poems show lesbians clearly: to hide our anger from one another, to hide our vulnerability to one another, is to deny our strength.

Meanwhile, in the South in 1976, two lesbians in Charlotte — Catherine Nicholson and Harriet Desmoines — began *Sinister Wisdom*, a magazine that was to become the main vehicle for lesbian writing in the late 1970s. The

writing that emerged in *Sinister Wisdom* was a response to Catherine and Harriet's call for lesbian vision, "that of the lesbian or lunatic who embraces her boundary/criminal status, with the aim of creating a new species in a new time/space."

Brown, Arnold, Harris, Parker, Grahn, Nicholson — all are Southerners. But they were not acting or writing as *Southerners* in the late '60s and '70s as a new movement emerged. They were lesbians first and always (except probably for Parker, who was black and lesbian), working to give birth to themselves and to a lesbian movement, a women's culture, a revolution, a "new time and space."

## Beyond the Pale

**I**n the months it is taking me to write this, life intervenes: Ronald Reagan is elected president; the Republicans take the Senate; the Heritage Foundation urges revival of the House Un-American Activities Committee; Strom Thurmond suggests repeal of the Voting Rights Act of 1965; six Klansmen and Nazis are acquitted of the murders of five communists in Greensboro, although the shootings were recorded by four television stations. Things are speeding up; events take on new urgency. But, as I also know, it's been here all along.

Southern lesbian writing now seems to me to be in a third stage. Some of these writers are staying home, dealing consciously with Southernness from the lesbian-feminist perspective developed outside the South, combining it with an anti-racist analysis that grows out of a close examination of Southern culture. The lesbian-feminist analysis emerged from a decade of multiple liberations. We will apply it in a decade of growing repression. If lesbians in the past two decades sought to create a "new species in a new time and space," Southern lesbians today take a hard look at the old species, the old time and space. Today I choose to stay South out of a conviction that there is no "better" place to be. This is home; I had better deal with it.

Much of the focus for this self-consciously Southern lesbian literature has come from *Feminary: A Feminist Journal for the South*. Four years ago, three friends (Susan Ballinger, Minnie Bruce Pratt and Cris South) and I sat down on a screened porch at Yaupon Beach, North Carolina, to clarify our new purpose: "*Feminary*, one of the oldest surviving feminist publications in the Southeast, announces a shift in focus from a local feminist magazine to a lesbian-feminist journal for the South. . . . As Southerners, as lesbians, and as women, we need to explore with others how our lives fit into a region about which we have great ambivalences — to share our anger and our love."

*Feminary* had a long feminist history, beginning in 1969 as a newsletter when the energy of the women's liberation movement hit Chapel Hill. First called *Feminist Liberation Newsletter*, it bore the marks of influence by the Furies' newsletter — "The Furies Collective was a religion to us in Chapel Hill between 1971 and 1974," explains former *Feminary* member Elizabeth Knowlton. After collective members attended a "Women in Print" conference in Nebraska in 1976, the group decided to turn the newsletter into a journal. Gradually, most members of the original

and expanding collective either came out as lesbians or dropped out or moved, until eventually the collective was down to just two full-time members — Susan Ballinger and me (I had joined the year before). It was clear to us that *Feminary* then suffered from a lack of focus: we were putting out an amorphously "feminist" local journal for we-didn't-know-who, never saying clearly that we were all lesbians doing the editing. About that time, Nicholson and Desmoines decided to move *Sinister Wisdom* from Charlotte to Nebraska. They assured us that there was a wealth of lesbian writing waiting to be published. So, taking a collective deep breath, *Feminary* came out, both as Southern and lesbian. Last year Deborah Giddens also joined the collective.

The first "new" *Feminary* contained a long article I had written on "Southern Women Writing: Toward a Literature of Wholeness." In it, I took a hard look at the Southern literary tradition I had grown up in, how it was limited and why, and the influence it had had on me. The heart of my analysis was an explanation of the hold of the grotesque on Southern literature and life, an explanation based on my own lesbian-outsiderhood. "Freaks in Southern 'Gothic' literature," I wrote, "reflect a process basic to the small-town Southern life I knew. This community life was confined by the narrow boundaries of what it felt was permitted or 'speakable.' The sharply drawn parameters of 'normalcy' created its opposite, the grotesque. If some people must be 'normal,' then some people must be different from normal, or freak. In reality, everyone is a freak, because no human can cram her-himself into the narrow

**T**oday I choose to stay South out of a conviction that there is no "better" place to be. This is home; I had better deal with it.

space which is the state of normalcy. But all have to pretend that they fit, and those closet freaks choose the most vulnerable among them to punish for their own secret alienation, to bear the burden of strangeness." I went on to explain the necessity to patriarchal politics of the grotesque hold on the imagination: to keep people in their places. At the end of the article, I called for a new Southern feminist literature of wholeness. Since that article, the lesbian part of that new literature has begun to emerge.

In addition to *Feminary*, *Womanwrites*, a Southeastern lesbian writers' conference, has helped bring lesbian writers together to shape a new literature. First held in 1979, *Womanwrites* will meet this summer for the third time;

I am sure that this year, as in the past, the gathering will show an increased power in individual writers as well as in the group as a whole. But thus far, the “we” of Southern lesbians at Womanwriters has been white: no Third-World women attended either year. As Southern lesbians, we all grew up in a segregated culture, and we have not yet found the ways to bridge those chasms – of anger, fear, suspicion, guilt and the great sadness beneath. But it is becoming clear to those white sisters among us that, as we begin to deal with our own racism and the racism of other white people, we will become more trustworthy to our darker sisters, from whatever distance they choose to deal with us. Womanwriters III has in fact set a high priority on meeting racism and anti-Semitism head-on. A statement by the conference’s anti-racist task force announces, in part: “Southern-born or not, we have been raised to hate in many different ways – to hate darkness or Jewishness, and always to hate ourselves as women. Anti-racist work at Womanwriters is an opportunity to us to begin to develop a complex analysis of how these issues appear in our lives and writing, and to begin the work of overcoming these divisions.”

Black lesbians, born Southern or not, continue, like Pat Parker, to express their anger over the racism they encounter among white lesbians. For example, Lorraine Bethel, Georgia-born black lesbian poet, rages in an article titled “WHAT CHOU MEAN WE, WHITE GIRL? OR THE CULLUD LESBIAN FEMINIST DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE (DEDICATED TO THE PROPOSITION THAT ALL WOMEN ARE NOT EQUAL, I.E., IDENTICALLY OPPRESSED).” She writes: “I bought a sweater at a yard sale from a white-skinned (as opposed to Anglo-Saxon) woman. When wearing it I am struck by the smell – it reeks of a soft, privileged life without stress, sweat or struggle. When wearing it I often think to myself: this sweater smells of a comfort, a way of being in the world I have never known in my life, and never will. It’s the same feeling I experience walking through Bonwit Teller’s and seeing white-skinned women buying trinkets that cost enough to support the elderly Black woman elevator operator, who stands on her feet all day taking them up and down, for the rest of her life. It is moments/infinities of conscious pain like these that make me want to cry/kill/roll my eyes suck my teeth hand on my hip scream at so-called radical white lesbian-feminist ‘WHAT CHOU MEAN WE, WHITE GIRL?’”

Or as Lou, a black lesbian-feminist separatist in South Carolina, writes:

*once i tried to  
identify  
with everyone else  
trying to beat me down  
no thanks*

The divisions created by centuries of racism and class inequity are at least as deep as those arising from centuries of homophobia. For the lesbian today, writing must be rage, writing must be clarity, writing must be challenge and healing.

We must claim our sadness and our separations. Black lesbian Ann Allen Shockley’s writing goes far toward doing that. Shockley is a librarian at Fisk University; she has devoted much of her life to black scholarship and is the

author of *Black American Authors* and *A Handbook of Black Librarianship*. Only in the past four years has she published lesbian fiction: *Loving Her*, a novel about an interracial lesbian relationship, and *The Black and White of It*, the first collection of short stories about lesbians by an Afro-American writer. One of Shockley’s characters, a 40-year-old white lesbian college teacher, looks out a window: “Loneliness flooded her like the bone-chilling spectre of the damned.” *The Black and White of It* explores the loneliness that comes from our various separations: black from white, straight from homosexual, old from young, old dyke from new lesbian. Shockley has lived in the South most of her life. She writes more out of sorrow than of anger, from the pain of separation and the wish for a different wholeness.

Much lesbian writing over the past decade has been a search for transformation, for the healing of these separations. When a woman comes out as a lesbian, she has a tremendous sense of the power of personal change, of the breaking into new worlds, uncharted terrain. As black lesbian writer Doris Davenport (born in Georgia but living in Los Angeles) explains:

*every day i repeatedly  
give birth to me.  
sometimes prematurely  
sometimes stillborn  
sometimes in the morning  
or later on.  
not just once a day.  
sometimes as many as ten.  
after a while, i’m having  
reincarnations  
less messy, but they feel the same.  
one day i had me  
300 times, each time different  
except the last when i  
became what i was at first  
to provide some continuity  
and point of reference.*

Susan Wood-Thompson, Texas-born lesbian poet, describes one such transformation in her long, moving autobiographical poem, “Trying to See Myself Without a Mirror.” For Susan, it was a search for herself, for sanity and for other women that led into the locked ward of a mental hospital and attempts at suicide and out again to bring back the knowledge:

*The bond of suffering  
is that we know  
we begin with what we have  
and do not measure each other  
against a perfect husk  
that never burst with pain.*

Minnie Bruce Pratt, in another long and beautiful poem, “The Segregated Heart,” traces her own transformation from her Alabama girlhood through marriage to divorce and the loss of her children because of her lesbianism: “to leave where I could not stay, to bend myself to change was to leave where I also loved.” Lesbian poems, like lesbian lives, are best when they operate on the mysterious edge where life continually dies and is born.

It is against the background of the natural world — of shifting afternoons and days and seasons and years — that the lesbian writer searches for transformation. This is especially true of the *Southern* lesbian writer, whose writing is also influenced by Southern landscape. Natural images in her poetry reflect the perception that “patriarchy” is based on abstract thinking and living that kills, because it fears fluidity, change, emotions, nature, life, the female. As Susan Griffin’s book *Women and Nature* demonstrates, the male impulse to conquer and tame nature and to conquer and tame the female are the same. The lesbian also identifies nature with the female, but it is — or can be — with the reverence that a woman can feel for another woman’s body. Melissa Cannon, Tennessee lesbian poet, writes in “Grand Tour”:

*Your eyes lose themselves  
among rich curves, vivid petals —  
arc of apricot,  
blush of plush  
coral of shell lips,  
the blood wave’s crimson*

*You come at last to a small cave  
mountain shadowed.  
It is guarded by a priestess  
hiding under a velvet hood.*

*Do not lower your eyes.*

The short stories of Diana Rivers, a lesbian born in New York but living on a women’s land trust in Arkansas, show the power that comes when women speak as the land. For much of English literature, the male hierarchy that put man over woman also put spirit over nature and reason over feeling. It is nothing less than revolution to reverse that order. Faulkner’s stories are full of little old ladies trapped and crazy inside dusty houses, while the men are out conquering The Land.

In Diana Rivers’ stories, women have taken back the wilderness. Women are the wilderness. In “Hawk,” the last of her *Sister Stories*, an old woman looks back over her 40 years in Arkansas:

*When we first came here we were all so different.  
Mira had five children. Omi had never been with a  
man. Some of us grew up poor and some rich, some  
came from the country and some from the city.  
There were those who cried because it felt good and  
those who never cried at all. We thought we’d love  
each other because we were all women — but oh what  
fights we had. We struggled over everything. Political  
struggles, personal struggles, sometimes both to-  
gether, shouting and crying. . . . So much anger.  
At one time it got so bad I left. I was sure I’d never  
come back. We’ve grown more tolerant or lazier.  
We don’t feel so responsible for each other’s virtues.”*

If knowledge of the natural world helps transform lesbian lives, the lesbian’s own shift in consciousness also transforms the Southern landscape. Minnie Bruce Pratt has told me how reading Senate reports on Klan activities in Alabama in the late 1800s near her home town has given her a horrifyingly different view of the familiar terrain of childhood. Cris South is at work on a novel about a

## Southern Gothic

*for Carson McCullers and Bertha Harris of  
Fayetteville, NC*

In my room are six windows  
and a mirror big enough to walk through.  
Then I see myself sit on a yellow bed and beyond  
one window open into the green cavern of a tree.  
In this mirror I have watched my face twist  
with sorrow dangerous as a nest of coral snakes,  
my body writhe with a lover, our arms,  
our thighs silver in the moonlight, like eels  
hurrying over a dewy meadow to the sea.

All the while the tree in the mirror trembled  
with veins of ice or knotted itself into  
fists of white flowers. Now berries are scattered  
like red nipples over the yellowing skin of its leaves.

It is time for me to stand and look with a practiced  
eye

through the old glass that wavers behind me.  
In this window I see the customary street, the lines  
and fences that have caught the young woman  
next door.

She lives like a rose-of-sharon tree set in an iron  
pot.

I fear like her to be contained, but I know  
at least two women before me in this town  
have made an art of being strange, wandered  
like wolves in its streets hunting for the wildness  
hung between the starched clothes stiff on the line.

Like them I look with my eyes’ mirrors to see  
the dwarfed housewife of forty years in the dawn  
calling her cats to her like a gypsy queen,  
the ponderous woman with elegant hands in  
the sun

who roots up the last rose from her lawn  
to make a jungle with fern and banana trees,  
at the night end of the street the ghost of two girls  
whose mouths kiss and separate and join again.

I see myself stand on the steps, the bearded lady  
my hairy legs ready to run wild over the road,  
living like wisteria, gnarled and twisted,  
trailing with a lover down the steps  
like two purple meteors of wisteria bloom  
while to themselves neighbors murmur  
how peculiar, how queer.

— Minnie Bruce Pratt  
September 11, 1980

**I** think the next step for Southern lesbian writing will be to explore the connections between seeing the world differently and making the world different.

lesbian who lives in the country – Klan country – doing anti-Klan work. Catherine Risingflame Moirai's poem "Taking Back My Night" traces her own shifting view of the landscape of night and day, from her early fear of "the dark" – which she comes to realize includes the "dark races" and herself as lesbian and woman – to a terror of male "enlightenment":

*Tonight I will walk in darkness  
feeling my way home  
by the curve of the earth  
feeling my way to sleep  
by the curve of a woman.  
If I wake in the night  
she will soothe me.  
If the men in white come  
she will not desert me. . . .  
I am still learning to walk  
where I am afraid.*

With such a change in consciousness, the Southern lesbian writer does begin to move "beyond the pale." In Pratt's "Death Row" the voices of the dead speak to us from the fields:

*Child, what have you been up to while we  
were trying to keep body and soul together?  
But never mind that now. Here's what you must do:  
Tie a red flannel string around your waist  
for strength. Plant your roots  
at the dark of the moon. Remember your past,  
and ours. Always remember who you are.  
Don't let the men fool you about the ways of life  
even if blood must sign your name.*

In the past four years, a strong Southern lesbian-feminist literature has begun to emerge. Those of us writing it have moved from a powerful sense of our transformations as they fit into natural rhythms, to seeing the world in a different way. What's next? I wish I knew. I think the next step for Southern lesbian writing will be to explore the connections between seeing the world differently and making the world different.

We cannot disconnect our lives from what will happen in American society in the coming decade. Over the past 20 years, American society has developed clear models for personal and social transformation. First the revolutionary energy of black people in America again erupted, as a generation of black people threw off white definitions to see themselves as beautiful and to move in that power; with the gift of their example, women and homosexuals did the same. All along there were those who feared the power of these transformations: the knowledge that when some change, all must change. These forces today fight to keep the world static. But we will not go back. □

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## Resources and Bibliography

Unfortunately, much of the writing discussed in this article isn't easy to find in bookstores. So, for those interested in reading more, here's how to find the lesbian-feminist writers' works:

- Azalea*, a journal published for and by Third-World lesbians, 306 Lafayette Avenue, Brooklyn, NY 11238.  
*Cat's Eye*, edited by Melissa Cannon, 930 Kirkwood Avenue, Nashville, TN 37204; subscriptions \$5.50/year.  
*Conditions*, P.O. Box 56, Van Brunt Station, Brooklyn, NY 11215; subscriptions \$8.00/year. *Conditions Five: The Black Women's Issue* available for \$3.00 plus \$.75 postage.

*Feminary: A Feminist Journal for the South*, Box 954, Chapel Hill, NC 27514; subscriptions \$6.50/year (three issues); back issues \$3.00.

*Lesbian Poetry*, edited by Elly Bulkin and Joan Larkin, Persephone Press, P.O. Box 1222, Watertown, MA 02172.

*Sinister Wisdom* (A Magazine of Images and Ideas for the Lesbian Imagination in All Women), P.O. Box 600, Amherst, MA 01004; subscriptions \$7.50/year. (Beth Hodges edited two special issues on lesbian literature, No. 2 and 13; each is available for \$3.00 plus \$.75 postage.)

Brown, Rita Mae, *Plain Brown Rapper* (Baltimore: Diana Press, 1976).

Davenport, Doris, *It's Like This*, self-published; available for \$3.00 from 1316 S. Highland Ave., Apt. 7, Los Angeles, CA 90019.

Grahn, Judy, *The Work of a Common Woman: The Collected Poetry of Judy Grahn* (Oakland: Diana Press, 1978).

Parker, Pat, *The Collected Poetry of Pat Parker* (Oakland: Diana Press, 1978).

Pratt, Minnie Bruce, *The Sound of One Fork* (Durham, NC: Night Heron Press, 1981). Self-published. Available for \$2.75 plus \$.50 postage from *Feminary*, Box 954, Chapel Hill, NC 27514.

Rivers, Diana, *Sister Stories*, unpublished manuscript.

Segrest, Mab, *Living in a House I Do Not Own: The Hurdle Mill Poems* (Durham, NC: Night Heron Press, 1981). Self-published. Available for \$2.50 plus \$.50 postage from *Feminary*, Box 954, Chapel Hill, NC 27514.

Shockley, Ann Allen, *The Black and White of It* (Naiad Press, 1980). Available for \$5.95 from Naiad, P.O. Box 10543, Tallahassee, FL 32302.

Wood-Thompson, Susan, *Crazy Quilt: Poems by Susan Wood-Thompson* (Washington, D.C.: Crane Books, 1980). Self-published. Available for \$3.00 plus \$.50 postage from 2023 Patterson Road, Hyattsville, MD 20782.

# KATE

by Barbara Angle

All her life, the woman had seen the mutilation of coal miners.

They don't talk much about what did happen but rather what might have happened...if... say an inch to the right, maybe to the left. Up. Down. What if, and if only. Thank God and Amen.

And she would wonder what went on in a man's mind as his body was ground up and spit out by some cannibalistic machine. She'd imagine the agony ripping nerves; flesh screaming. And with a shake, she would try to throw it off, to put her mind elsewhere. But just as her tongue keeps probing the cavity in her jaw tooth until it agonizes, she can't release the thought . . . wondering. She is a coal miner.

One minute she is maneuvering the shuttle car to the face, concentrating on a smooth turn, the move of the machine, sighting a man who may be ahead, or an obstacle. The continuous miner groans in the next cut. The other buggy whines its way to the feeder. She feels content. "Happy" would be too radical a word. But things aren't bad . . . with the day, the job, the life. She drives the buggy into the break, watching the front for obstacles, checking the base of the rib for power lines, sighting the turn.

An awareness of agony on the periphery tells her something is radically wrong. Turning her head, she sees the ripping flesh of her right arm, the snapping bones. This isn't happening, the woman thinks. The canopy is crushing her arm. It moves towards her head. She is going to die.

The sudden alkali taste of death fills her mouth. Her system is not registering true pain, but it has gone crazy with the shock of torn nerves, bones systematically shattered. A nightmare of scarlet and black moves towards her head.

Animal sounds tear at her throat. She listens with the curious detachment of a spectator. Suddenly, it's not happening anymore. The buggy has stopped. She is not going to die. But the rest of life has been dissected by that span of seconds.

"Oh my God! Somebody help. Joe . . . somebody . . . Aieeeeeee. . ."

Her keening cuts across the suddenly still mine section, all machinery unexplainably stopped. From the other side of the canopy her right arm protrudes at an angle designed by neither God nor contortionist. Abstractly, she notices that the elbow bone which hangs loosely from the torn jacket looks like the knob end of a chicken bone, only larger.

"Oh, my God!" Voices echo her screams in disbelieving horror. "The woman's cut all to hell. Earl! My God, Earl . . . we gotta do something."

The crew assembles and disassembles. Mange gags, and turning his back, heaves his lunch. Voices and people are thick but nothing is happening. They are trying to find where the power has been kicked to get the machinery off her arm, which is somewhere on the other side of the canopy post. She is not quite sure where. Torn flesh and bone fragments are visible through what was the sleeve of her hunting jacket. But she feels the arm else-

where. Her senses position it high, shoulder high against the rib. But she knows that is a phantom limb . . . gone. Its ghost will ache in the damp. The specter will try to reach . . . experience. That's what she's read. That's what the amputees say.

"Did you check the transformer to see if the power's kicked there?" She can't tell who is speaking.

"We did. It's not there."

"How about the tricycle?"

"Bob was down there. He says no."

"Christ! Maybe a bad splice. Could take hours to get her out."

Joe presses a finger against the artery in her neck, grounding it against the collarbone. "We're going to get you out of here, baby. You'll be okay. We'll get you right out."

"I'm not pinned, Joe. It's gone. Why don't you just take it from one side and me from the other."

His eyes flatten at the thought. "Shh, now. We'll get you out." And turning, he screams in a voice that belongs to another man, "You guys get a jack. Get something, for God's sake."

For my sake, she thinks, settling into his arms. His caplight is the only illumination. They rest in a void of panic.

"There's nothing on the jittney." Leroy speaks in the midst of a sprint across the section, looking for something . . . somewhere. Everyone moves swiftly. No one does anything. Everyone tries. To stand still is to do nothing.

"Goddam!" Joe cusses, an extremity. "We've told them about bringing that mantrip in without a jack. Just a goddam good thing it's on section." He grinds his teeth, looking at her. It is hard for any of them to stand the sight of her body warped between the machine and the coal. It is hard for her.

"Maybe we can get the power on. But what'll we do? You don't know what the hell's wrong. The buggy could go the wrong way. It could take her head off."

Dipperlip is there, two slate bars in hand.

"You gotta be kidding," Joe says. "That thing weighs 18 tons."

"We gotta try. We gotta do something."

Dipper hands one bar to Marvin, the other bolter, and the two men insert the steel between the canopy and the rip. They pry, bars bending beneath their body weight. Tears and sweat mingle on Marvin's face, streaking lines gorged by labor, marking the dust.

The machine quivers, then slides some little way from the rib. Hardly believing, Kate looks at Joe but he is concentrating on the buggy, willing it to move. Dipper strains, trying to eliminate the laws of gravity. Prayers are spit from between clinched teeth; eyes bulge with the effort.

"Now, in the hour of our need. His will be done . . . the shorn lamb . . ." Shorn, Kate thinks. That's me.

The opening above her arm widens and she takes the bloody bit in her left hand and moves it upward, seeking an out. The buggy moves some little more. The flesh slips into the space. Free! She falls back onto Joe's arms, the limb somehow attached.

For a moment, she feels a sinking. Unconscious? No. It is just the sense of relief spreading through the crew that reaches to her. "The stretcher," Leroy says. "Let's get her the hell out of here."

From the backboard, Kate can see only dimly. Someone has removed her caplight and hardhat, which is another whole scene eliminated. Voices come to her darkly, through the passing light thrown by another. Shadows accentuate the unreality of a scene which must just be happening in her head anyways. Hell! She was indestructible. She'd spent the better part of some 20 years proving that. This is only a dream, shifting illusions of black and grey. Voices down a long tunnel.

Except for the pain. Her nerve ends have begun to scream. Torn flesh protests. Too much, she thinks. Too much. Pain builds on pain. Shock recedes. Reality and illusion are quickly separated. She lifts something. A fragment of bloody bone, and closes her eyes again quickly. She can't stand the thought of being a victim.

"Easy now. Easy." She is lowered. Joe's hand compresses the artery, following every move, each dip and sway as they edge the stretcher into the mantrip. Wood clammers on metal and she is in. Dipperlip climbs to one side of her, his eyes brilliant in the coal-grimed face. And Joe is there, his ever-present hand on the jugular.

From the driver's compartment, Leroy calls back, "You ready?"

"Everything's okay here. You got clearance?"

"Tracks are open the whole way out."

"Let 'er roll."

The jittney clackets into life. The ride is fast and cuts whiz by in the blackness. Kate figures they could get outside in 10 minutes or so going this pace. The men's silence also confirms the reality of the moment. Nothing less than a crisis would silence the horseplay and jiving that marks each trip outside, every escape from the blackness that is their working life.

Dipper shifts restlessly, eyeing the bloody attachment that was Kate's arm, then looking quickly away. Joe is quiet but Kate can feel his heart in the arterial pressure, the firm touch. His heart is real through pain.

Such love starts the tears as Kate remembers the real victim of this accident. Her voice is hollow, holding nothing. "Jesse! My God! Oh, my God . . .

what's goin' to happen to my baby. I want my baby."

Joe pushes the hair from her face. "Shhhh, now. You don't need to be worryin' about that. Your baby will be all right."

"Jesus," Dipper mutters.

"But you don't understand . . . I need my baby."

Shock, the two men are thinking, almost relieved. Their first aid training has told them to expect this. A person may talk quite lucidly and still be in shock. A woman wailing for her baby when she has her arm tore off. That's crazy . . . shock. "Something on the tracks up there. Thought he called for clearance." Kate feels Joe's hand tense on her collarbone. She hears the screams from the front half of the jittney. "Injured man! Clear the tracks. Ignorant sons of bitches. Get the fuck out of the way."

The vehicle hurls forward unimpeded. Whatever was there must have moved. Beside Kate, Dipper is talking. "General mine foreman . . . that damn Zanzucki. Did you see him run to move that mantrip?"

Both men are silent for the rest of the ride. A faint light creases her eyes. The pitmouth comes closer and she prays for daylight, pushes against the pain. Black becomes grey. The glare of daylight erases caplights. They are outside.

Kate closes her eyes against the sudden brightness. Brakes squeal. People gather. Confusion. Faces peer into the jittney and disappear. Old voices merge with new in the same refrain . . . "accident . . . woman . . . arm . . . don't know."

"Where in the hell is that ambulance?"

"Christ, Leroy. Give 'em time. We only called about 20 minutes ago."

"Look at that fog out there. Ain't gonna be nothin' movin' fast in this shit."

Kate opens her eyes, avoiding the faces, looking up into the sky. Sure enough, it is raining. That seems appropriate. The brightness that appeared sunlight when first leaving the pitmouth is a thick greyish mist, weeping steady rain.

A new voice cuts into her reverie . . . Lester, the company safety man.

"How did it happen? Anyone see?"

No one answers.

"Well, take her into the shop."

Kate opens her eyes to study the flaking yellow paint on the jittney's interior. "Fuck day shift" is scrawled there in red chalk. "Fuck Lester," she thinks.

Murmurs have started now. "Found her wedged between the rib and the buggy."

The voice continues. ". . . cut off. Pretty damn near. She'll lose it. Conscious. Okay. Callin' for her kid though."

Who the hell else is there to call for, she thinks. The rain is cool on her face. She would have liked to linger under its ease, a request certain to be called shock.

But she is inside. The crew is still with her, jamming the small room, their hovering strangely protective. Authoritatively, Lester takes over. "Put the stretcher up on the table here. Sam, get me some scissors. I got to take a look at this."

"Where's your ambulance at, Lester?" Joe's grip tightens on her shoulder. White, a mine committeeman, has appeared from somewhere and takes her hand, squeezing it to emphasize his presence.

"Should be here. Guess this fog slowed it down. Sam, phone the emergency squad again. Find out when they left. The rest of you get out of here. Give her some breathing space."

The men filter out. Joe directs Lester's attention to the need to compress the artery. Kate looks at the man as he leaves, trying to say . . . maybe thanks. Maybe that she loves him for his caring. He trails the crew out the door.

Lester keeps hacking away at the jacket while Sam calls on the phone to the emergency squad. "Yeah. Ambulance for a girl who has her arm tore off."

Lester turns none too subtly. "Shhhh."

"Comon, Lester. I know."

He treads the verbal waters gingerly, the strain of it showing on his face. "Now, Kate, Sam was just gettin' a little carried away. We don't know that it's gone and . . . you're tough. You can handle it. We don't even know what happened yet. What did happen?"

The son of a bitch, she thinks, meeting his look and holding it for a moment. He glances confusedly back at the arm. The jacket is almost off.

"Did it throw you?"

"I guess. I don't know. It was so fast. That goddam buggy. My arm's gone." The tears are starting and Lester works quicker, somewhat flustered. "I need my baby."

"Hold on now, Kate. I almost got this off." His fumbings have a nervous cast and she glances down at the arm.

Red flesh. Prime sirloin. Unmarbled but charcoal crisp, packed with coal, lumps and dust ground into the muscle. No filet cut what with those bone fragments splintering the meat.

The supply room door flies open and she turns to see the general mine foreman. He approaches the table where she is laid. His walk indicates a maddened animal, wounded, who may attack. His eyes grab hers, then fall to the mangled limb. He looks up again in calculated horror . . . wondering. Worried. She knows his mind so well. He is trying to figure if he has covered his tracks, if this

accident can come back on him in any way. He turns suddenly and bolts out the door. She hears him:

"Get those men back in the jittney and underground." Sudden anger tears at the woman. For a moment there is no pain. She screams at his disappearing back, "You son of a bitch! The only thing you did give a damn about was your fuckin' coal."

Lester and Sam freeze, then quickly resume working over her arm.

Lester's monotone suddenly accelerates. Excitement alters the pace of hopelessness.

"Artery's still there! God knows how. Another quarter inch and it would've been gone. See it pumping. Right there, Sam. There, right behind that mess. They oughta be able to do something. . . ."

The sudden gladness in the woman is muted by the word "something." She visualizes the many crippled miners she has known, fingers gone, arms maimed, limbs frozen at strange angles. She sees old Pete, trying to position his arm to light a cigarette. Ernie, dragging a crushed foot behind him. She sees herself, feeding the baby from some preposterous position, twisted arm, bound muscles.

**A** red flashing light bounces off Sam's face, swings from wall to wall. "The ambulance," Lester says, tearing jerkily at a

blue paper package which expels a towel. As he places it over her arm, red splotches dot the surface.

"Here it is," someone yells. The renewed confusion agitates the pain. As the nerve ends regain consciousness, she feels herself sinking. It is good; the blackness inviting. Temper the wind to the shorn lamb. Kate wanders the backroads of her mind. Dying will be a secondary shadow to the present. It will not be now. Kate knows this. Nor for a long time. But in its day, death will recognize its markings on her as ashes on the forehead, coal in the pores, flecks in the lungs.

She is being moved back through the weather into a glittering interior. White-coated attendants flash across her sight. And her brother's face

comes into view. Will! Somebody has called him out of the mine and now he climbs into the vehicle beside her stretcher.

"I'm goin'." His words are gruff. Why not, thinks Kate. He is her brother. His ways are not hers but he will buttress her strength. She concentrates on fighting the pain, keeping it in her sights. If she quits looking, it will take over. If her attention swerves, the unbearable becomes worse.

The 40 miles to the nearest hospital stretch over pot holes and broken roads. Thick fog nudges the windows, trying to infiltrate the interior, obliterating the outside.

"Christ!" the driver complains, inching the vehicle along. "I ain't seen it this bad in years. Not since that run to Jacobs in '63. Remember that one. Picked up a boy who got eat up by the feeder. Kid didn't have a chance."

Confusion again. Trundling and bundling. In the eyes straining to see, Kate can read curiosity . . . shock. Pity. As always, compassion is the most difficult to endure. You can turn away from pity, but not compassion. And it will cripple you.

The emergency room nurses avert their heads as the arm is unwrapped, then look back. They stare at the gore, make a face, then look back again, deliciously horrified and fascinated. The doctor is blessedly brief.

"We can't handle this. Make arrangements for transport."

"Morgantown?"

"No. Try Union Pacific in Baltimore. They're the hand center for the East Coast and if it can be saved, they'll do it. Say we have a patient with a partially severed arm and a high chance of infection. We need the helicopter for transport. Stat."

A nurse cuts off the remainder of Kate's filthy clothing, touching them gingerly. Another tugs at her boots and each jerk is agony. "Cut the damn things," Kate screams. She does so. The doctor sinks the first of so many needles in her good arm. She raises her brows in question. "Morphine," he explains. "It should cut the pain." It does nothing.

A nurse brings a rag to clean the wound. "Don't." The doctor's voice is sharp. "Don't touch that arm. Pack it in ice, start some i.v.'s and we wait."

They didn't wait long. "Fog's too thick, Baltimore says. You'll have to go by ambulance, Kate," a doctor of heavy beard and kind eye tells her. "It'll be a hell of a trip, I'll not kid you. But we'll send a nurse with you so you can have another shot. You'll need it."

She is back in the ambulance. Morphine blunts the pain and her awareness clouds. Still it is there, gnawing. Without site. Hurt envelops her body,

centering in neither arm nor head. She wants unconsciousness but it won't come. Her mind is too disciplined and grips reality despite herself.

After three hours on the road, which seem like an eternity, Baltimore's lights tint the sky pink. Despite the drug, the pain has escalated for the woman and now has a razor quality. The passengers in the ambulance are silent. Will grips Kate's hand, his forehead sweatbeaded. The driver's back tenses when she moans. "Supposed to be a police escort," she hears him mutter. "Where the hell are they."

"You'll probably pick them up on the radio," his partner advises.

Contact is made. The dispatcher's voice echoes through the ambulance. "Okay, Fletcher County. You will proceed about a mile and a half to University Parkway. Make a left. I believe that's at the third stoplight."

"He believes . . ." Will growls.

Spotlights gleam down from a tall brick building: Pacific Memorial Hospital.

"Thank God," the nurse says, detaching the i.v. as the doors are thrown open. Kate is lifted out, but again her senses register a difference. The hands are smoother here. Floors have a high polish. Lights are brighter; voices low. White coats unwrap the arm, evaluate, x-ray, page. A doctor removes most of the pain and most of her mind. "Move your fingers," they say. "Make a fist." "Lucky," they say. "A strange break. You should have severed that artery by all rights," they say. God and she mutually acknowledge each other.

An Oriental introduces himself.

"I'm Dr. Kim. I'm going to put you to sleep."

His moon face beams against fluorescent orbs. She likes this man and smiles through the gathering dimness. He pats her cheek. "You don't look much like a coalminer. Too pretty."

"You don't look much like a doctor."

He laughs merrily, a Santa Claus in white and yellow. The needle is inserted in her veins. "Little stick," he warns. She is slipping. She doesn't want to go there but it pulls her back. The blackness returns; the mines suck her in.

Later they will ask Kate, "Do you remember?" She says "yes," but it is an affirmation qualified by periods of dimness when things are seen dimly through pain. She didn't know such pain exists. Nights are spans between the operating room, broken regularly as the last shot wears off and she lies there, waiting the prescribed interval for her next fix of demerol and oblivion.

The people in her world exist only from the waist up. Sweet smelling gas lulls her to sleep and she wakes in hell. They call it the post-op room but it is hell's antechamber populated by monitoring equipment which follows her struggles back into

life with beeps and lights. Nurses hover, monitoring the monitors. The sterile cold environment is designed to discourage microbes. It discourages Kate. Life doesn't seem worth returning too in that cold aloneness. She wakes feeling frozen, teeth chattering. Every tremor pushes the pain through her body. Her mouth is dry and she looks up into the bright lights, knowing she is back for another go at it and wondering if it's worth the effort. Licking her cracked lips, she finds even her spit has gone. Finally, she manages a dry call, "Water."

The nurse confers with another nurse who pages the doctor. An eternity later, she rubs ice over Kate's mouth, then allows her to suck a few chips. The woman's system goes crazy. Parched cells stampede toward moisture. Little by little, each teasing drop is absorbed. Finally she is allowed a sip. Then a swallow. The dryness relaxes some. Her teeth chatter against the glass and she asks for blankets. She is packed in warmth. Her senses cease complaining and she relaxes some . . . enough for the pain to reassert itself.

"Could you get me something? I'm hurting pretty bad."

"Not yet. Wait till they get you upstairs and check the doctor's orders."

"How long will that be?"

She checks her watch. "About an hour."

After what Kate judges to be four hours, she timidly catches the nurse's eye.

The nurse glances at her watch again. "I'll call for transport."

A half hour passes. Chances are that the floor nurse is busy catering to the needs of her patients and can't find time to truck down to the o.r. Finally Mary, God bless her, appears and transports Kate, tucked in, medicated and soothed, back to her bed. The worst is over, at least till the morrow.

The doctors work to clean the wound before attempting any surgical connections. I.v.'s empty into her system, one clear bag following another. Glucose. Blood. Antibiotics. Her system disgorges fluids through a catheter into a bag whose yellow contents are a visible flaunting of her body's wastes, the stuff mother had told her was nasty.

The third night . . . at least, Kate thinks it is the third night . . . they set her bones. The doctor says they will use a Hoffman apparatus. She nods her head, comprehending nothing. And wakes to find a madman's erector set perched on her arm. Eight pins, about six inches long each, have been drilled into the bone and interconnected. Fifteen pounds of metal rods, screws and bolts shape the fragments into some semblance of an arm. They tell her that this is only the second time such a device has been used on an arm. And they have never saved one "so far gone." A year or two prior, they say, it would be in that box under the willow tree. Kate doesn't

feel particularly lucky then. She just feels the pain. They say in a few days there will be a skin graft; in a few months, a bone graft. A nerve graft. Amazing. . . .

Washing her, the nurses marvel at the persistence of coal dirt. Her hair fades back to a dingy red. Black slowly evacuates the pores. Grease and oil are rubbed away. But the dark halfmoons under the fingertips of her mangled hands persist, a personal affront to hospital hygiene and operating room sterility. Nurses scrub, fuss, scrape and cut. It does no good.

Kate's consciousness remains borderline. The pain ebbs to engulf. She dips into oblivion and finds it waiting. Nurses try to position her for comfort and find none. Some become frustrated at their own helplessness, resentful of her pain. The buzzer is sometimes ignored or answered more slowly. Pain shots are given with a sense of relief. They know for a while the agony will back off and only minor discomforts need to be dealt with.

Through it all, there are the visitors. Sympathetic, well-meaning and conscientious, they come. And one must talk to them. "Now what exactly *did* happen? Harry heard. . . ."

The companionship she needs is those few who come and say little, holding her hand and pushing back the dimness. They generate healing with a light touch, require no response.

**T**he six weeks of hospitalization pass. She recovers quickly, surpassing the doctor's prognosis. They credit

her stamina . . . toughness, they call it. But mostly she recovers because of Will's new concern, Lindy's willingness to shackle her life with Jesse, John's quiet presence, but mostly because of a confused little boy who understands only that his mother has disappeared.

The baby is slow to accept her, fearing another betrayal. But they make their peace. Surmounting the new concern of her family for herself and the child is a little more difficult. Tasks done with one hand now require twice the time, if they can be done. But Kate knows she must do them. To become dependent will establish a precedent she

will have to live with the rest of her life. She insists on returning to the farm with the child. It is easier to do the hard thing, to do it alone.

The physical limitations of the arm are learned with daily living. Pain ceases or becomes such a fact of life it is not noticed. But now she needs to find something to fill up the days, to fill up the rest of her life. They have told her she cannot go back to mining. There is nothing in Cogan's Bluff but mining.

She learns to live with the mutilation by beating herself into fatigue each day, hoping exhaustion will bring an easy sleep. But three a.m. is the witching hour. Yesterday's black fatigue has mellowed. Dreams wrap, entangle, ensnare. From behind her eyelids, the canopy grabs her arm, chewing it to the consistency of mincemeat. The hand jerks toward her, yanked by some severance while the machine grinds the limb into the rib. Snap! A bone breaks. The canopy closes in on her head. Snap! A clean cut across marrow and nerves. The hand flops in protest. She is reminded of a dying fish. Snap!

She jerks awake into the room's blackness, like that of the coal, clutching her right arm. The elbow is frozen in a perpetual half bend. The skin is rough and mottled to the touch. But there, sweet Jesus. Warm and alive. Crippled and unsightly. But there.

Funny. The arm has more personality in disfigurement than when it was intact. She is continually aware of it being an extension of herself, having definite needs and wants. Her body caters to that arm. The back has donated skin. Nerves from the legs. Bone from the hip. Tendons . . . where in the hell did they get those tendons? The left arm works for its partner, attempts to write, perform the primary life functions.

She thinks during those long nights . . . of what she will do and what she can no longer do.

The physical and spiritual ache dims as morning comes strong. She rises and takes Jesse from his crib. He stirs only slightly. Placing him on the right side of the bed, she slides in beside him and insulates the arm with his body's warmth. Funny that this child she so recently nurtured within her body should already be sustaining her. She will have to buy a heating pad, Kate thinks. Tomorrow. Then she realizes it's already tomorrow. In many ways.

It's time to leave her mountains.□

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*Barbara Angle was born and raised in the Maryland coalfields, is the granddaughter of a miner and went to work in a West Virginia mine in 1975. She has been a general laborer, longwall chock-setter and shuttle-car operator. This story is an excerpt from her new book, Kate.*

# APPALACHIAN POETRY: The Politics of Coming Home

by J. W. Williamson

**T**he imposed identity of “hillbilly” once made many young Appalachians ashamed to be from the mountains — caused them to turn away from their own history in migrations both physical and psychological. But appearing in the mountains today is a literature of “hillbilly nationalism.” Young writers in Appalachia are exploring and embracing their mountain identity. This embracing of a despised past is more than a declaration of identity; it is a dawning of political consciousness.

The majority in this country has always specialized in making the minority — Appalachian, black, Irish, chicano — accept the majority’s version of what the minority’s identity is and must be: *you are a hick, hillbilly, nigger, and that’s a shameful thing*, says the majority, and the minority sometimes accepts the judgment. When this exchange is broken there is a revolution in consciousness, an awakening: *yes, I am black, but black is beautiful*.

But the dawning of political consciousness is not that simple, for it involves much more than just a declaration of identity. Achieving awareness means, first of all, *seeing yourself* — how you may have been manipulated; how you have played someone else’s game, complete with someone else’s rules; how you have been fooled, tricked, sent on this gull’s errand or that; how you have been duped. This vision of self is searing. It drives some mad, some blind. It has put out the eyes of many a would-be revolutionary who cannot contain the paradox of his or her own complicity in victimization.

While many young Appalachians find mutual comfort and support in the growing numbers of those who have awakened politically, there is no comfort in the larger number of their neighbors and cousins who have not recently changed. That irony is nowhere more starkly illustrated than in a little book called *Generation*, the 1978 publication of the Eastern Kentucky Youth Media Workshop. There, side by side, you can find the paradox of Appalachia’s current politics. On one page, we find an almost standard version of revolutionary rhetoric:

*With the exception of the American Indian, no people have been victimized more than Appalachians.*

*Their land is scarred from years of timber and mineral exploitation, and now their cultural heritage is being drained of all virtue and dignity. More and more the mountaineer is being made to feel like an immigrant in his own land.*

Immediately after this declaration is a statement of now-standard Sacred History:

*The time has come to disregard the old image of dirty, unkempt, barefoot people carrying their trusty rifles and corn jugs. They must now be recognized as what they are and what they can be. They are descendants of independent frontiersmen, feuding clansmen and hillside farmers. They are a proud, loyal and independent people, but they are tended to be bound by the sacredness of home and family.*

This romantic vision indicates a powerful awakening coming over the young author and gives him or her something to cling to in the quest for social and cultural identity. On another page in *Generation* we find a much more startling and profound version of a political state of mind, written collaboratively by a group of fifth graders in Breathitt County, Kentucky:

## *First One in the Van*

*I wish I had this and I wish I had that.  
I wish I had a set of mag wheels . . . some  
more of them.  
I wish I had a green bicycle.  
I wish that old foolish mule over  
there was gone, it about killed me.  
It drug me through the creek and  
through the grass.  
I wish I had me a big black race horse.  
I wish I had my barn built.  
I got my old barn torn down and  
built me another.  
I wish I had me a lot of money.  
I wish I had a '72 Nova!*

*I wish I had my bridge fixed.  
 I wish I had a set of side pipes . . .  
 you know, they make it pop and sound  
 louder.  
 I wish I had me some coal in.  
 It's going to be going up to \$35.00 a ton!  
 I wish I had my cement porch fixed.  
 I wish I hadn't let Jiggers go.  
 It's a circus dog and would stand  
 on its hind legs.  
 I wish I had a c.b. base station –  
 you could talk right with Jackson.  
 I wish the bumblebees would stay  
 out of this van.*

The best of the young mountain writers have seen themselves both as victims and as collaborators with the enemy. They have come back home and yet stand off in that "suburb north of themselves" (as Jim Wayne Miller called it). They are wise enough to know that the first one in the van – so to speak – is not necessarily the one who believes Appalachia can be returned easily to some state of purity. The best of the young mountain writers have killed the beast in their own hearts and yet live wrapped in its arms.

Jim Webb, born in Letcher County, Kentucky, and now a resident of Mingo County, West Virginia, is in many ways representative of the best in the current Appalachian identity movement. A serious poet and playwright, Webb possesses an awesome wit. He teeters on the paradoxes. He might be called the Clown of the Appalachian Apocalypse.

Webb went to high school in Hazard, Kentucky, where the local middle class presented – and presumably still does – a textbook example of the colonized mentality: ashamed of being associated in any way with "mountain" or "hillbilly," intent on out-mainstreaming the mainstream, the sons and daughters of the town (who likely had cousins in the hills but who could not wait to be professionalized and credentialed and homogenized into that majority society) learn to talk like Tom Brokaw or Jane Pauley and learn to look like them, too.

Jim was apolitical in school. He resisted the middle-class enticements and inducements only because he was lucky enough to be inattentive. By his own admission, he was more interested in the ways of the flesh than in the road out of the mountains to Success. Later, in college at Berea – that strange nursery of both genteel sensibilities and radicalism – he did not respond to the political rumbles he heard around him. During two college summers Webb worked for strip miners, first on a crew that was faking the restoration of the land and then participating – with considerable pride – in the removal of mountaintops.

He woke up with a jolt. As a not-very-involved hanger-on at a Save Our Mountains rally in Summers County, West Virginia, he happened to see Bob Gates' independently produced anti-strip-mining film "In Memory of the Land and the People."

"For the first time I saw what was happening," Webb says. "I had lived every moment of my life where they strip-mined coal." Gates' film was "a veritable turning point" for Webb: "I don't feel I came anywhere close to being a poet until I started writing strip-mine stuff. Before that I was just doing bad Rod McKuen imitations."

Then came the Appalachian flood of 1977 which devas-

tated Williamson, West Virginia, where Webb was living. That flood – caused largely by the inability of the hills, raked clean by strip mining, to hold the water of a heavy downpour – helped radicalize Webb. He helped begin the Tug River Recovery Center, and he started to write a more politically intense poetry. After the flood he helped edit a little book of protest poems, *Mucked*, and he wrote his first play, *Elmo's Haven*, a rollicking political satire that played three performances in Williamson in May, 1980.

Webb writes some of the most sardonic and arresting lyrics that can be found in the Appalachian renaissance. For example, his "America":

*America,  
 You are my teeth,  
 Rotting even as I live.  
 My tongue  
 Searches out the pain.  
 One tooth rotted to near nothing  
 Hurts even now.  
 All of them are filled  
 Or capped.  
 Some have gone, gone forever.  
 Coke bottle, Dairy Queen, popsickle,  
 Chewing gum, Milky Way, Forever Yours  
 Rot.  
 Some I lost head first  
 On a concrete street.  
 Your fire department  
 Hosed away the blood and  
 tooth pieces of my mouth.  
 You capped the shards  
 With plastic and assured me  
 The gaps would close with time.  
 They did.  
 But others cropped up, America,  
 And holes remained.  
 My plastic teeth  
 Look real, America,  
 Except for the black line  
 Of real tooth stub, dead  
 Black bone: no blood,  
 No nerve, no sun bleach  
 Like bones in your desert  
 West, America.  
 Others have the look of  
 Death.  
 Most work, though none are  
 Good. They still crush  
 Hot dogs & apple pie.  
 But sugar daddies devour them,  
 America.*

*No, I won't stand in your line, America,  
 But I will chew & chew & chew, gnash & gnarl  
 Till they all fall out, every last  
 Lead silver gold bone plastic  
 Tooth.  
 I'll watch them fly in my spit  
 And never never take your  
 Set of plastic perties,  
 But I will  
 Gum you till I die.*

There's a submerged stereotype in this poem: the old snaggle-toothed hillbilly, teeth rotted out from poor nutrition or from "bad genes," grinning at us with a new, sly, much more dangerous awareness. There's a melding here of the personal and the national, the confessional and the political. Above all, this is *public poetry* that runs distinctly counter to the private obscurities that are now so much in fashion both with those academics who toss around such terms as "post-modernism," and with those few Appalachian poets who seem to associate profundity with impenetrability.

The overt politics of Webb's "America" emerge more as a frame of mind than a program or policy for change. In the Appalachian identity movement, the relationship between the self and what the self describes is always profoundly political, though the politics may be implicit rather than explicit. For example, Webb's "Hog Killing" may be an anti-strip-mining poem, but it is first a haunting lyric full of carefully observed detail. The final image — "Men standing / In the cold — freezing and dreaming / Of eggs" — touches one of Webb's favorite themes: the ironies of complicity, the colonized doing the work of the colonizers, dreaming their borrowed dreams.

Nowhere in Webb's poetry is that theme of complicity more fully — and hilariously — developed than in his long tour-de-force, "Pike County: Doo Dee Oomp Wah Wah." It is a jazzy satire of the mountain middle class and that characteristic state of mind — whether one finds it in the high school at Hazard or among the well-to-do of Pike County — that has made broad the way for corporate America to come into the mountains and for Appalachian children to go out. This is the opening section of the poem:

*I*

*look at you & your hillsides*  
*Pike County*

*Rich Christian County*

*In the Bible Belt*

*More gospel groups'n*

*ennybody*  
*county*

*And I scratch my head and*

*Wonder bout all those times*

*I read the Bible (the world's*

*Largest selling book, they say)*

*yes, I know*

*For the Bible*

*doo dee ooh wah wah bop*

*she bop doo dee ooh wah wah*

*Oh yes & verily*

*THE BIBLE, The Bible*

*Tells us so*

*doo wah*

*doo wah*

*My mountain mind reels*

*As I look at you, Pike, the*

*True Cinema Verité.*



*Thomas McGowan*

*Jim Webb*

Jim Webb has been both academic and roustabout: until recently he taught English at Southern West Virginia Community College (endearing himself, you can be sure, to the powers that be), and he has been punched out at a public meeting in Mingo County after he voiced his opposition to Island Creek Coal's plan to open up new stripping operations on 68,000 acres. He knows an Appalachian Stepin-fetchit when he sees one; he knows the desperation and frustration of honest people in the grip of corporate power; he purges these ironies when he can in a poetry that is characteristic of an entire literary stirring in the mountains. He is in many ways paradigmatic of the current Appalachian literary reawakening.

Many others of Webb's generation are writing in the mountains. Some have been heard from already, will be heard from again. For example: Bob Snyder, who describes himself as a "marginal white-collar worker." As director of the Appalachian branch of Antioch College, Snyder organized a group of young writers — the "Soupbean Poets" — who talked politics, history, literature, and found a collective voice and energy for poetry. Snyder can write beautifully understated lyrics, like "A Prophet's Honor":

*the blast shook the window*

*I ceased writing down the dream*

*which prophesied the explosion*

*laid down my pen*

*and walked down into the refinery*

*to see how my father was*

*I met the foreman climbing the fence  
running for his life but  
all people in Saint Marys ever remember  
is my Dad telling his egghead son  
to get the hell out.*

Another leading voice among the contemporary mountain poets is Bob Henry Baber, who recently hosted the fifth annual Appalachian poetry reading on Baber Mountain in West Virginia. Baber sometimes writes a more fragile, more confessional kind of lyric than either Webb or Snyder. Others are Pauletta Hansel, Gail Amburgey, Mary Joan Coleman — all members of the original Soupbean Collective at Beckley, West Virginia.\* Mary Joan Coleman has written one of the memorable Appalachian emigré torch songs, “D.C. Working Girl Lonesome”:

*I hungered for the sound of Appalachian r's  
pronounced like the grate of a sharp rock  
scraping the sandstone cheek of a cliff  
used as a makeshift toy  
in some hill child's hand  
I longed for the corn tassel yellow  
of my baby cousin's hair  
and the pink surprise of a Cherokee rose  
jumping out of green brier patches  
until I found a country bar  
where a hillbilly band played  
“Detroit City”  
and some lean Kentucky boys  
thirsted for Southern Comfort.*

Jim Webb, the Soupbean Poets and the dozens of other young mountain writers — both known and as yet unknown — are important for their vitality and their shared political identity. They have only just begun to find their voices, and time will sift them. But two writers — Jim Wayne Miller in poetry and Gurney Norman in fiction — have already established themselves nationally as voices of contemporary Appalachia. Both Miller and Norman give us powerful versions of the psychological — and the physical — coming home of the mountaineer, Miller in a remarkable sequence of poems published under the title *The Mountains Have Come Closer* (1980), and Norman in the novel *Divine Right's Trip* (1971), first serialized in *The Last Whole Earth Catalog*, and in *Ancient Creek* (1976). Both Miller and Norman have lived in some measure through the political diaspora that has made being mountain-born a problematic fact in modern America, and both have dealt with that problem by casting themselves resolutely back onto home ground. The simple existence of Appalachia's stereotype in the popular mind gives their writing political force. But neither is, properly speaking, a revolutionary. Where there is anger in

their work, it is balanced and gentled by irony and paradox. Both Miller and Norman are extraordinarily gentle spirits who see loss of identity as *American* rather than merely or exclusively Appalachian.

For Miller, being severed from one's roots and the sense of self that those roots — only — can bestow, is like being “lost in the American Funhouse”:

#### *Getting Together*

*Suddenly old friends are in the house. Laughter.  
Separated years back, we've wandered around  
lost in the American Funhouse. Together again,  
what a crowd we are! The walls are angled  
mirrors multiplying us many times over.  
Each one of us sees the friend he knew  
standing back of the one this friend has become,  
and shyly, like an unacknowledged companion,  
confused by all this familiarity, unseen by our friends,  
stands the person we know we are. Laughter.*

*Moving through the crowd, I realize  
I've gradually got used to walking around  
in my life a huge elongated trunk and rippled face,  
a bulging wrap-around brow, moving on stumpy legs,  
my belt just above my shoetops, my chin  
riding level with my fly. I have forgotten parts  
of myself, my ears lie curled like lettuce leaves,  
my hands grow right out of my shoulders,  
no wrists or arms or elbows in between.  
Glancing past familiar strangers, I try  
to hold out a hand to someone who holds out a hand.  
Laughter! We hold back all but the little horrors.*

*The Mountains Have Come Closer* moves from this absurdist vision of fragmentation back toward home, an identification with people and things that restores the chopped-up self to psychological and political wholeness. In Miller's book, the turning toward home is given an unambiguously religious heading: “You Must Be Born Again.” That Miller does not mean anything remotely evangelical by that phrase and yet does mean to imply a rich quickening of the human spirit is best illustrated by “Going South”:

*Sorry to inconvenience so many people,  
and feeling it a breach of decorum  
to have so private a thing happen in public,*

*I think I will probably die  
in a long line of traffic  
on an evening in November  
when mercury vapor lights are coming on.*

*A red light will jam in my brain  
and I'll sit there slumped over the wheel  
blocking a main artery  
while angry cars begin to honk behind me.*

*A traffic division helicopter  
will dispatch a cruiser  
and report on a radio station's  
afternoon Traveling Home Show  
one stalled car, one lane of traffic backed up.*

\* Many others might also be mentioned. They will all come together in the new anthology of Appalachian writing being assembled now at the University of Kentucky by Gurney Norman, Bob Henry Baber and George Ella Lyon. The anthology is the outgrowth of a 1980 pilot project funded by the Witter Bynner Foundation, designed to stimulate poets and poetry in the central Appalachians. This anthology, when it appears, may be the single most important compilation yet to come out of the Appalachian renaissance.

*The cruiser, the ambulance, the Live Action tv unit,  
the whirling lights, the curious looking into the camera—  
all will flicker on the screen at 10:07.*

*The face of the eyewitness who discovered the truth  
will fade into a commercial at 10:09.*

*Newsprint will disappear like sooty snow.*

*Traffic will flow smoothly again.*

*Journalists with their noses into news  
will miss the only story worth the telling.*

*So here it is, like footage recovered  
from a correspondent who went careening  
into death, camera clicking to the point  
of impact: high over the town,  
above tiers of power lines, a black river  
of birds turned slowly and flowed south.*

This is a death dream: death of an old self stranded on America's asphalt, alienated from that identity back in the mountains that might save it. You must be born again. In "Getting Together" and "Going South" (as in many of the poems in Part I of *The Mountains Have Come Closer*), Miller makes the need for a rebirth a very compelling psychological fact. Repeatedly, he shows us the disfranchised at the end of their psychic rope. Then, in Parts II and III of *The Mountains Have Come Closer*, he gives us that necessary rebirth in the guise of a new character — the Brier. The Brier is the hillbilly come home, one of those middle-class Hazard students who found success outside the mountains but who found fragmentation and political alienation too. He has come home now, or is in the process of coming home, half angry at himself for being such a fool, for allowing himself to be severed from the only roots that count; he is angry, too, at the forces that made being a hillbilly such a shameful thing. The designation "Brier," like "hillbilly," is a term of derision, especially in Northern industrial centers where so many of the mountain migrants have congregated over the last 30 or 40 years. But Miller's Brier embraces that derisive name defiantly, and inhabits it. And the consciousness that dawns is, in a rich sense, political:

#### *Set Apart*

*Always now he carried a pearl-handled grudge,  
snub-nosed, heavy, holstered close to his heart.*

*Where once he held his tongue, he carried a blade,  
good steel that held only its cold keen edge.*

*He drove his mind so hard it sang like whining  
wheels rolling high over gaps and gorges*

*on trestles of determination. Rounding turns,  
he came on his black thoughts, hunched over entrails*

*like buzzards eating carrion on the road.*

*The thing or two he knew he carried folded*

*like the certain knowledge of hundred dollar bills  
whispering in a side flap of his wallet.*

*And drove toward mountains, and a self he would  
become:*

*old man in faded denim, gray as a weathered barn,  
fencepost at a field's edge — until he moved.*



*Jim Wayne Miller*

*J. Hancock*

This is the new consciousness of a Jim Webb; it cuts clean, it draws blood, it says, "I will be whole in a world that wants me half-whole."

*The Mountains Have Come Closer* ends with "Brier Sermon," the single most ambitious distillation of Appalachian politics yet to appear in this Appalachian renaissance. As with the best Appalachian political poetry, it is wrapped in paradoxical irony that saves it from being mere strident polemic. The Brier — by now something of a revolutionary — preaches his sermon on the street in a mountain town, the one place most calculated to find his political and spiritual message uncongenial. He has a good eye for his targets: he sees how the mountain middle class is constantly selling out, compromised by greed and seduced by the mercantile blandishments of the very America that makes them ashamed to be hillbillies. "You've kept the worst," the Brier tells the mountain folks on the street,

*and thrown away the best.*

*You've stayed the same where you ought to have  
changed,*

*changed where you ought to have stayed the same.*

*Wouldn't you like to know what to throw away*

*What to keep*

*What to be ashamed of*

*What to be proud of?*

*Wouldn't you like to know*

*how to change and stay the same?*

The Brier — not unlike Jim Webb or any of the other Appalachian nationalist poets — *has seen himself*, has understood how the dynamic of colonization has worked on his own head and heart. He wants the people of the town to see themselves, too, and by that sight to know who they are and to free themselves at the same time:

*You've heard that prayer that goes:*

*Help us to see ourselves as others see us.*

*Buddy, that's not a prayer we want to pray.*

*I believe we ought to pray:*

*Lord, help us to see ourselves — and no more.*



J. Hancock

Gurney Norman

*Or maybe: Help us to see ourselves,  
help us to be ourselves,  
help us to free ourselves  
from seeing ourselves  
as others see us.*

Accurate as the Brier is about the complicity of these mountain people in selling out, they will not listen to the message. Everything is new inside the Brier, but nothing is changed among the people to whom he preaches. Ironically, we last see the Brier as he disappears behind a mobile home, that ubiquitous symbol of America's loss of roots, made comic now by the Winnebago illusion that home is always with us.

In *Divine Right's Trip*, Gurney Norman, like Miller, begins with a funhouse America where his displaced hillbilly is adrift in fragmentation and spiritual exhaustion. Norman's funhouse is the Southern California drug scene of the late '60s. From there, Norman's hillbilly makes a long odyssey home to the hills and hollows of eastern Kentucky where his full awakening to his lost mountain identity is accompanied by fright (a near-mad, freaked-out wrestling match with a "dragon" in an abandoned coal mine) and pain (he has to relearn physical work in building a hog pen) — all withdrawal symptoms of a person leaving a society that has seduced him. By the end, we see that *Divine Right's Trip* celebrates a return to a mythic mountain haven. The novel ends with a wedding, with an ode to a revitalized soil, with a family celebration for the prodigal hillbilly who has come home, having shaken off the delirium of the "other" America. The politics of this homecoming are more implicit than explicit, though we know well enough that the dragon the hillbilly has had to face is as much corporate America as it is the dark, three-footed creature of the mind, unleashed by drugs.

Norman's politics are more explicit in his curious modern jack tale, *Ancient Creek* — curious because it is available

to the public only as a recording from June Appal Records. Norman takes the anti-hero Jack from the mountain folk tales of his heritage and rediscovers him as a modern and potent rebel force against the complacency of King Condo III and the more evil power of the Black Duke, King Condo's local administrator of the mountain domain. Like Jim Wayne Miller in *The Mountains Have Come Closer*, Norman makes his tale of resistance and redemption a struggle with no resolution, though *Ancient Creek* ends on a great surge of almost mystical fellow-feeling: the healing force of a *group* of people who for the first time feel the power of the group against the encroachments of an alien power.

The force of Norman's personality — the tonic of his warmth and generosity — has made him almost a guru for scores of young Appalachians. He has lived and is still living the psychological odyssey of dispossession/coming home that so many young mountain people have tasted, and they are drawn to him both as a writer who has made good with the mountains in fiction and as a living exemplar of being both free and hillbilly. Norman understands the dispossession and the struggle to get back home as a political struggle well enough, but he synthesizes his politics with an almost mystical whole earthiness that deals with the paradoxes by trying to embrace them.

At the end of Norman's novel, *Divine Right* — the hillbilly come home — is in the process of redeeming a derelict family farm that has been hemmed in by strip mines. He sits down and writes a letter to his friend Flash back in California:

*Yesterday I spread rabbit shit on some old dead ground, and today spaded it in and sprinkled two gallons of red worms on it. . . . Our purpose is soil redemption. Salvation! Healing by miracles, signs and wonders. The theme song of our commercials is "The Old Rugged Barn."*

*On a hill far away,  
Stood an old rugged barn,  
The emblem of effort and pride. . . .*

*Come be my partner, Flash . . . and we'll get into soil salvation. First we'll save our own; we'll breed ten thousand rabbits and twenty million worms, and make this dead old hillside bloom. Then if other people feel like they've got a troubled soil, why let them call upon us, and we'll respond, with miracles, signs and wonders.*

*Faith, brother! Faith and rabbit shit, that's the theme!*

A revolution of political consciousness, and the healing of dispossessed identity, never had a humbler, yet more profound, culture on which to grow. □

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*Jerry Williamson was the founding editor of the Appalachian Journal. He has recently had Appalachian-related articles in The Progressive and In These Times. For valuable comments and suggestions, the following people are gratefully acknowledged: David Whisnant, Bob Lysiak, Jim Wayne Miller, Jim Webb, Steve Fisher, Frank Einstein, Bob Snyder and Gurney Norman.*

# The Adidas Generation

## Reflections on Student Writing

by Max Steele

illustrations by Leslie Udry



rom the narrow fenestrations of Chapel Hill's Greenlaw Hall, a paranoid classroom fort planned in the mid-'60s apparently against students rather than for them, I can look into the sunny Pit where body-proud Carolina students are basking, men and women with their golden legs stretched out in front of them, studying the tabloid list of *Courses Offered*. Who are they and what do they dream, this Adidas generation?

I believe in dreams and I have faith especially in the collective dreams, those marvelous stories that are read in creative writing classes and which form, reveal and help define a college generation. Listening to these stories over the years, I have come to comprehend what James Baldwin meant when he wrote: "Although we do not wholly believe it yet, the interior life is a real life and the intangible dreams of people have a tangible effect upon the world."

I think, for example, of two stories by students from a dozen years ago that I recently came across. I remember that when I first read them, they too seemed new and strange and powerful to me — and quite foreign.

In one, a young stockbroker goes to his office on a Saturday to complete work he has not been able to do in his highly competitive work. His desk is not in the office which he has shared for a year with two other junior

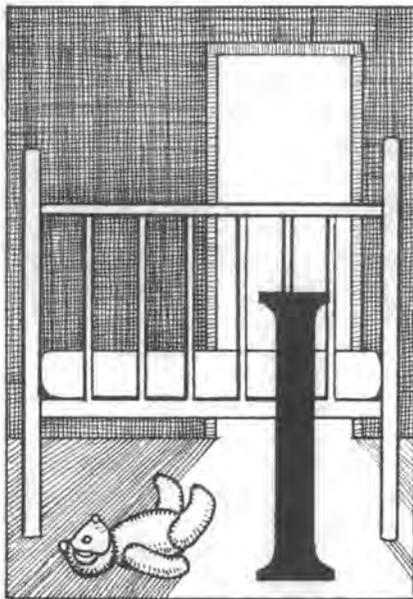
members of the firm. He searches the offices and then, by chance, discovers his name printed on the door marked "Men." Inside, his desk and chair have been installed in front of the urinals. All his papers are in order; the telephone has been connected and there is even a carpet on the floor. At first he thinks it is a joke played on him by his colleagues; but as he stands there listening to the piped-in Mozart, the telephone rings. It is his boss asking him how he likes his new office. The young man says it is a very funny joke but an elaborate one. The boss assures him, in a voice informative but not punitive, that it is no joke, that that is where he will be working. When he hangs up, the young man calls his wife to get a babysitter and come over. When she arrives she realizes it is not a joke: her husband will be working in his new office. They agree to leave the baby with the sitter for the rest of the afternoon. They buy a bottle of brandy and go back to their flat.

In another story, called "Above the Super Market," the reader finds himself in a walnut-paneled room at a long table with leather chairs where a meeting is going on that at first glance would seem to be that of a board of directors. But then we listen. A young man, Bradley Martin, is being questioned about his habits by the board, which apparently already knows all the answers and can tell immediately whether he is telling the truth. One of the inquisitors is a smooth, Madison Avenue type who calls Bradley by his first name and tries to persuade and coax confessions from him with his obviously false friendliness. Another is an older man, a confidant, a father-confessor, who appeals to him with wise, gray eyes from behind horn-rimmed glasses. Several are nondescript. But each is a man of some specialized power. The last man is shaven bald, wears a turtleneck sweater, has a tremendous chest and arms; and upon a signal from any of the others, lunges at Bradley to choke or hit him until he confesses whatever needs to be confessed.

The odd part of the story is that there is nothing to confess; and it is this emptiness which the lad is attempting to hide. But the inquisitors want all the details of his empty life. At last, above the sounds of the cash registers in the supermarket below, the hero confesses all: he exchanges bills at the bank once a week for change, not because he likes to run his hands through the coins as they accuse him of doing, but because he makes extra money by finding rare coins to sell to dealers; true, he has a lover and sometimes he cries, as they already know, on her breasts,

but that means nothing to him. He has no joys, no ambitions. The confession rendered, he is turned loose. We do not know who his inquisitors are or what his answers mean to them.

Today, after seeing the trials of Watergate, we know that these stories written five years before the media exposés have a certain accuracy: in a metaphorical way men did have their desks placed before urinals and were soothed by piped-in music. We know that often useless facts about individual citizens were gained from rooms above the supermarket and from the files in doctors' offices. Sometimes it seems that there are in the air prophetic stories with compensating themes waiting to be captured, brought down, netted with words by the writer of whatever age who is sensitive, through some emotional need or moral indignation, to their hovering presence.



recall also a certain sort of story by women writers which began appearing with some frequency on some campuses in the mid-'70s. There were many variations but the plot line was essentially the same. A young woman is packing to leave her apartment, a young man helping her. She looks about, studies it as if she may never see it again. The young man is anxious, attentive — a bit, one realizes on second reading, remote and cold. He helps her with her bag into his car and drives her to the hospital or clinic. Only then do we realize that the serious business we are reading about is a first abortion. There is a brief, seemingly tender farewell. Details of the hospital, of the operating room, are usually missing. But always there is a nurse afterward who looks at the patient through her glasses or over her glasses or through steady gray eyes in which we cannot detect an attitude. The last scene varies. Sometimes the woman is phoning from the hospital to the empty apartment before going to sit on the floor of her room, nursing an imaginary baby, or playing with a doll bought for the child at a happier time. Sometimes she is back in the apartment discovering that the young man has packed and left. Here too she sits on the floor and sometimes draws her knees up to her forehead. She does not feel like crying. She feels empty.

A variation here before me, by a writer from Mississippi, begins after the operation and has the subject refusing to leave the soothing warmth of her tub, where, we learn from dialogue with the young man, she intends to stay during most of that day, just as she has been doing each day. Finally he urges her to leave the tub, the steamy bathroom, to put on new clothes they have bought her, to go with him to the cocktail party where they will see friends they have not seen for almost two months. She concedes and seems in her new clothes to be a stranger to herself. At the party her laughter sounds too loud to her, like someone else's laughter and then above it she hears a baby crying in the room above. She makes her way through the loud cocktail party noise and up the stairs where she stands in the door of a nursery; then she enters and sits a long time by the empty crib, not knowing that the baby has been sent across town with a babysitter. When she looks up the host and hostess and her husband are staring at her from the doorway. She explains to them that she came to comfort a baby she heard crying. The husband helps her down the stairs, through the kitchen and back to their apartment, where she lets the tub fill with warm water.

In the late '60s advertisements for safe abortions first appeared in college newspapers throughout the South. One does not know to what degree the writers of these stories were familiar with the experiences, but certainly they knew someone down the hall or back home or somewhere who had suddenly faced, alone and often in hostile circumstances, a painfully personal and complex moral question. The stories appeared and then they disappeared. But the feeling of abandonment and hallucination and grief was so strong in them that I think often of the woman analyst who maintained that the most important day in any woman's life is the day her first child is born. If she is right, I wonder if someday we will hear of a new blend of depression and bitterness (or independence and political activism), among certain thousands of middle-aged women who in the early '70s first experienced the birth ritual as an abortion.

The analyst commenting on the significance of birth in a woman's life was, in a sense, completing Freud's statement that the most important day in any man's life is the day his father dies. Years before Freud, writers everywhere knew the traumatic impact on the family of the father's death. Changes in the economics and politics of family life, however, have mitigated the trauma associated with a father's death, as well as the traditional view of women being primarily childbearers. Again I have my ears tuned to those younger writers who have never quite turned away from the tradition of filial devotion, or who redefine it for their generation.

During the the '60s the father, along with all figures of authority, was often held in contempt. But for the generation now emerging on Southern campuses, the father appears with frequency and persistence as a figure to be studied, comprehended and looked at with compassion and love. Several of the best student writers of the past few years have written father stories that, when read aloud, have brought to the class that special silence that is more rewarding than applause. The incidents, the fathers, the sons are almost ordinary and it is only the moment of identity that lifts them to that special level of good fiction.

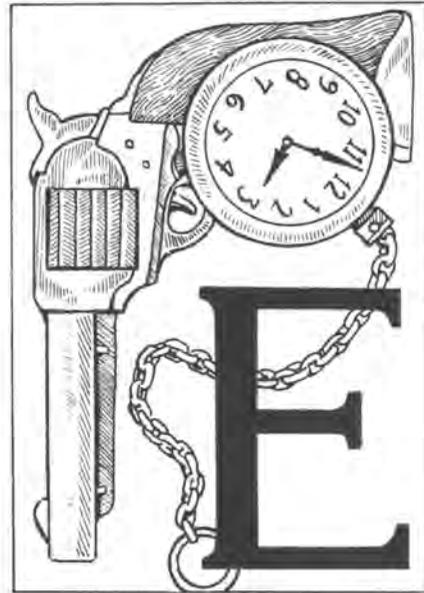
In one story a college student is having insoluble trouble with his girlfriend and goes home without calling her to break a date for the following evening. At home his parents

have argued; his mother is besieged with anger, and the guilty father has taken refuge away from home. But the grandfather invites the young man to go fishing and there, in the steady rhythm of casting and reeling in, the grandfather says only one sentence, that he too has had trouble with women. It is enough for the boy to feel a great kinship with his grandfather, with the father, and back at the house he calls the young woman to tell her he will be back but a little late.

In another story a father and mother, an older son and daughter and a younger brother are driving at night, hoping to get across the mountain between Asheville and Tennessee before dawn. For a while they sing and it is the best of moments in a happy family with the father teaching them army songs. Gradually, one by one, the others go off to sleep, but the older son sitting next to the father is determined to stay awake to help keep the father awake. They talk little if at all, but are aware of the changing pressures of their bodies against each other as the car swings around mountain curves. At the crest, at a lookout point where it is claimed by a sign that five states can be seen, the father says, "Who's going to take a leak with me?" And the son says he will and follows him proudly to the edge of the cliff.

In still another story a lawyer and his son go through the backroads to the grandfather's Arkansas farm. Neighbors (mainly black) have encroached and are using the backyard as a place for their all-day horseshoe games. Upstairs in the empty house the old grandfather is dying of cancer. Beside him on a chair are the masculine symbols: his pocketwatch keeping perfect time and his pistol, both of which will be inherited by the father and then the son. The son knows that he has been brought here to observe the old man's patience and courage. As he and his father go down the steps to pitch a hospitable game of horseshoes with these neighbors who have moved their game here where they can tactfully look in on the old white man and attend his needs, the son wants to put his hand on his father's shoulder but doesn't.

In a final story the young man has returned home to be with his sister and his father, an epileptic, during the funeral and cremation of the mother. In the final scene, grotesquely comic and tragic, the father is seized by a fit while taking the box containing the ashes up the stairs. He grabs the stair rail and in his fall brings it down with him amid the plaster dust and ashes which coat them all. Out of this chaos, the author brings a superb order: "I stand straighter than my father sits, and I look down on his rounded shoulder. I know I do not need to stretch to catch his words. I know there is more to find out, nothing hidden from me that is not hidden from my father. I can never know what is hidden from him, or, if I knew, point him toward it. I have joined in the hunt that grown-ups have, of finding the end of my life. No longer a fumbling at the top of the stairs, or landings interposed. He has done all that for me, and I know that his problems now are insoluble. That he is not weak, but that the self-contradictions and involutions of his life have piled up, incremental as steps. And who can guess my future inturnings before I am balled up in the sheets, breathing shallowly, rapidly as I talk, each shortened and automatic breath a word, the sentence of death being read. There it will make sense, there at the end. All my father tells me now, truth delayed."



Each of these stories and a dozen more not quoted, many of them by the most talented young writers in the South, have these things in common: the father or grandfather is a man to be admired, but the *idea* of the father creates a distance between him and his son; the mother is absent by death or divorce, or weakened in her presence by depression or anger or problems of her own; there is a shared moment of poignant silence (poignant because the author asks for less sorrow than the reader is willing to give); the silence is broken by trivial words; and then there is a moment in which the boy feels his father is a man who needs his friendship.

The stories have a great deal of daydream in them as well as memory. The student writers may speak for their peers who, born in the late '50s, grew up during the '60s in the most permissive atmosphere this nation has known, with the least paternal guidance and restrictions, and who feel the urgent need for such intense, rare moments to complete their identities as adults. One of my colleagues, who is renowned for his ability to show the connection between literature and life, states without a doubt that the restrictive Victorian father is ready to walk upon the scene again. It is interesting to me to re-read these stories, to look out on the dazzling view from my window, to realize that perhaps these are the young men and women who will usher him upon the scene and that he will bring with him his strict ideas about God and family, the rituals of manhood, the confinements of womanhood and the proprieties of dress, decor and decorum. □

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*Max Steele teaches creative writing at the University of North Carolina. He has published stories in The New Yorker, Harper's, Esquire and Mademoiselle and is the author of several works of fiction: When She Brushed Her Hair, The Goblins Must Go Barefoot and The Cat and the Coffee Drinkers. This sketch of student writing at a largely white, mainstream university was written two years before Ronald Reagan's election.*

# NOTES OF A COUNTRY POET

by Ruth Laney

In 1975, when I began a two-year stint as poet-in-residence in the schools of Louisiana's Avoyelles Parish, I admit I was terrified. I was prepared for glassy-eyed adolescents who already hated poetry. And heaven knows what they expected — an antiquated librarian, probably. What they got was a skinny 31-year-old in blue jeans and running shoes whom many of them mistook for a fellow student. But we did seem, in the brief spurts of time we had together, to develop a mutual delight in one another. I was delighted, at any rate — and I think it's safe to say they were pleasantly surprised by the poet and the poetry.

Louisiana's literacy rate was the lowest in the nation. Of the state's 64 parishes (counties), Avoyelles ranked near the bottom academically. And yet, led by a visionary superintendent, the parish school board decided to dip into its meager budget to match funds provided by the National Endowment for the Arts for a poet-in-the-schools.

I had never taught before, and I wondered what kind of teacher I would make. I found I was good at empathy and inspiration, poor at discipline. I also decided I wouldn't be a regular classroom teacher for \$50,000 a year, which was what I concluded a good teacher should make.

Certain faces shine in my memory, like those of the pretty black girls whose writings shyly, tentatively shaped the sentiments of black pride. Lynette, who had the almond eyes and saffron coloring of a high-fashion model, wrote:

*Black is the color of my skin.  
Black is death —  
like the color of the widow's dress  
or the big black Fleetwood she rode in.  
Black people died for this color.  
Martin Luther King, Malcom X fought  
for their black people. Rest peacefully in your grave.  
But I say, No, black is not death —  
It is everything I live for.*

Or the faces of adolescent boys, who seemed to wake from their classroom slumber only for periodic fights in the halls, banging each others' heads against the lockers — yet they could come up with something like this:

*Spring is like your first shotgun.  
...  
Spring is like seeing your first deer.  
Spring is like catching your first six-pound bass.  
...  
Spring is like seeing  
your first pro football game.*

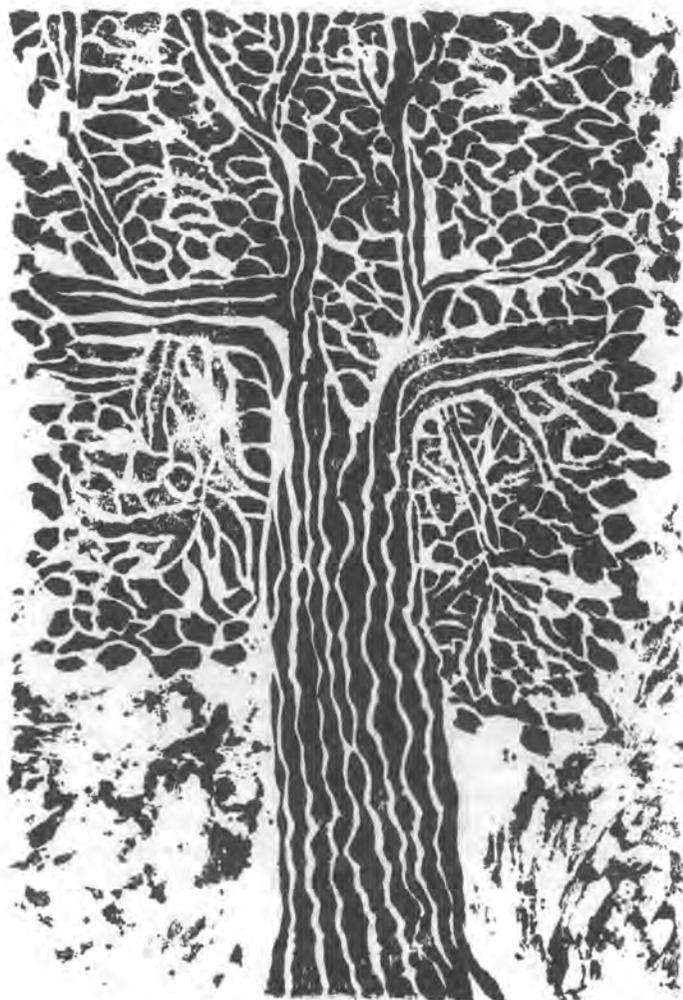


illustration by Kelvin Parker

These kids had something special going for them: they hadn't been programmed to write formula poetry — or any kind of poetry. When I forbade them to use rhyme, they were free to come up with poetry full of their own language, with the Cajun words that flavored their speech: *boudin* (a spicy sausage), *goo-fish* (a “trash-fish”), local nicknames. One student wrote:

*T-Bud's grocery is going out of business  
All boudin, chicken and Shake-N-Bake must go.*

Along with the Cajun were references to “Charlie's Angels” and “Starsky and Hutch,” those artifacts of modern culture that no adolescent escapes. Wish poems revealed a strong bias toward the red Trans Am and the blue Cutlass Supreme. One girl's poem about her desk complained:

*because of this old marked-up thing,  
I ruined three pairs of panty-hose.*

Love poems drove them to some of their most creative efforts:

*Her face is as rich as a big chunk of gold —  
I think I'm in love  
to the top of my head.*

Or this one, which a shy student stayed after class to finish:

*When I'm with her, I feel like  
a bird, out on its first flight.*

Or the blasé gum-chewer who startled me with this:

*His crude, exotic words  
made my head spin like a wheel,  
as though thunder was thrashing  
against my tensed ears.  
As if some untamed lion  
was going to grab at my throat.*

Some of the kids couldn't handle love but wrote creative "hate poems":

*Her walk is like a bullfrog with a hernia,  
Her hair is like burnt spaghetti.  
Her fingers are like lunchroom corn dogs.*

My work convinced me that the encouragement of creativity nearly always evokes a response. It is difficult to describe the thrill I felt when a student rushed up to me in the stairwell and pressed a poem into my hand, or when a "slow" student stayed after the bell to finish a poem begun in class.

I discovered that in teaching, as in writing, all my past experience was grist for the mill. The student unimpressed by my credentials as a poet was intrigued by my interviews with sports heroes, or by the fact that I ran four miles a day, or by the fact that I had once pumped gas to pay the rent. I shared many such experiences with my students, hoping to strike a chord of recognition and interest.

Finally, I told them how sports had opened a new world to me, a world reflected in my writing. I suggested that writing poems might do the same thing for them — open doors which they previously had thought closed. Only by writing poems, I told them, will you understand how the poet operates. You may discover the poet inside of you, heretofore unsuspected. This is a time to open doors, not close them.

In my journal I kept a record of how the two years progressed:

**December 10, 1975:** My first sink-or-swim class. Just me and 40 dubious adolescents. Asked them to write lines beginning with the words "I wish." Most of them wrote pedestrian stuff — "I wish for peace in the world." I feel discouraged. In fact, I've never felt so far from poetry in my life.

From that unpromising beginning, I discovered that if I simply had the students make the wish personal — "I wish that I . . ." — the results were much better. Some efforts, like this anonymous work, startled classmates and poet alike:

*I wish that I could be in Rome  
dressed in white satin. I would  
walk the bridges that lay toward  
the horizon. I would wear diamonds*

*on every finger and furs every  
day. To go out in the evening, I  
would wear white satin as I would  
watch the women staring with  
envy in their eyes.*

By March, 1976, we were deep into preparation of a book of the students' poems, collecting and typing them and having them printed offset by the school board office. We brought out 1,000 copies of a 100-page paperback, *A Sheet of Paper Let Loose in The Wind*, which was reviewed in several local papers (and by magazines as far away as Albuquerque), sent to every library in the state, and distributed to every high school in the parish, with a personal copy for each student having a poem in the book.

The school board was pleased and renewed the program for another year. Though I had been able to reach only six schools in the first year, in 1976-77 I covered all 12 parish high schools, spending two to four weeks in each.

**December 14, 1976:** Bordelonville. My last day here. I felt sad leaving the kids. In two classes, the mood was responsive, and in others there was sporadic interest. I asked them to fill out "evaluation" forms provided by the state department of education. The kids' comments were very positive. The teacher wrote that she thought the program was "frivolous" and the money would be better spent on basic composition instruction. This was exactly her position when I arrived two weeks ago, so I doubt I made any inroads here. She asked to look at my poetry anthologies (*An Introduction to Poetry* by X.J. Kennedy and *The American Poetry Anthology*, edited by Daniel Halpern), then pointed out the poems she thought "obscene" and "perverted." She told me that all the students cared about was "sex and having a good time." Hmmm. Pot calls kettle sex-crazed?

Is it maternal, this loathing I have to abandon their talent? They have talent but don't recognize it. They need someone who believes in it and can help them tap it. They need *me*, I truly believe. Because Mrs. S. attaches no value to it, she's quick to agree with the kid in class who scoffs when I read to them from Gertrude Stein ("Please be please be get, please get wet, wet naturally, naturally in weather") and ask them to play with sounds in their own writing. But then they produce:

*fluffy fleece  
rose floral  
splashes on cushions  
mist floats by  
seeps into panes  
rash passion  
surrounded by rolling plains*

So who is right, the scoffer or the scoffed at? Best of all, the students inspire me. I'm writing more myself — poetry, again, which I believed dead in me.

**January 24, 1977:** Plaucheville. Every time I face a new school, I go through this feeling of dread. Starting over is taxing. I'm tired of changing schools all the time. New teachers, new kids, new faces, new names — and by the time I learn the names, it's time to move on to the next school. I'm the circuit rider of Avoyelles Parish.

In Mrs. C.'s class, I began by telling the kids, "I'm going to read you this poem by Sylvia Plath ('Metaphors') and I want you to tell me what it means." I explained that each line in the poem is a clue to its message and asked them to ponder it out with me. While the message seems perfectly clear to me ("I'm a riddle in nine syllables,/An elephant, a ponderous house"), they seemed puzzled. But when we got to the line "I've eaten a bag of green apples" and I asked them what it meant and then said, "Have you ever heard the expression, 'She swallowed a watermelon?'" their faces lit up. "She's pregnant!" Right, you've got it. Then we went over each of the nine lines and related them to pregnancy. Maybe a little racy with tenth-graders, but you can practically see the light bulbs going on over their heads as they "get it." Mrs. C. told me she had never realized you could do that, help guide them to finding the meaning. She would have just given them the poem cold, she said, with no "expectations" or guidelines.

**February 26, 1977:** After much back-and-forth discussion with the school board office, I got permission for several classes to go to Natchitoches to hear Ernest Gaines read from *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*. My arguments to the board were based on the fact that Gaines, born and raised on Oscar Plantation near New Roads, grew up in surroundings similar to those in Avoyelles and has achieved national stature as an artist. The kids were excited. Gaines a study in brown — herringbone coat and the everpresent beret — tall and dignified. At a reception afterwards, he was unfailingly polite and attentive to everyone, answering what must have been the millionth question about *Miss Jane*. He is the most innately courteous man — almost courtly — I've ever met. The kids held out sheets of notebook paper and he patiently signed them — "To Pamela — Best Wishes — Ernest J. Gaines — Feb. 25, 1977."

**March 1, 1977:** Marksville. Pamela, the class clown, has discovered black pride. Today she brought her Ernest Gaines autograph to show the class — she'd had it laminated. Then in fifth hour, wanting my attention, she called out, "Miss Poet!"

**April 26, 1977:** My last day at Lafargue High School, the last school of the year. We wrote "telepathy" poems. I paired up with a boy named Kenneth, blond with glasses and suspenders. He would write down a phrase, hiding it from me, then look into my eyes and concentrate on beaming it to me. He sent me "pink and purple buildings," and I received "black hole of Calcutta."

**May 17, 1977:** Marksville. A marathon day at the school board office. We printed covers for our second book, *Jumping Like a Heart*. The covers look fantastic, a jumping frog silhouetted against the moon (done by artist-in-residence Debra Kendrick), in brown ink on cream paper. *Jumping Like a Heart* was an even bigger hit than our first book, and it too now reposes in libraries all over the state. Alas, the success of the books was not sufficient to ensure funds for a third year of the poet-in-residence program. With that knowledge, I wrote *Jumping's* introduction to serve as a guideline to teachers interested in offering creative writing to their classes. Some excerpts:

- *Most students enjoy using the acrostic device — write your own name down the page, then fill in with lines of poetry. Susie Gautheir came up with:*

Standing alone  
Untying  
Stems of roses  
Ignoring  
Everyone.

- *If students get stuck on the acrostics ("I have three e's in my name!"), I refer them to the dictionary (elegant, elephantine, erotic, exotic, eggplant, errant, ebony, echo, electrocardiogram).*

- *Another useful tool is Roget's International Thesaurus. When I assign a poem about color, I introduce Roget's color section, which is full of wonderful words to inspire poems. Asked to describe a color in terms of the senses, Vallery Murray wrote:*

Red smells like the grass we set afire last week.  
Red sounds like the dual exhaust of my uncle's red  
"ss chevelle."  
Red looks like the mistakes circled on an English  
test.  
Red tastes like the red pepper that almost choked me  
to death.  
Red feels like the day I finally got my drivers  
license.

- *Another good exercise is to write on the board words which may be unfamiliar to the students and ask that they use them in poems. Here Valerie Colvorich used unknown words in delightful new ways:*

My dog has a case of superfluous  
We took him to a henna who told us  
there was no hope  
We told the henna that he had spots of  
Rococo on his stomach too  
He gave the dog a shot of samba  
which calmed his balmy nerves down

- *Certain unlikely sounding projects best described as ventures into the unknown work amazingly well in the classroom. One such device is to give the students a poem in a language they don't know (I used a German poem by Holderlin quoted in the Whole Word Catalogue) and ask them to "translate" it. The idea, of course, is that they don't know German and so are free to make up their own translations. At first, they may stick closely to cognates — English words which sound or look like the German words (thus, wilden Rosen becomes, quite correctly, wild roses) — but as they progress they find their own poems developing and may translate less "literally." Here you see the poem in the original German, the correct translation, and a "mistranslation" by student Mark Lacour:*

Hälfte des Lebens  
  
Mit gelben Birnen hänget  
Und voll mit wilden Rosen

Das Land in den See,  
Ihr holden Schwäne,  
Und trunken von Küssen  
Tunkt ihr das Haupt  
Ins heilignüchterne Wasser.

Weh mir, wo nehm' ich, wenn  
Es Winter ist, die Blumen, und wo  
Den Sonnenschein  
Und Schatten der Erde?  
Die Mauern stehn  
Sprachlos und kalt, im Winde  
Klirren die Fahnen.

#### The Middle of Life

With yellow pears and full of wild  
roses the land hangs down into  
the lake, you lovely swans, and  
drunken with kisses you dip your  
heads into the holy and sober  
water.

Alas, where shall I find, when  
winter comes, the flowers, and  
where the sunshine and shadows  
of earth? The walls loom  
speechless and cold, in the wind  
weathercocks clatter.

#### After the Winter, by Mark Lacour

Gelben Birnen got hung with his mittens on  
With a wilted rose in his hands  
The land in the sea  
is where his hanging stand was  
After he was dead, he fell on a cushion  
The weather was warm his mother cried  
when he was buried, his relatives came  
It turned cold and the wind blew  
the storm  
what is happening?  
The wind stopped  
All the dust and stuff settled down  
His mother loved him.

With the publication of *Jumping Like a Heart*, my two years in Avoyelles Parish were over. Besides learning that I could work with students, perhaps my most important discovery was a forgotten love for the Louisiana countryside. My notebooks are full of vignettes: a poetry class at tiny Lafargue High School disrupted as everyone rushed to watch a herd of cows being ushered down the road; hearing Cajun French spoken as I waited in line at the grocery store; my neighbor Bitsy telling me "I had an *envie* for strawberries, so I stopped by the side of the road and bought some;" driving to Bordelonville in the mornings past winding bayous, giant hogs and an airplane parked in a farmyard; watching a baby cardinal struggle to free his head from his shell in the azalea bush outside my window; being menaced by a cow wearing a yellow identification "earring" as I ran my daily miles on the levee.

Such incidents wrapped themselves around my consciousness. The people of Avoyelles, like people anywhere, were unique; I shall never forget some of them, particularly my students. And the landscape of central Louisiana – the landscape from which my students' poems sprang – will be with me forever. □

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*Ruth Laney is a free-lance writer based in Louisiana. Her work has appeared in Women's Sports, The Runner, Track & Field News and Louisiana Life. Her story, "I'll Just Keep Running," appeared in Southern Exposure's special issue on sports.*

#### For C.P., Sixth Hour

Your classmates write poems  
while spring jumps up and down outside the window.  
They dream of beautiful girlfriends,  
red Trans Ams, blue Cutlass Supremes,  
grownup lives.  
They leave sweat and fingerprints on the thesaurus,  
chew no. 2 pencils, sigh,  
pitch desperate looks at the walls.  
Poetry hums in the room.  
Like an electric typewriter.  
Light-brown Lisa writes of yellow,  
maize, golden, straw, canaries.  
Fat Roy's violet cat eats a violet cake.  
They laugh,  
they twist in their desks,  
they grab each other's papers.  
You sit in the back of the room,  
shiny face closed, hand to your cheek,  
and refuse to join them. Politely.  
They read aloud. You listen.  
They hand you jagged pages. You read them  
and show your teeth.  
They bend their heads  
over their pages, intent.  
I gaze out over them, adrift  
in a sea of poetry.  
My eyes meet yours, shining and veiled.  
You are the door I want to unlock,  
the wild rabbit I fear to approach –  
if I do, you may vanish forever.  
I only hope  
we really are talking  
with our eyes, over their heads.

– Ruth Laney



illustration by Ronald Ballentine

## Ophelia Emma 1912

Augusts we'd go south to Mississippi  
into sickening, stifling heat  
each summer to see strangers  
from a past my daddy seldom speaks of:  
to the grandmother he saw outlive his mother,  
to the cousins he grew up with,  
to aunts whose husbands no one ever mentions.

They lived, all six sisters,  
in the town where they were born.  
They came each year to see us  
in the home they built again  
after the fire, before the Great War:  
Aunt Emma's house  
at the end of Seelbinder Road.

From the summer I was nine  
until I was fourteen,  
I recorded it all  
with my Brownie Hawkeye:  
my brother on the porch swing,  
no hair to hide his ears;  
my sister, pixie faced and silly in her jumpsuit:  
baby Venus on a myrtle stump;  
the obligatory family portrait on the steps:  
Aunt Emma, Mama, Daddy, Henry, Betty, me.

Now, ten years later, we go again,  
this time in June,  
but it is hotter than I remember.  
My glasses steam when I step outside.  
No one stirs from noon to three.  
One sister is dead and another soon will follow.  
I go now a woman grown and single,  
a foreign red-head still gangly.  
Never a beauty, I hear them thinking.  
Not even a Methodist.

If this is a reunion, it's not official.  
We are relations seldom seen.  
That alone is an event.  
I hear again my mother's warnings to behave.  
I am lost for conversation.  
All we share is blood and marriage.

In ten years Emma has not changed.  
She studies me across the room.  
"You young people like to look at pictures,"  
she says. "I have some pictures there.  
Bring them here."  
I bring three books of photographs and clippings,  
collections begun when photographs were rare



illustration by Renée Robison

and serious.

We turn page over page of firm-set faces,  
forms in heavy clothes and shoes  
seated or standing against studio backdrops  
or brown landscapes and clapboard houses.

Here is my grandfather.  
This is Zeda Musselwaite.  
That was a winter hog-killing.  
Here is my father with his cousins.  
This is the school. These are friends,  
a picnic by the river,  
a niece in Meridian.  
"He's dead," she says.  
"She died last year."  
"She's in a nursing home over in Greenwood."  
"He died the year I married."  
"I never hear from her anymore . . .  
I guess she's dead by now."  
"These pictures mean nothing to me."  
She says it more than once.  
"All my friends are dead or dying."

In our search for roots, Emma, we cling  
to photographs of women.  
We young people love to look at pictures.  
I look for signs in my grandmother's face:  
for the features I have gained from her,

for some evidence of the woman  
whose spirit and desires  
I am told I possess.  
I look for younger, smoother faces  
than those before me now,  
for the same light in the eyes,  
that same smile or turn of chin.  
I look sometimes to see myself old.  
How will I age, I wonder.  
Will I gain a girth or another chin?  
Will my hair salt gracefully?

And this – this photograph of two women  
standing on winter ground  
before the trellis of this house we sit in now,  
standing in heavy dresses and highbutton shoes,  
each with an arm encircling her friend's waist,  
drawing her close enough for hips to touch,  
each tilting her head toward a waiting shoulder,  
each looking into the camera as if to say,  
*Capture this moment. This is my friend.*  
*I want to remember her always.*

On it, in your hand, I read,  
"Ophelia Emma 1912"

There was some cause for this photograph.  
Was it a parting or a birthday?  
In three books I have seen no other likeness of  
this woman

whose impish smile dares the camera here:  
"You cannot take this woman from me.  
We shall share the frame forever."  
I want to know more of this.  
I hand you this memory and ask.  
You shrug. "Oh, that's Ophelia."  
Your tone says ask no more.

Later, when the house is full of relations,  
I find you in a corner alone,  
out of the hub of reunion jokes and stories,  
and I ask again.

Who was Ophelia?

"She was my best friend.

We were in school together.

She was a born artist.

She could draw anything."

Your eyes have gone a distance I can't reach.

"She died. In 1917."

And then, as if you put it there yesterday,  
you reach, without rising, behind you to a desk,  
open the second drawer,  
take out pages from a writing tablet.

Pages on which one friend  
copied for another

a favorite poem,

illuminated it from her heart,

gave it as a keepsake.

I hold now in my hand

a memory outlasting photographs,

stored here for over sixty years.

– Emily Seelbinder

# The Dharma Bum of Rocky Mount

by Stephen Hoffius

Jack Kerouac, proclaimed on paperback covers today as "the King of the Beats," the daddy of the Beatniks, stood out, even in a time as schizophrenic as the late 1940s and '50s, as a mass of contradictions. Befitting his current image, he was often wild, loose, free, desperate for action. "The only people for me," he wrote in *On the Road*, the book which burst the Beats into the national consciousness in 1957, "are the mad ones, the ones who are mad to live, mad to talk, mad to be saved, desirous of everything at the same time, the ones who never yawn or say a commonplace thing, but burn burn burn like fabulous yellow roman candles exploding like spiders across the stars and in the middle you see the blue centerlight pop and everybody goes 'Awww!'" At the same time, Kerouac spent much of his life trailing his mother, Gabrielle, across the country, taking her with him when he could, anxious to fulfill a deathbed promise to his father to care for her, though he possessed none of the financial or emotional resources necessary to do so.

From the calm and quiet of his mother's home, Kerouac rushed to New York City for crazed day-and-night-long parties, raced across the continent to San Francisco, to Mexico City, to Denver, but always he would return, sober up, write uninterrupted and relax. And then he would leave again. His life was filled with these cycles, and the tension they produced provided much of the strength of Kerouac's writing. Just as he moved between quiet home life and a wild party life, so did his work balance calm acceptance with paranoia, humility with great arrogance, gentleness with violence.

After the second world war and until the late 1950s, Gabrielle spent much of her time in Rocky Mount, North Carolina, where her daughter – Kerouac's sister, Nin – had settled. Kerouac visited her often, spending holidays, sometimes long months, in the small house by the Big Eason Woods. Rocky Mount was hardly a center of the Beat Movement. But there Jack Kerouac lived for parts of his most creative years. There he wrote many of his least frantic works – *Visions of Gerard, Pic*, much of a Buddhist volume he called *Book of Prayers*. There he could leave his pressure-cooker lifestyle, slow down and regain some peace. And there he was strengthened for many of the zooming cross-country journeys recorded in his most popular books, the travels and adventures that came to symbolize an

alternative to mainstream materialistic America, a nation staggering from the second world war and settling into boosterism and complacency. Kerouac's books, for their subjects and styles, became the Bibles of a movement that sought to establish new moral values for America. That movement continues today, and Kerouac's writings (*On the Road* still sells 50,000 copies annually) remain an important part of it.

**J**ack Kerouac first visited Rocky Mount just before Christmas, 1948. He described the scene in some detail in *On the Road*, with the location changed to Virginia. He was completing his first-published and most traditional novel, *The Town and the City*, and taking classes at the New School for Social Research, when he and Gabrielle headed south for the holidays. He had written of his holiday plans to his friend Neal Cassady in California, but was surprised when Cassady suddenly arrived, unannounced, covered with the grime of several days travel, his ex-wife LuAnne Henderson and a friend still sleeping in Cassady's new Hudson. Kerouac writes in *On the Road* that Cassady, "sandwich in hand, stood bowed and jumping before the big phonograph, listening to a wild bop record that I had just bought called 'The Hunt,' with Dexter Gordon and Wardell Gray blowing their tops before a screaming audience that gave the record fantastic frenzied volume. The Southerners looked at one another and shook their heads in awe. 'What kind of friends does Sal [Kerouac] have?' they asked my brother. He was stumped for an answer. Southerners don't like madness the least bit, not Dean's [Cassady's] kind."

Though Kerouac hadn't been in the South long, he needed little encouragement to leave his uncomfortable family gathering: "gaunt men and women with the old Southern soil in their eyes, talking in low, whining voices about the weather, the crops, and the general weary recapitulation of who had a baby, who got a new house, and so on." Together, the four travelers drove non-stop to New York with some of Gabrielle's furniture. Kerouac and Cassady returned to North Carolina 30 hours after they had left, picked up Gabrielle and took her back to New York.

In the spring of 1951, fresh from the frantic composition of *On the Road* — a single paragraph typed in three weeks on a 250-foot roll of teletype paper so he would not have to waste time changing pages — Kerouac again relaxed in Rocky Mount, with a book supply that included Dostoevski, Proust, Lawrence, Faulkner, Gorky, Whitman, Dickinson, Yeats and more. In the summer of 1952, he returned to Rocky Mount after a tense visit with William Burroughs in Mexico City, where Kerouac had completed *Dr. Sax*, his recreation of a childhood fantasy. His manner of composition demanded recuperation, and he often found it in North Carolina.

Kerouac's sister and her husband, Paul Blake, lived in a house just outside of town, near what is now Langley Cross Roads. It was — and remains — an isolated place. On the back of the house stands a porch — now enclosed, but then walled by screens — which Kerouac converted to a bedroom from Christmas, 1955, until April, 1956. Shortly before that, he had met poet Gary Snyder and had become imbued with Snyder's love of the outdoors. He stretched out a sleeping bag on this porch and slept there through the winter months. Twice daily he wandered into the Big Eason

Woods behind the house and meditated cross-legged on matted straw, beneath twin pine trees. As Kerouac describes the scene in *Dharma Bums*, the area was beautiful: "The ground was covered with moonlit frost. The old cemetery down the road gleamed in the frost. The roofs of nearby farmhouses were like white panels of snow. I went through the cottonfield rows followed by Bob, a big bird dog. . . . We were all absolutely quiet. The entire moony countryside was frosty silent, not even the little tick of rabbits or coons anywhere. An absolute cold blessed silence. Maybe a dog barking five miles away toward Sandy Cross. Just the faintest, faintest sound of big trucks rolling out the night on 301, about twelve miles away, and of course the distant occasional Diesel baugh of the Atlantic Coast Line passenger and freight trains going north and south to New York and Florida. A blessed night."

Down the street from the Blake-Kerouac home stood two country stores, and they remain today, both run by members of the Langley family. In the stores, "the old boys there sitting among bamboo poles and molasses barrels" would ask him what he was doing in the woods. Studying and sleeping, he'd say. When he talked of his Buddhist studies, they suggested that he return to the religion he was born with. Many of those same "tobacco-chewing stick-whittlers" still sit in the stores, but now Kerouac himself is a subject they are asked about. In the last decade, dozens of Kerouac fans have visited the area, looking for a Beat memorial, Kerouac's old haunts, hoping to hear anecdotes of him. They're usually disappointed. Those in the store nod and chew, chew and nod. Yep, they knew him, they say. Nope, he didn't do much, they say, just minded his own business. Nope, they don't remember ever selling him any wine, though he wrote of long Rocky Mount nights with bottles of wine. The landlady of Kerouac's house, his former next door neighbor, doesn't add much more: Kerouac had wandered through her backyard often, heading for the stores. He seemed odd at the time, she says, barefoot, unshaven, usually wearing a plaid shirt, writing and sitting in the woods, never working a "real" job. "Today, of course," she smiles, "that wouldn't seem unusual. He was just ahead of his time." When the bookmobile from the library first came through with *On the Road*, she says, everyone felt proud that he had been published. She admits, though, that she never read it all.

**W**hen it was first published, Kerouac's writing shocked many. He rejected materialism, politics, most racial stereotypes, the quest for suburban bliss, Western religions, pop music, even rationality. He promoted spontaneity, Buddhism, mysticism, expressed emotions, jazz and his alternating cycles of asceticism and wild overindulgence in alcohol and drugs. He was alternately in love with the world, and overwhelmed by its immense pain.

American prose style was then heavily influenced by Hemingway's short, crisp, journalistic sentences. Kerouac's sentences flowed in rambling discourse, each filled with a dozen scattered thoughts, sometimes interrupted by parenthetical phrases that filled a page. His goal was to find a natural style to present people and scenes as they came to him, as a storyteller would present them, and not just in stiff chronological order. His extensive notes and even more extensive memory (Allen Ginsberg once called him "The

Great Rememberer”) allowed him to write as if he were experiencing events that he instantly put down on paper, and he included many of the inconsistencies, seemingly unnecessary details and pointless conversations in which we all fill our days. To many readers he brought great life to apparent trivialities. To early critics, his style was both shallow and indulgent, and he was widely attacked, not just for his own work, but as a representative of all those who tried to stretch the bounds of writing in the late 1940s and early ’50s.

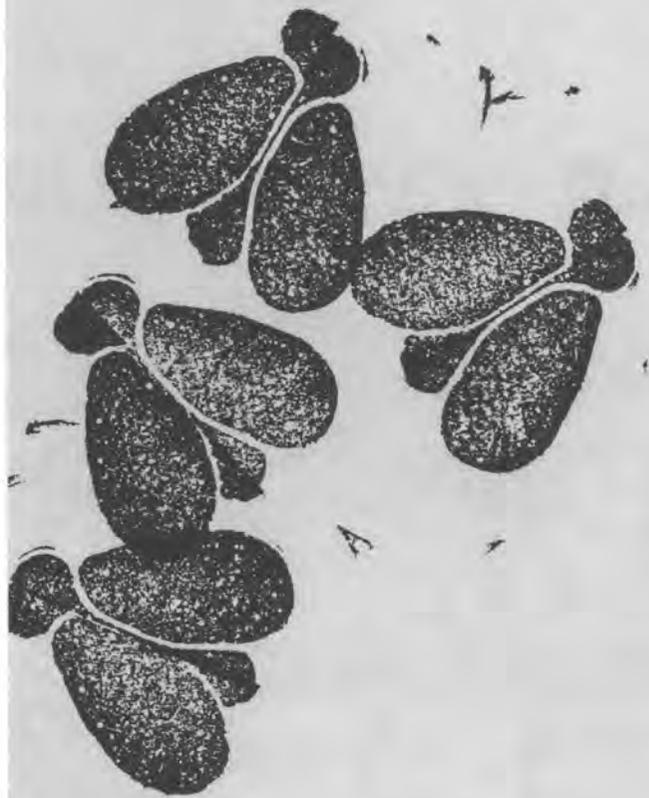
After the publication of *On the Road*, Kerouac became a cult figure and a hated stereotype. Wherever he went he found that people had already formed opinions of him, had branded him and expected him to live up to their images. Ultimately his ability to write collapsed when Kerouac’s fame prevented him from escaping to the anonymity of small towns or unknown cities. The only escape he found was into booze, and his already great thirst quickly became a strong case of alcoholism. His admirers didn’t help. His hard-drinking reputation encouraged them, and they lined up to ply the great man with alcohol. One experience in North Carolina was typical: in the early ’60s, Kerouac was hitching along the east coast, one of his last hitchhiking experiences, when he was picked up by a University of North Carolina student. Excited by his find, the driver took Kerouac back to Chapel Hill, where he was paraded through every bar on Franklin Street by students disappointed when he grew too drunk to discourse on literature. He could no longer retreat, as he did in Rocky Mount, and because of that he could no longer write. “Let me tell you,” he once said, “a true writer should be an observer and not go around *being* observed, like Mailer and Ginsberg. Observing – that’s the duty and oath of a writer.” He died, lonely and frustrated, hiding from the public, in 1969. He was 47 years old.

Today, though Kerouac’s books still demand an uncommon patience, their energy remains strong, their rhythms often equal to good jazz riffs, and his characters are generally endearing, even sweet. While he wrote extensively of his friends and their adventures, his works concentrate as well on truck drivers who gave him lifts, buddies who worked on the railroad with him, waitresses in restaurants. The community that he described was a very broad one, broader than that presented by most of his fellow writers of the time, and included the “stick-whittlers” at the corner stores in Rocky Mount as well as hipsters in hot jazz clubs. Jack Kerouac had a sense of people – of their lives and their language – that showed a great respect, whatever their class or race, for their histories and for their voices. This didn’t develop because of his time in Rocky Mount – he found it early growing up in Lowell, Massachusetts – but it was the kind of respect that is common to the best of Southern writers, and that perhaps was nurtured for him in the South.

In the South he could relax, catch his breath, unwind before returning to the cauldron. The peace of Rocky Mount kept him from falling too much into either of his primary emotions: drunken frenzy or pounding despair. It served for Kerouac, as it has for so many writers, as a way of keeping balance. □

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Stephen Hoffius is a free-lance writer in Charleston, South Carolina.



## Dog

A dead dog  
on his back by the road  
his paws and stomach sprung up in the air  
his guts the color of clear sky  
and corn flowers.  
A million flies feasting  
love is everywhere.

— Wallace Kaufman

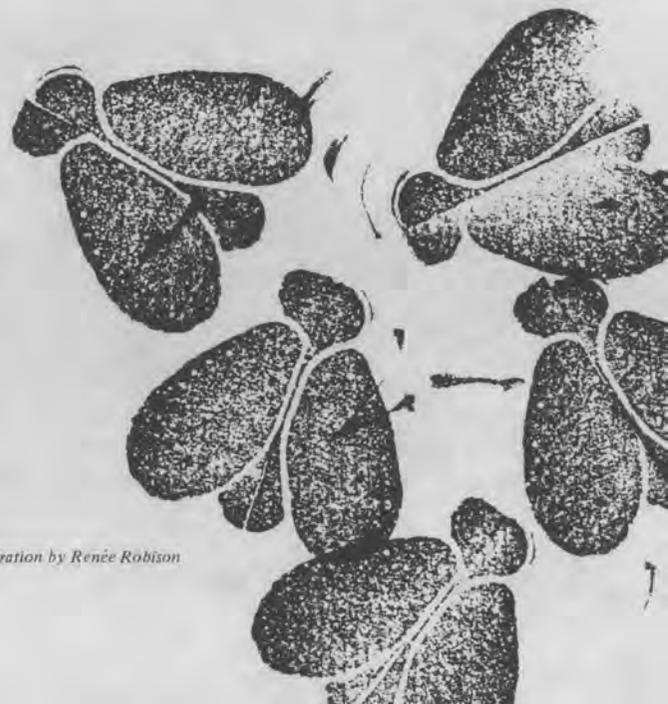


illustration by Renée Robison

# In Print, Out of Print: Book Publishing in the '80s

by Bob Brinkmeyer

**B**eing a writer from the South and wanting to be published by a major publishing house has always meant sending your manuscript north, usually to New York or Boston. Being identified as a Southerner by a publishing establishment that has no links with the South has put many writers in an uncomfortable, even compromising, position. Flannery O'Connor's words on her struggles as a writer speaks tellingly about this situation: "If you are a Southern writer, that label, and all the misconceptions that go with it, is pasted on you at once, and you are left to get it off as best you can. When I first began to write my particular *bête noire* was that mythical entity, The School of Southern Degeneracy. Every time I heard about The School of Southern Degeneracy, I felt like Br'er Rabbit stuck on the Tarbaby."

Southern writers these days face an even more menacing editorial reception than O'Connor did in the '50s, for now most publishing houses, which are still located up north, are controlled by corporate conglomerates like International Telephone and Telegraph and Music Corporation of America. As *Forbes* magazine's most recent annual report on the publishing industry says, "It's hard to find an industry that has been picked cleaner by the conglomerates than book publishing." It's so true. Since the early 1960s, when Random House absorbed Alfred Knopf, the publishing industry has been marked by a relentless series of mergers and takeovers, the end result being that scores of once private, individually owned publishing houses have fallen under the ever-enlarging umbrella of corporate ownership. A few examples illustrate



Frank Holyfield

the trend: CBS now owns Fawcett Publications, Popular Library and Holt, Rinehart & Winston; MCA owns New American Library, Coward, McCann & Geoghegan, Berkley Books and G.P. Putnam's Sons; ITT owns Pocket Books and Simon & Schuster; and Time, Inc., owns Little, Brown & Co. and Book of the Month Club, Inc.

While not all major publishing houses are owned by conglomerates, many that have remained independent, such as Doubleday, McGraw-Hill, Harper & Row and Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, have broadened their business interests, becoming conglomerates themselves. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, for example, has acquired more than 30 companies, including such un-literary enterprises as Sea World, Inc., a marine amusement park, and Captain Kidd's Seafood Gallery, Inc., a California fast-food chain. The only major hardcover book publishers that remain both free from conglomerate control and uncluttered with other business pursuits are Crown; W.W. Norton; Farrar, Straus & Giroux; Houghton Mifflin and Macmillan.

This move to conglomerate ownership has had profound effects on the publishing industry, not the least being the scads of money that have poured in from the parent organizations. Most of this money has been directed into the discovery and promotion of what publishers call the "big book" — the blockbuster which floods the marketplace and which inevitably is made into a major movie and then sold to a television network. Incredible sums of money are involved in this process. Not too long ago, for instance, Bantam Books bought the paperback rights to Judith Krantz's novel *Princess Daisy* — for over \$3.2 million. Only with the backing of large financial corporations can money in such amounts enter the publishing marketplace.

Pursuit of the big book has created a situation in which a number of publishers are placing a great deal more time, energy and money into making sure that a book's financial statement rather than its text reads well. Not that publishers haven't all along been concerned with making a profit; they too, obviously, have had bills to pay. But bending under the pressure of parent companies, which have brought into the publishing industry a revolutionary overhaul of its once simple

and often whimsical marketing techniques and strategies, many publishers now have expanded their promotion departments so that they — rather than the editorial offices — are the hub of the operation. As a result, editorial standards have dropped. Copyediting is often left undone. Editors are evaluated not on their literary discoveries but on the financial statements of the books they have recommended.

With the increased presence of Hollywood in the publishing industry — Gulf & Western owns Paramount Pictures; Warner Communications owns Warner Books; MCA owns Universal Pictures — this has become the era of the package deal, in which the production and promotion of books into movies, and oftentimes into television series, are intricately linked. This media alliance has gone so far that it is not unusual for representatives of the various industries to sit down together and "generate" a product. With a bare plot in hand, these wheeler-dealers will hire an author to write a book and a screenwriter to complete a script, and then, when their products are ready to go, they will orchestrate an elaborate promotion schedule whereby the appearances of the book in hardback and then paperback are timed in such a way with the movie that the three will promote each other over an extended period. Sometimes the book appears first, sometimes the movie. The process usually completes itself with a new round of reprintings when the movie finally appears on television.

For authors, this emphasis on the big book has created a brutal caste system. At the top rest a relatively few authors who are making incredible sums of money (Judith Krantz, for one); these are the ones who, at their publishers' urging and coaching, are running themselves ragged, crisscrossing the country in search of radio and television talk shows where they can plug their books. These are the writers of bestsellers — or books their publishers foresee as potential bestsellers. In contrast to these elite authors, those writers on the lower end of the caste system — particularly new writers trying to get their first books published and those known in the trade as "middle" writers (those who have shown some potential, have published a book or two, but have not reached the bestseller lists) — either are not getting published or, if they

are, are saddled with limited press runs and meager advances.

Adding to the plight of the struggling writer is the recent dominance of the bookselling marketplace by chain bookstores, such as B. Dalton and Waldenbooks, where the standard fare is bestseller, bestseller and bestseller. Chain bookstores for the most part stock only what they think will sell fast, and when books don't perform according to management projections (B. Dalton's has a computer hook-up in every cash register in each of its stores, and therefore its executives know at all times *exactly* how many copies have been sold of every book stocked in their nationwide inventory), they are yanked in favor of more popular titles.

To make matters even worse for the non-elite writers, a recent Internal Revenue Service decision prohibits publishers from depreciating books stored in warehouses unless they are destroyed or sold at discount. This ruling will undoubtedly discourage publishers from taking chances on books that may not sell out quickly and will further limit press runs on those that they do decide to go with.

The publishing industry is in the throes of dramatic changes which are having profound effects on what reading material — books and otherwise — is being made available to all of us. In this section are a number of testimonies from this new conglomerate industry. In the excerpts from Thomas Whiteside's essay, "Onward and Upward with the Arts — Book Publishing," which originally appeared in *The New Yorker*, those involved with and those who have dealt with the major publishing houses speak on what is happening there. John Beecher's "On Suppression" discusses the problems he had — and his struggles are typical of many authors' — when his publisher brought out but refused to support his *Collected Poems*. On an upbeat note, Judy Hogan of Carolina Wren Press and Tom Campbell and John Valentine of the Regulator Bookshop describe their efforts at independent publishing and book-selling. Little wonder in this age of conglomerate control that Hogan, Campbell and Valentine see their ventures not only as important in terms of achieving personal fulfillment but also in maintaining truly free and high-quality literary expression. □

# CONGLOMERATES: Swallowing Up the Industry

by Thomas Whiteside

*Editor's note: The following quotations are taken from the series "Onward and Upward with the Arts – Book Publishers, Parts I, I and III," published in September and October, 1980, by The New Yorker. The author, a veteran New Yorker staff writer, has written several books and articles on the mass communications industry.*

## The "Big Book"

There were some young editors at Putnam who were proposing some authors they thought we ought to publish. I said at the meeting, "Unless we agree to support young writers with advertising, I don't think we should be buying their work – because it's unfair, and because it's so embarrassing to work with an author for so many months and to know that after all that work that author is just not going to be supported by the publisher." And I said to Peter Israel [Putnam's managing director], "Look, among all the books I bought for Putnam, those two Puzo books netted Putnam two-and-a-half million dollars in paperback-rights income. Can't we peel off \$20,000, \$30,000 from this roll and put it into these new authors?" He said, "No. That's not the way we work." I wrote out my resignation, and said I would leave Putnam at the end of the year.

– William Targ,  
former editor-in-chief, Putnam

Concentration on the big book is at the cost of other books, and this goes contrary to the claim made by publishers who are specializing in the big book – that profits from the big book are used to carry the rest of their lists, the works that aren't going to be big books but, rather, are going to sell *only* 4,000 or 5,000 copies. I remember a conversation with a younger editor in which he

defended the policies of the larger companies. He said, "It's ridiculous to say that we're not interested in books that aren't going to be really big sellers. We're always being told by the publisher to look for books of literary merit." But then he said, "Of course, we're told not to bring to any editorial conference any book that's likely to sell less than 4,000 or 5,000 copies." Well, you can't have it both ways.

– Robert Straus  
Farrar, Straus & Giroux

With all the conglomerate money in publishing today, it's like playing Monopoly. If we had to use our own resources, we'd think twice about bidding as much as we do. . . . But with a parent or a conglomerate that has annual sales of two billion dollars and up, with two or three million shareholders, what is the risk? What's the diminution of stockholder dividends if you are wrong? A mill in most cases.

– Ronald Busch,  
past president, Ballantine Books

## ...and the Poor Get Poorer

There's no doubt that, with most of the time and energy of most publishers concentrated on ever fewer but more profitable titles, things are becoming harder for the middle-level book and its author. If they don't happen to be a book-club choice and if it doesn't look as though they'd get paperback money, there's very little chance for them. Some of these authors are still able to sell their books to publishers, but then they find their books are not getting any kind of real in-house support in terms of advertising and so on, and in active interest generally. I just think that the sense of frustration is going to keep building among serious writers who can't get the kind of backing they need.

If, as an agent, you are interested in encouraging serious writing, you have to be careful to represent writers who aren't making instant money in addition to representing the more commercial ones. But it is hard under present conditions, and sometimes I get discouraged and wonder if I can afford, not just financially, but *emotionally*, to go on doing it. It's such a strain because these authors are suffering so much disappointment – "I've got these wonderful reviews, and why isn't the publisher even advertising the books?" How many times a day can I say, "Look, you didn't get a big paperback sale." And they say, "Well, I would have if they'd advertised more." It's this *over* and *over* and *over*."

– Lynn Nesbit  
International Creative Management

Sure, somebody's getting hurt by all this. The rich are getting richer and the poor are getting poorer. It used to be that if you were a young person and wanted to be a writer, you could go to a publisher and get enough of an advance to live adequately till your next book. An \$8,000 to \$10,000 paperback sale does not occur anymore – either you sell the damned thing for half a million or you get nothing.

– Richard Snyder  
president, Simon & Schuster

## The Editor as Hustler

When things were more open in this business, there was a lot more concern and attention paid to the artistic relationship between editors and authors, and, to put it crudely, less talk about deals. A glance at most of the books in bookstores today will reveal that this isn't just nostalgia talking. It's clear that there are now more books appearing that are badly edited and badly written — bad in every aspect, from syntax to structure and internal organization — than there used to be. There has been a definite decline in editorial standards over the past 20 years or so, and it's apparent all up and down the line in the editorial process, beginning with the editor per se and going on through the copyediting and proofreading stages. Perhaps this decline can be connected with a widespread decline of standards in our society. The cause-and-effect relationship is obviously difficult to disentangle, but certainly in publishing the influx of conglomerate money, the increase in the size and pace of publishing operations and in the shifts not only of editors but of authors from house to house, the decreasing loyalties that go with that, and the whole concept of editorial packaging — all these things tend to distract even the best-intentioned editor from what he used to focus his professional attention on.

You find more and more that editors are people whose title is a misnomer. And you find more and more that as the acquisition of rights has become the primary part of an editor's job, the relationship between the editor and the author has become more limited, with the actual shaping and line-by-line sharpening of the manuscript being relegated to, at best, younger assistants, and in many cases that stage is skipped entirely, with the manuscript going straight into the copyediting phase — the final editing and styling of the book.

— Aaron Ascher  
Farrar, Straus & Giroux

A number of my friends in the industry have moved around to four, five, even more houses in the past 10 years, during all these conglomerate takeovers. Now you have a situation where you have valuable editors who are working in an atmosphere of fear and anxiety and who have been turned to marking up profitable production records instead of spending their time looking for literary excellence. When I started in publishing, during the '60s, the advertising business had that reputation, but now the kind of anxiety we used to associate with advertising has permeated the publishing business itself.

— unidentified trade house employee

## Spontaneous Generation of a Literary Property

As for us as agents, we make sure that we not only control all the markets but *choreograph* their interplay. You want the hardcover coming out at a certain time. Then you want the paperback out at a properly calculated time.

If all goes according to schedule, the hardcover version of the book [*Atlantic City*, by Paul Erdman] will be

published in 1981. Filming of the movie will probably start at the same time. Then will come the first paperback edition. It'll be presented as a *true* paperback edition rather than as a tie-in with the movie. During this time, the hardcover and paperback editions will be getting all the visibility; they will be building interest, and an audience for the motion picture that is being made. By the time shooting is finished and the movie is edited and ready to show, the paperback edition of the book should have been out for three months or so. The paperback will have had the benefit of an enormous amount of publicity and advertising money in print and on TV, and it's probable that the movie studio will contribute to the publisher's advertising appropriation for the hardcover book, too, and undoubtedly Erdman will be making TV appearances all over for the hardcover and paperback editions. Then, after the paperback has been out those three months and the movie is released, a *new* paperback edition of the book, with a new cover, explicitly tying the book in to the movie, and bearing the movie artwork and logo, will be published. And that will set off a new round of publicity, promotion and advertising.

— George Diskant,  
agent, Ziegler, Diskant Agency

Peter [Guber, producer of "The Deep" and "Midnight Express"] and I were sitting around one day outside his house, talking about books and movies we could do together. Peter lives up on Mulholland Drive, overlooking the city. He said, looking down on the city, "What would happen if all this burned down?" I said, "There would be a terrible L.A. fire. Let's do the terrible L.A. fire as a book and as a movie." So all right. So I found a writer, and we came up with a concept, and Peter and I came up with a story line, and we gave it to the writer, and the writer wrote the book. It was O.K. — we did have revisions on it. [The book, which was written by Edward Stewart, was called *The Great Los Angeles Fire*. Simon & Schuster has published it in hardcover.] And because Peter is such a good promoter we took the project to Columbia Pictures, and because of Peter's track record of having two enormous successes as a producer the studio bought a share of the book rights and the movie rights to the book for more than 10 times what we'd had to pay the author. Then, because we'd made this big movie sale, we went to Fawcett, and Fawcett gave us a six-figure advance for the paperback rights.

We did something innovative in selling the paperback rights. In addition to sending the book around to all the paperback houses, we produced a five-minute video cassette about *The Great Los Angeles Fire*. What it was was L.A. TV station outtakes with voice track over it taken from the book, and it was like this stirring five-minute movie, and at the end, coming out of the flames, was a copy of the book. Peter's just a genius at that sort of thing. And we got a book that if we'd done under normal circumstances would have had a mediocre life, but now it's almost an assured success, because we're close to \$400,000 in sub-right sales on it before we've even published it. We gave the author a \$30,000 dollar advance to write the book, and Peter's risk was only \$10,000, as his part of the author's fee. This is an example of almost-no-risk publishing.

— David Obst  
president, Simon & Schuster

## McDonaldization of Bookshops

One terrible thing is the big national bookstore chains. This, to me, is perhaps the most lethal part of what's going on, because so far the big publishing houses haven't driven out the smaller publishing houses to the extent that the big-chain-bookstore economy is driving out the personal bookstores, stores in which people who ran them *cared* about writers and books, and not only best-sellers. And the net effect on publishing of the independent bookstores' going out of business all over is restrictive.

— Lynn Nesbit  
*International Creative Management*

We try for a bright-colored, cartoony feeling in our stores. When the customers walk in, they shouldn't feel they have to whisper, the way they might in the old-style bookstore. We use the phrase, "We take the awesomeness out of the book-buying experience." Many people tend to feel intimidated when they go into a bookstore. You have no sense of intimidation in our stores.

We look for multiple purchases all the time. We work the impulse areas very hard. The checkout area is especially conducive to impulse buying. We use table displays and dump bins [freestanding prefabricated display racks] for best-sellers, and you have to walk by different displays of the same books two or three times when you go through the store.

— unidentified B. Dalton  
*advertising and promotion executive*

## There's No Biz Like Show Biz

Radio is very important in selling books. People listen to radio while they're driving, and in California that accounts for a lot of time, so I go on radio interview shows a lot. One thing about radio interviews — the station breaks come so often that the interviewers will keep saying after the breaks, "We've been talking to Judith Krantz, the author of *Scruples*, the new best-seller." On TV, all they do is flash that book for a few seconds.

In Chicago and out here in L.A., you have to have a local person who knows the media and is a specialist in arranging TV and radio appearances. Besides the publicity people at Crown and Warner Books, I've got the services of Jay Allen, who, as I'm sure you know, handled appearances for authors going back to Jacqueline Susann. Out here, Jay Allen has the contacts nobody else has. He said to me, "I told Merv that none of my clients will go on 'The Merv Griffin Show' if there's a Gabor on. Because they steal the time that my client would normally have." Nobody can make that statement to Merv except Jay Allen. He's retiring from the business any day, but he's handling another appearance of mine this week on Merv Griffin. I'm keyed up now. Tomorrow is my hair day, so I'll be up for Merv. Merv does the best plug of all. He holds that book up and he says, "This is a terrific book; you've got to read this book!"

Well, the Griffin show — the first thing in the morning, after I leave the taping, I'll be flying out to Minneapolis-St. Paul and on to Houston, Dallas, Fort Worth. The treadmill. And then there's "The Mike Douglas Show" here when I

get back. Everybody's out here now. Johnny Carson, Griffin, Douglas — all the talk-show people have moved here. That's why New York is not a good media town anymore — it just takes the network stuff. There's hardly any talk show you can go on from New York, except maybe the "Today" show, and I got on the "Today" show the other day from here.

— Judith Krantz,  
*bestselling author*

A "Memo on Media Exposure" given to McGraw-Hill authors by the company's trade-book publicity department offers neophytes to the air some general advice, including the desired comportment of a writer before the cameras, and it also lists some of the hazards that may be encountered. "Do not underestimate the value of a minor show," the memo advises the authors soothingly, just in case one or another of them may feel that the shows listed on the tour schedule don't quite seem to live up to expectations. "Such a program may provide valuable exposure to an audience that would not be reached otherwise." It goes on, "Resolve to be at your best on every show, regardless of your opinion of its format or host." Authors are also urged to suppress their reaction to a discovery they might make just as they go before the cameras: "Do not feel incensed if [the talk-show host] has obviously not read your book. This happens on top-notch shows as well." What would be a lot worse would be to discover that there wasn't a copy of the book itself on the premises. So:

*Always bring a copy of your book with you. They may not have it on hand, it may have been filched — safe is safe. Assume that your interviewer has NOT looked through the book; be prepared to give a quick capsule-summary of its contents. Radio and TV commercials [that interrupt the show periodically] can be put to good use, as during that time you can quietly mention to the host what topics you would like to hit next.*

The memo goes on to describe the standards that writers are expected to live up to:

*A measure of showmanship is definitely in order. By agreeing to appear before a TV camera or behind a radio mike, you have temporarily assumed the obligations of a show-biz personality. You must radiate self-confidence, charm, charisma. Keep in mind that your normal hand and head gestures will lose all impact when reduced to a TV screen: do not fear to over-gesticulate within reason. . . . Also practice to vary the pitch, tonal qualities and volume of your voice — the purpose is to add strength, punch and interest to your delivery. . . .*

*For every point you make, have two or three stock examples that illustrate your statement quickly and memorably. Be armed with a supply of well thought out, brief personal anecdotes and pertinent, relevant aphorisms which will sound as if they had just occurred to you and are being ad-libbed on the spur of the moment. . . .*

*Do not hesitate to mention the title of your book from time to time, and your publisher at least once. . . . Never refer to "my book" — always mention the title, were it only for the benefit of that part of the audience which always tunes in late. □*

# ON SUPPRESSION

by John Beecher

**G**ulag Archipelago is in every bookshop window across the country. How smugly we congratulate ourselves on our putative freedom of expression without fear of a crushing totalitarian bureaucracy. But search these same bookshops for the works of contemporary American poets. If you can find any such at all they will be buried in the darkest corner of the shelves or banished to the balcony under "Belles Lettres."

Among the Soviets the opposite situation prevails. Andrei Vozneshen-sky, a contemporary Russian poet, recently told an American audience that his latest collection, issued by the State publishing trust, numbered 300,000 in the first edition and the bookshop counters were swept bare in a single week. Nor is he an apologist for the regime. Just a poet, pure and simple.

Contrast the predicament of American poets today. The authorities, in our case the big commercial publishers, usually units in a great conglomerate combining the production of books, peanut butter, electronic components, sanitary napkins and toilet tissue, just suppress us in a manner subtler than the way Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn was suppressed in the Workers' Fatherland. They publish a very select few of us to establish tax credits and stay respectable, but in editions so small as to be invisible to the naked eye. One editor-in-chief for a major publishing house told me his firm's first editions of poetry numbered 500 copies. When my editor at Macmillan announced to me that

they were issuing my *Collected Poems: 1924-1974* in a first edition of 5,000 or 6,000 clothbound copies because they considered it to be such an important work, I was surprised and gratified. Of course the edition when it appeared did not actually number 5,000 or 6,000 copies. Some potentate in the upper reaches of the shadowy outfit had cut the number to 3,500. Still this was, for poetry in America today, an astronomically large figure. Before the year was out, another substantial edition was issued by Macmillan in response to the 130 reviews received, still in cloth however. A second publisher wished to issue the book in paper but was rebuffed by the dog in the Macmillan manger. All this is done on the specious ground that "poetry won't sell." Of course it won't. They make absolutely sure of that by issuing a token number of books in minuscule editions, which they neither advertise subsequently nor promote in any customary way. How could poetry published and marketed in this surreptitious manner be sold to a mass public conditioned to buy through saturation advertising the way Pavlov's dog salivated only when he heard the little bell ring?

**W**hen Macmillan produced my *Collected Poems: 1924-1974*, I was very pleased with the big book. The design and printing were impeccable, the format large and bold, the dust-jacket spectacular, just the thing to decorate your coffee table. It was released under most auspicious circumstances in my old home town, Birmingham, Alabama, where I had first become a poet a half century earlier by writing about the inhuman conditions prevailing in the steel mills. I first worked there during the non-union, 12-hour shift days of the early

'20s. For many years I had been regarded with distaste by the Birmingham power structure because of my defense of human rights in both writing and action. Nor could it be overlooked that, although I was practically a native, my great-great-aunt Harriet Beecher Stowe had been the author of a subversive work called *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. These things are hard to live down. However, a new dispensation reigned. Bull Connor, his fire hoses and raging police dogs were an uncomfortable memory. A new image of the city was being projected. May 1, the release date of my book as well as the international working class holiday, was declared to be "John Beecher Day" in Birmingham.

At the "John Beecher Day" ceremonies in Magnolia Park I received the key to the city and a mayoral proclamation declaring that I had "won national recognition as the poet and spokesman for the weak and oppressed," and had "stood tall for our American ideals." I was furthermore dubbed an "Honorary Citizen." Hundreds of helium-filled balloons imprinted "I am a Beecher Creature" floated over the skyscrapers of the Alabama metropolis.

Far from making capital of the Birmingham honors and widespread attendant publicity, my publishers ignored the whole affair. Not a line of advertising of the book appeared in the Alabama newspapers which were saluting its publication with stories and reviews — and not a line anywhere else for that matter. I then requested from Macmillan's publicity department a list of the publications to which my book had been sent for review. Several weeks passed before it came. I could scarcely believe my eyes.

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*Publisher's Weekly*, the Bible of the book trade, had not received a copy either for listing or review, which is *de rigueur*. *Time* magazine and *The Nation*, both of which were quoted on the book jacket from their reviews of previous works of mine, were astonishingly absent from the list. So was *Saturday Review-World*, although *SR* had taken favorable notice of my work in the past. *The New Republic*, to which I had been a contributor for more than a generation, got no review copy. Neither did the *Durham Morning Herald*, published in the city where I then lived as a visiting scholar at Duke University, nor the nearby *Chapel Hill Newspaper*, famous for its "Literary Lantern" column, nor yet the statewide *Raleigh News and Observer*.

I discovered that the list furnished me was in fact bogus. Many listed editors responded to my long-distance calls and letters to say that they had never received the book. I spent weeks in investigating and rectifying matters by sending books from my own stock to editors who had not received them. Eventually my wife and I decided to go to New York and try to clear up the botch. We stayed for 10 full working days.

In all that time I was unable to get an appointment with my editor, who had previously been readily approachable and unfailingly courteous. I did learn from one of his assistants that in the very first month of publication, before any reviews began to hit appreciably, two-thirds of the edition had been disposed of. Three pitiful advertisements ultimately appeared, the first a three-inch squib in *Poetry* magazine, circulation 6,000, rehashing old quotes despite the marvelous reviews which had been coming in, the second a minute box in the *New York Times Book Review*, the third a modest plug in the *American Poetry Review*. Meanwhile at their sales conference, Macmillan's district salesmen were told, "This book is for libraries. Don't bother with it." (Testimony from one who was present.) Reviews poured in from every part of the country, many of which placed the book in the first rank. No response from the publisher who, to use a current phrase, was "stonewalling" it. The word for this is *suppression*. □

## Carolina Wren Press: FLYING AGAINST THE WIND

by Judy Hogan

**W**riters, like hobos, are mavericks by and large: a bit at odds with society in one way or another, unconventional in their hearts and minds, whatever their clothes, job, income or style of living might suggest. Fairly early, I realized that when you publish, you don't just publish the work, you publish the writer. You don't just go through someone else's orchard picking the best specimens; you feed the tree; you prune, you worry over the harvest; and only then, when all you've worked toward matures, do you get involved in selling the fruit, persuading other people that this writer is going to be important to their lives.

I didn't have any idea, when I was in my mid-20s, that I would end up the publisher of a small Southern press, the Carolina Wren. I knew I wanted to be a writer, but when I was ready, around 1967, at 30, to send off my poems to magazines like the *Atlantic Monthly* and the *New York Review of Books* and some of the more established university quarterlies, they consistently returned them with the standard rejection slips. In 1969 when a writer friend, Paul Foreman,

suggested that he and I start a literary journal, I still had nothing published, and I knew of many other writers who were infrequently published, if at all, and who wanted as much as I did to have more than a rejection-slip relationship with an editor. Paul and I decided to confine ourselves to poetry in the beginning and to write at least a note to everyone who sent us poems.

At the time we began *Hyperion*, we were scarcely aware of the "little magazine" movement, which had taken off in the '60s, fueled by the protest literature and mood of the time. We had planned to do *Hyperion's* first issue on my ditto machine, but Paul (then in Berkeley — I was in Evanston, Illinois) found an "underground printer" to do the work for us. Paul gathered some friends to help staple it, and *Hyperion*, 500 copies costing us about \$300, was born.

I loved magazine publishing because I could encourage, reinforce and get out the word about a large number of new writers. As I go along, though, I find book publishing even more rewarding. I take the most satisfaction in finding and helping the most gifted, the very best, keeping them flourishing and helping to allay their cynicism,



Lisa Furgatch

bitterness and despair. If a book doesn't get published fairly soon after it is written – and I'm assuming it's a good book – something happens to the writer. He or she can get very bitter. Finding these good books and helping them find their audiences then becomes, perhaps, an even more crucial role than magazine publishing.

For instance, I know one writer – Curt Johnson, from Chicago – who published in the 1950s a solid and very appealing novel, *Hobbledehoy's Hero*, through a commercial house called Pennington Press (one which has since folded or been gobbled up by a conglomerate). He wrote in the '60s a second very human, very small-town story called *The Morning Light*, and was unable to publish that through a large house. Enter cynicism and despair. Around 1973, he published *Nobody's Perfect* through a very small press in Ohio: Carpenter Press. It's about a truckdriver who wanders the country, traveling in and out of the

literary and political gatherings of the late '60s. The human vision is still here, and the appeal to a wide audience, but the humor has turned bitter and is focused particularly on the follies he has come to know too well of the "lit" world. Eventually, Carpenter Press also brought out *The Morning Light*, around 1977. Another small press, Vagabond, in Washington state, published a shorter and more cynical Johnson novel, *Lace and a Bobbitt*, in 1978. And none of these small-press novels sold especially well. I asked to see his newest novel when he had completed it, in 1979. He tells me he has an agent and is again trying the larger houses. This novel is about as cynical as they come. I felt like crying. What happened? Mostly, I think, it is that his human, loving vision of life never found its audience, and that ate away at him. His vision grew very dark.

It is to prevent this sort of thing's happening to other good writers that,

when I can do something about it, I take up whatever weapons I've got. It is what guides my work as a publisher.

**I** had not been in North Carolina long before I realized that there were taboos against some Southern poets. In 1974 I was told by the woman who coordinated the arts program for the Hillsborough schools – I lived in that school district and my children attended those schools – that I was not a "safe poet." I was too closely identified with "prison poets," meaning, I supposed, poets like T.J. Reddy, one of the Charlotte Three. She said, as a consequence, she'd let me teach in the grade schools, but she wasn't going to risk my rocking her boat at the high school level.

Experiences like this deepened the intensity of my commitment to publishing. I soon discovered that certain writers never made it onto the official state arts council lists of

writers available to do readings, go into the schools and so forth. (This has changed, fortunately — perhaps in part because some others and I made a fuss.) Yet the healthiest writers I have known usually come at culture from an angle, with both insight and criticism. In the words of Ezra Pound, “The writers are the antennae of the race.” Poets usually aren’t the defenders of a culture. They don’t usually hide behind its taboos and habits. And poets with a persistent appeal down through the ages have rarely been either “safe” or “established.”

So I found a role, with a vengeance. I began looking for the writers at the edges of the universities and the more established cliques. And as I was beginning to look around more thoroughly, the women’s movement was having some interesting poetic side-effects. I began to gather the work of these new writers into a book which eventually became the special women poets’ issue of *Hyperion*, which became my way of saying, “Here’s a whole new kind of poetry by a group of writers no one in the history of literature has ever really taken seriously, saying simply and without fanfare some of the most meaningful things about our human experience that you’re likely to find anywhere.” This anthology, called *Black Sun, New Moon*, with its 300 pages of poetry, isn’t the only one of its kind, but I like to think of it as one of the best and purest collections of a new, direct poetry by women writing in an open, clear way about their feelings and uncovering a whole new “deep imagery” to articulate experiences which simply hadn’t been expressed before.

A telling example is the poem by Jenovefa Knoop which leads the book and lends it its title. Where does the image of a “black sun” come from? And why, in the same poem, a “new moon?” The poem is about the ecstasy of a man and woman making love. Jenny’s poem uses eclipse imagery — but of the sun. And what is an eclipse? A balancing of two energies, sun and moon. Jenny was expressing through her imagery her power as a woman to balance that of a man.

I realized that, once the drama and shouting of the women’s movement had quieted a little, women were speaking in a newly released way. A wide world of developed feeling and perception was unlocked. Few of the

writers had ever taken “creative writing” classes; some had never rewritten their poems. Many had not been among the fighters who produced the changes that released them to write down and share their real feelings. So they didn’t have — or had passed through and beyond — the angers and postures of warriors which might have kept them from opening the doors on their quietest and deepest feelings. But they were part of a large social change.

**I**t was exciting to be as close to this new world of feeling and to see it as it was happening — at open readings, at women’s readings, in small classes and groups, many of which I had initiated. But what was happening was much larger than anything I did. I picked up anthologies in California in 1975 and found the same open, simple, articulate writing. I found poets in the Northwest in 1976 whose work was akin, in expression and clarity, to poets I knew in the South. And poems came through the mail. It’s one thing, though, to participate as teacher, editor, fellow writer or moderator of a reading; it is by far the more important social and cultural act to put the best of these poems into print. But this requires patience.

It took me six years to edit and find the money for *Black Sun, New Moon*. I kept myself going with the reminder that I’m a tortoise, not a hare. I’m slow to get through the piles of manuscripts because I read them all myself and write answers to everyone. It used to be hard for me to tell a writer he or she still had a lot of work ahead, but it’s easier now. I know that, though we all balk at it, crossing the technical bridge is well worth the effort it takes. And so I urge writers onto it. I remind them that strong feelings and the desire to write are the main things, that anyone who’s willing to go to some trouble can learn the necessary techniques.

Beyond this I look for and care most about writers who are *developing people*, who get wiser as they get older, not more corrupt and/or egotistical. I believed in T.J. Reddy’s writing and was willing to go a long way to help him partly because of the injustice of the Charlotte Three case, but mostly because I felt he had the inner wholeness and order, the integrity and wisdom, that so few American writers have. I met him in

the Albemarle prison yard in 1975. We sat at the visitor’s table and talked for about 45 minutes. He told me you couldn’t use words much in prison; you had to live poems, by fasting, doing yoga, painting, meditating. I had met few people as authentic, as willing to extend themselves to another human being in trust. I knew his innocence, as I knew his greatness of spirit, at an instinctive level.

**T**his year I am turning over all the editing of *Hyperion* — which Paul, his wife, Foster Robertson, and I have taken turns at over the years — to them and their Thorp Springs Press in Austin, Texas, because I feel I can do the most good by putting my major efforts into book publishing at Carolina Wren Press. I want to give Carolina Wren more and more of the energy that’s left after I fulfill my own commitment to write and my responsibility to my three children.

My goal for the press is to bring out six books a year — fiction and plays as well as poetry — and to distribute them as widely as I can. I am always looking for new ways to distribute them. And I would like for this eventually to be my main means of support. The publishing, editing, selling and promoting I do now is almost entirely volunteer work. I envision a day, though, when sales will mean a small salary for me, the money to reprint, and never having to delay production because there’s no money in the bank.

Beyond that, I want to help my writers stay whole and sane and productive.

Carolina Wren came into existence in 1976, partly to fulfill my obligations to the writers whose books of poems I’d promised to see published and partly because I had been bitten by the book-publishing bug. I had been separated from my husband for a year and was living on food stamps in federally subsidized housing. My income, for four of us, including child support, was less than \$6,000. It is still less than \$10,000, but I have managed to lend or contribute an average of about \$500 a year to Carolina Wren. She owes me \$2,000 now, which I probably won’t get back for some time. Although the writers have sometimes helped by finding some money — contributions or loans — there hasn’t been much in the way

of grants until very recently, nor have there yet been dramatic sales.

My three "best sellers" — meaning that the print runs of 500 to 1,000 sold out in about a year — have been

Jaki Shelton's *Dead on Arrival*, T.J. Reddy's *Poems in One-Part Harmony* and *Black Sun, New Moon*. Two black writers and the women's anthology. It's discouraging to see other fine

books I was sure would find their audiences still in boxes. Poetry, especially, takes time. Reviews help generate interest, and so do readings by the poets. If the book itself is put

## DEAD ON ARRIVAL

This story begins about nine years ago when I received in the mail a postcard from Jaki and Sherman Shelton. It read: "We are two black writers and would like to know whether you would like to see our work." I wrote back: yes. In due time, the poems came, and I accepted a few from each writer for publication in *Hyperion*.

The following spring Jaki came to see me. She drove alone down the little dirt road to our old farmhouse, across the land of a farmer I was later to learn wasn't very happy about blacks and whites socializing. I felt that first visit was a kind of test of me — to see how far I went with my life; to see if I could deal with a black writer face to face, or if I kept my role purely editorial, via letters and behind stances. We became friends. Through thick and thin, through my divorce and hers, through emotional crises in both our lives. I felt always, after that first visit, that I had been seen and accepted, both as a friend and as the one she had chosen to help her as a writer, the editor she trusted.

*Dead on Arrival* finally emerged in 1977, after Jaki made generous contributions to its publishing costs: a first book of poems by a completely unknown black woman writer who had spent most of her life in Efland, North Carolina. The book sold out faster than any other Carolina Wren book and is soon to be available in a new, revised edition. Again, all we need is money. But we're printing up, as a pamphlet, her new poem

"Masks" and selling it for two dollars, hoping to raise the production costs for the new *DOA*.

It has been gratifying: to know she was good; to see her get better; to have other people, people I had never met or talked to, drawn to her poetry because of the book or a reading she had done; especially gratifying because her poetry emerges from a deep place and "flows" out — and isn't easy to understand. Jaki's is a quiet rather than an obviously revolutionary voice — but in that quiet imagery is a potency for upsetting applecarts and stereotypes: "The moon is a rapist/peeing in my window." Who but a black woman growing up in the South would see the moon as a (white) rapist?

It has been gratifying, too, in a more personal sense. For in her poem "dead on arrival," written for me, she articulates as simply and as well as I could ever hope to what I'm trying to accomplish. It embarrassed me at first — it was such a large tribute. She wanted it to go first in her book. I talked her into last. What more, for reward, could any editor or publisher ask than this?

*the leaves smiled and gathered  
close to the water;  
the black birds flew too high  
and became air.*

*her  
hand fell limp  
beside the stretcher  
and they all asked  
her name.  
they asked me to identify  
the smile.  
the smell  
the style of her art.  
they asked for identity  
a season.*

*a year.  
a place.  
i could only give them  
the time of birth  
her astrological chartings  
and the names of her lovers  
but they wanted*

*a name  
a stock number  
a style symbol.  
i could only speak of her  
mother  
and her sisters  
and her daughters.  
they dressed the hand  
in a white glove  
and sewed it  
inside her womb  
clenched  
with the names  
of all the people  
she'd borne.*

Poetry by its very nature is hard to hang a lifetime identity on. It comes and goes, especially with writers like Jaki, who write from a deep place or not at all; who don't practice, try or rewrite. Poems emerge whole, like dreams. One Sunday morning about 11 o'clock, for instance, she called me up. "I want to read you something. I don't know whether it's a poem or not."

She read me "Night Queen," which she told me she had just written while still lying in bed, keeping her husband and two young children waiting for their breakfast, behind a locked bedroom door.

I could tell it was good; it had intensity and integrity; it was mysterious and baffling to the logical mind. but it went somewhere; it did things. I said, "It doesn't matter what it is. It's probably a poem — a prose poem — but it's good!" A few months later, she read it at a reading, and I could tell by their stillness as they listened to a very long poem, that the audience felt its power.

Jaki's poetry taught me that people — ordinary people, untutored in literary tradition — can be spellbound by poetry they don't understand, just because of this authority of the dark vision rising from a deep place: it *feels meaningful*; it stirs the imagination; it takes us somewhere new.

together attractively enough, people find they must pick it up and look and read.

The two books most frequently picked up at a recent Washington, DC, book fair were *Black Sun* and *Rituals of Our Time*. *Rituals* has an arresting four-color cover of a naked man holding a rose in his teeth, in a position suppliant to an old man and an old woman. But the best seller turned out to be *Black Sun*. The buyers (all six of them) became enthusiastic on the spot because of what they read when they picked it up. First, of course, you have to get them to pick the book up, and you have to get it out there where the browsers are.

Though I have sold just about all of the books' print runs over three or four years, the sales are never quite fast enough to keep pace with the expenses, no matter how careful I am. Grants make a big difference, even small ones. In each of the last three years, Carolina Wren has received about \$1,000 from the North Carolina Arts Council, making four new books possible. I have just received my first National Endowment for the Arts small-press grant for books, and NEA's literature panel also gave a generous \$5,000 to *Hyperion* for two special issues (*Black Sun* and *Focus: South*, an anthology of Southern poets). And I earn my living under a small-press review project funded by NEA.

**I** know I'll continue publishing and helping writers I believe in, whether grants come in or not, whether the sales match my expectations or not, whether or not these writers come into their own and are recognized, as they deserve to be, in my lifetime. Some of the books I've been surest would sell still fill my hall or are used for chairs in my kitchen. Others have surprised me, and I've run out, and then not had the money to reprint. There's always a gamble, and I always believe the book will come into its own in time. Some good things take longer than others to be recognized for their real value.

If you wonder why I keep doing it — why I've dug my heels in even more deeply — I guess I'd have to say I do it because my desire to do something that is both *for* the world and *in* the world can be best expressed by publishing. I'll write myself and hope to see my work in print. But publishing is a very social act — an act, for

me, of social change.

I like a term from accounting lingo: *accrue*. Little by little, good things *accrue*. You keep a fire going long enough, and people will come to you. The word spreads, when the news is good, by all sorts of methods that defy the big media and their pressures and their increasingly heinous tactics. We are here — the small, independent presses and the "little magazines" — in such large numbers because of the failures of conglomerate publishing. Once it was possible — and not so long ago — for a good writer to be published by a major house, for the publisher to make money and for the writer to earn a living doing what he or she loved best: writing. Now that happens only rarely.

The hype and the failing economics of the big New York publishers have all but destroyed their usefulness to readers. A recent comment by Christopher Lasch in the *New York Times* cites the effects of their failure: "Today the censorship of ideas has entered American life through the back door. The economics of centralization and standardization threaten to achieve what could not be achieved, in a country officially committed to liberal principles, by governmental repression: uniformity of thought."

People want words that help them live and understand their lives. And that's the main reason the large publishers are failing, because they've lost touch with that. They've become cynical about their audience, and now that new tax rulings are forcing them to clear out even more inventory, they'll probably go even more to cookbooks and diet books, coffee-table extravaganzas, and the sensational, oversold novels like *Jaws*.

The small presses are ready to take — and in many ways already have taken — up the challenge. But they still don't "exist" for most readers. It is no easy matter getting small-press books into bookstores and libraries. The Chapel Hill library, for instance, won't buy a poetry book unless it's by a famous author, because "poetry doesn't circulate" — though the librarian herself paid me on the spot for the copy of *Black Sun*, *New Moon* I'd brought to show her. *She* wanted one.

Yet the library journals, the American Library Association, even the American Booksellers Association, *are*

buying, *are* attending small-press book fairs, *are* reviewing small-press books. And consequently, more libraries and bookstores are ordering these books. The dike has a hole, but probably only a spreading awareness on the part of American readers will let the dam break as it should.

I remember, around 1964, seeing my first anti-Vietnam War march and thinking, "Those people are crazy! Even if they're right, who will ever listen, or believe them?" Only four years later, Lyndon Johnson backed away from running for re-election to the presidency because of that war. Pretty swift change, all told. And I wouldn't be surprised if our cottage industry small presses suddenly came into prominence and reached a mass market in the 1980s.

I don't *count* on it. I just say that's the way we're moving. Small outfits like Carolina Wren are doing more and more of the real work that keeps a culture's life alive. We're working with the writers, helping them pick their best work, *keeping them writing* — in a period when there's seldom an opportunity for new writers to make much money from their writing. We're getting the new work into print: *almost all* the important new poetry and fiction is coming out of the small presses. By 1990, all of it may be. We're not going to be beaten down by tax rulings or loss of grants or lack of immediate sales success.

**I** chose the name Carolina Wren because that bird — who always seems feminine to me, maybe because she's so near and so nurturing — persists in her cheerful call ("Cheering, cheering, cheering you") all year long. Because she likes people and nests near them, the way I like writers. And because the male (yes, he exists) is said to make four or five nests and let his mate choose the best one. I also try to choose the best and then put everything I can behind those books. And I'm very sure that time is on my side. □

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*Readers can order Carolina Wren Press books from: Judy Hogan, 300 Barclay Road, Chapel Hill, NC 27514.*

# EVERYDAY BOOKSHOP

by Tom Campbell  
and John Valentine

**N**inth Street opens up before dawn, an intimate village within a sprawling city ringed with shopping malls and interstates. Bookended by a bank and a natural foods store, Ninth Street maintains a thriving rhythm through the day as shoppers, workers and merchants go about their businesses.

The Regulator Bookshop lives in a converted drycleaning building, sharing the street with a microcosm of American free enterprise: a hardware store, a post office, an auto parts store, several restaurants, a Burlington Industries mill across the street and a very personal drug store complete with a genuine soda fountain. The daily traffic to these and a dozen other small businesses on Ninth Street resembles a melting pot of the North Carolina Piedmont.

The Regulator began as a shared dream of a group of friends who had stayed in Durham after student days at Duke University. Opening a bookshop was one of a number of equally unlikely fantasies, which included starting a newspaper, a restaurant, a coffee house, even a Japanese bathhouse. Then suddenly, in the summer of 1976, a likely storefront came open; one member of the group put down two months rent and a meeting was called. The 12 people who attended that meeting became the board of directors of a nonprofit corporation, Regulator Publications, Inc. The pleasant dream awoke to planning, painting, shelf-building, fund-raising, book-ordering. The Regulator Bookshop opened for business on December 8, 1976.

From its outset, the Regulator has been a hybrid of the conventional and the alternative. The store was initially capitalized by a \$5,000 bank loan (finally approved at the third bank we approached) and \$7,000 in low-interest loans from trusting individuals. None of the money came from the board of directors — none of us had anything to lend.



Lisa Furgatch

We found that we were viewed as an alternative merely because we opened on a shopping street rather than in a mall and because we were independently owned rather than part of a national chain.

The store was conceived as a general bookshop carrying a quality selection in all areas. But we would have strong sections in areas that were important to us and that weren't covered well in most other stores — progressive politics, alternative energy, women's issues, gay and lesbian issues, the environment, children's books. We added a room of periodicals that reflected our selection of books. Being naturally sympathetic to people of limited means, we devoted one entire room to used books.

When the bookshop opened, odds were about 50-50 that a business with a liberal/radical stereotyped reputation could survive on such a working-class street. Local malls and grocery stores carried 90 percent of what most people wanted to read right there in bright display racks.

Imagine a bull's-eye target, a series of concentric circles. Maximum sales potential is the center bull's-eye: *Shogun*, *People* magazine. Most chain stores program their stock according to this center targeting approach, ignoring the outer edges. The Regulator Bookshop attempted to carry the missing 10 percent, and is happily surviving after nearly five years. Our approach would be described as "fringe marketing." So along with *Princess Daisy* and *TV Guide*, we sell *The Wanderground* and *Guardian*; next to *Mother Jones* you'll find the *Saturday Evening Post*; color Xerox postcards beside the Miss Piggy wall calendars.

Access to information is a primary function of our bookstore. There are many great books written that never go beyond a small press network limited by word of mouth. A book not carried in B. Dalton will have a tougher time staying in print than another with a shiny cover on the chainstore counter. We try to even things out, ordering and

reordering the more obscure titles that do sell two or three copies a month. It's more satisfying to sell one copy of a non-bestseller than five copies of books whose primary selling interest was due to the author's appearance on a TV show.

Suggestions and decisions about what to stock are, of course, major concerns. We survive by having not only what people ask for but by having what they might not know about yet. How many chances we take varies, but a business lives and dies by its cash flow. So certain times of the year the store is playing catch-up with its accounts and not necessarily stocking every new author or magazine. We have to sell x amount of books in x amount of time. Turnover of inventory is more important than just volume of sales. So we juggle the bestsellers with the also-rans and the never-closes.

But the bookshop is beginning to feel like a success. Apart from blind luck, we credit this success to two main factors: service to the community and honest but intelligent business.

Service to the community is more aptly service to subcommunities. Probably half the people that frequent our shop are likely to run into each other only at the

Regulator. Some folks are interested only in our used books, some only in used gothic romances, others in our women's shelves or our books on politics. We serve our many communities by talking to them about their reading, gleaning interesting-sounding titles for our order lists; special-ordering anything for anybody; taking book displays to solar energy fairs, art fairs, folk festivals. We try to make the shop responsive to what people are looking for. On the other hand, we try to lead people to things they might be interested in, given some encouragement. We often point out books to people and give little pep talks about books that we think are especially deserving. Now and then we set up a "manager's choice" table that ranges from bestsellers to the kinky and obscure.

When we opened the shop, we imagined its future customers having wide-ranging tastes; for those that didn't, we set out to broaden their horizons by such subtle devices as not labeling our sections and purposely shelving some surprises among the sections we had. A science fiction book about an outer space hospital went on our medical shelves. Right below our mostly "quaint" section of books on North Carolina are our shelves of books about gay men. But by and large our little tricks have been no match for

*Lisa Furgatch*



the blinders so many people wear. So to some of our customers we are still seen as a political bookstore that carries a general selection just to stay alive. These folks seem a little embarrassed for us when they hear us conversing with someone else about Edmund Crispin's 1950s English mysteries (which are almost uniformly wonderful, by the way).

We strive to provide a space where different kinds of people can feel comfortable and unthreatened. There are no signs posted in our store about "no food, no pets." Bare feet are okay. We encourage a living-room ambiance. We built our shelves out of wood; a built-in sofa and coffee area are at the back of the shop. Customers have learned how to operate the coffee machine, so often we have fresh coffee without it being a chore. It is a good feeling to start work hassled and have people offer to help out in your own store, when they probably came to relax themselves.

Our efforts to be of service have been repaid with the gratifying loyalty of many of our customers. Almost every day someone comes in and buys books that they have seen at another store but they have waited to buy at the Regulator. All of our non-bank loans have come from our customers. In our last loan search, we raised almost \$2,000 in \$10 and \$20 loans from dozens of people. We have been given outright more than \$600. Twenty-five or so university professors order their textbooks through us on an exclusive basis. At the beginning of the semester our sales get quite a boost from these textbooks, and hundreds of students are introduced to the shop.

The other half of our "success formula" consists of honest dealing, good organization and a respect for money as a tool and resource. We were forced to learn book-keeping, which, although often tedious, yields valuable information about what is happening in the store. After \$400,000 of sales, our books contain a fudge factor of under one dollar. Out of more than 3,000 special orders, we have lost track of perhaps a dozen. Good organization frees up time for relaxing and talking with people, provides our customers with better service and allows us to make the best use of our limited capital. We think that good business practices are a lot like good craft work. Most of what's involved is knowledge, organization and experience, but there's an important fraction of creativity as well.

Most decisions about store policies are made in informal weekly breakfast meetings. We've found it easier to discuss nearly all issues away from the store. The distance and openness are important for the store's growth and for our own sanity. Yet we are a business and we approach seriously the issue of staying alive, the "bottom line." The freedom to decide what salaries to receive, what holidays to take, which books to promote, when to advertise, is satisfying. That freedom gives opportunity for fresh ideas. Trying something new once sure makes it easier to try something else the next time or to allow someone else to run with his or her ideas. With the benefits of customer interaction, we've held used-books-by-the-foot sales, book rentals, had artists display their works, and discussed closing the store during lunch for basketball therapy. Recently, we had a "moral majority" special on *Catcher in the Rye* and held an autograph party to celebrate the release of records by two local rock'n'roll bands.

The Regulator Bookshop proposes itself as a synthesis. A synthesis of the alternative and the conventional; of books published by the conglomerates and books put out by the



Lisa Furgatch

smallest of presses; of groups of customers with differing interests and backgrounds; of leading and following these customers; of airing controversial ideas in a non-threatening environment; of doing what we want to do and staying alive as a business. That we have survived and grown for four-and-a-half years is unusual. Achieving any sort of synthesis in this culture is not an easy task. As political attitudes and economic realities become harsher, this task will be all the more difficult. And all the more needed.

Oh yes, about our name. In the 1760s there was an uprising in this area against the colonial government and aristocracy. The upstarts called themselves the Regulators. Their taxes weren't bringing any benefit. Their farms were being stolen out from under them by crooked courthouse lawyers. They wanted better social services and an end to corrupt, self-serving upper-class rule. They didn't win, but we identify with their feelings and their spunk. □

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*Previously a recreation therapist, John Valentine has worked at the Regulator for two years. He currently makes buttons for local rock'n'roll bands in his spare time. Prior to helping found the Regulator, Tom Campbell worked as a journalist, a teacher of emotionally disturbed children and a dishwasher. He watches very little television.*

# REVIEWS



Photographs in this section are by Barbara McKenzie



## Flannery O'Connor's Georgia

Seeing was very important to Flannery O'Connor. She had written that "everything has its testing point in the eye, an organ which eventually involves the whole personality and as much of the world as can be got into it." She had also insisted that the writer must "see an action, or a series of actions, clearly. The key word is *see* . . . he wants to see it himself clearly and make the reader see it clearly. . . . The fiction writer is concerned with the way the world looks first of all. He establishes it by its looks."

In photographing Flannery O'Connor's Georgia I too have tried to see her world clearly, and I have tried to provide visual evidence of the world in her fiction. But the eye, of course, is my eye, and the choice of focus is mine also. "The Georgia writer's true country is not Georgia," Flannery O'Connor observed, "but Georgia is an entrance to it for him." I would like my photographs to serve as document and entrance. □

— an excerpt from Barbara McKenzie's introduction to Flannery O'Connor's *Georgia*, University of Georgia Press, 1980.

by Mary Lee Settle. Random House, 1980, 278 pp. \$11.95.

## The Scapegoat

by Robert Houston

N

obody in the South works. People hunt, run for office, lynch, get lynched, squat on barren tenant farms, remember childhoods in crumbling manor houses, roar around in pickup trucks, become deputy sheriffs, make whiskey, say funny things, say wise things, fornicate prodigiously, cultivate cotton and neuroses, refine corruption, repress everything, suffer, endure, and are noble. But they don't work in coal and iron mines or steel mills or lumber camps or cigarette factories — at least not in most of the books, films and television shows that have created the image of the South for the rest of the world (and for too many Southerners). The world — i.e., editors in New York — hasn't wanted the South to be so ordinary. And people who write about the South have generally obliged by writing about the South that the image holds sacred, by bowing to the myth without always realizing they were doing it.

Not that most of Southern literature has been bad or dishonest. The contrary is true: Southern writers in modern times have been very good writers. The great number of anthologies, dissertations and royalty statements in existence makes that case well, and I don't dispute it. I am very proud of it, in fact.

But when even a writer like James Agee comes in contact with the industrial/mining South, that contact shows up only as a brief line in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* that he "stayed with some Communists in Tarrant City," a steelworkers' suburb of Birmingham. Communist steelworkers? In the Heart of Dixie? In Bull Connor country? Lordy! Agee, on the trail of another story, never had the chance to follow up on that surprising aside. It was on to the tenant farmers, and the image of the poor, rural, put-upon South was preserved. Yet what a glimpse we had of another, fictionally undiscovered South.

Again, I don't want to claim that the South Agee and others have written about didn't deserve to be written about, or that it didn't or

doesn't exist. Or that the "other South" has been totally ignored. The point I do want to make is that, like Moliere's imaginary invalid, we too often can "only like music we've heard before," and that no matter how good the music, the time comes to look for new tunes if our singing is to remain alive.

With the publication of Mary Lee Settle's latest novel, *The Scapegoat*, we begin to hear clear strains of that almost forgotten other music. *The Scapegoat's* characters are miners and mine owners, strikers and strike breakers; its setting is the West Virginia coal mining country. It is a historical novel, but nothing of a historical "romance," an important difference. It is a Southern novel because, West Virginia's secession from the South notwithstanding, its characters and their world are chiefly Southern. And though its major action takes place during a 1912 miners' strike, it is not a "strike novel." Ultimately, it transcends all such categories to become a book about a moment of change, the closing of a door between one period in Southern history and another.

I say Southern history. And that's a crucial point: it *is* Southern history she is writing about, but this time it's the history of the rest of the country, too. The book's people and world may be Southern, but the historical movement they are swept up in is the result of forces common to Arizona and Minnesota and Pennsylvania as well as West Virginia. The New South is a-borning! And its midwives are not Snopeses now; they are lawyers and corporate directors and union organizers. Corporate capitalism is replacing the old semi-feudal — yet more personal — master-and-serf system that most of the South had operated under before.

Of course the corporations had been in the South before 1912. Right after the War, Northern capital had moved in to develop such new industrial towns as Birmingham. Yet nothing happens all at once. Old ways persist. It took time for the Jay Goulds to get their grants of a railroad right-of-way through the whole state of Louisiana for a dollar and build their railroads to industrialize the South. What Mary Lee Settle has done is to pick a particular day in the lives of her characters — in the life of a social order — and say, "This is the invisible apex of the arch, the moment at which the change becomes irreversible in the lives of these people, and through them, of their world." It is history as it would have been ordered were God a novelist instead

of a historian.

Throughout Settle's work change has been central. However, in this latest addition to her "Beulah Land" series, which traces the history of her native region from its settlement in the eighteenth century to nearly the present, she has sought compression instead of the broad sweep of the conventional historical novel to get at that change. The first novel of the series, *O, Beulah Land*, spanned many years and hundreds of miles. Although it was a powerful book, it was a sprawling, unbalanced one. In *The Scapegoat's* compression, its ability to let the part stand for the whole, it is both more complex and more successful than the earlier book. Settle's use of multiple points of view, her consummate handling of changing narrative voices, are the work of a novelist who knows damn well what she is after and how to go about achieving it. If there were doubts that she was not fully worthy of the National Book Award won by her 1977 novel, *Blood Tie*, *The Scapegoat* should silence them.

As with all good novels, then, *The Scapegoat* is first about characters and change. But beyond that, it illustrates something we too often seem to have forgotten in creating the fiction of the South: the South *is* a piece of the whole. As the West was colonized by Eastern capital after the Civil War, so was the South. It remained, of course, Southern, and its responses to colonization were shaped by that. And they still are. But obsessed as we have been with the violence between the races, we seem to have let go that other cultural and economic violence visited upon us — of both races — by industrialization and urbanization, almost as if writing about such things were somehow not in good taste.

Perhaps *The Scapegoat* and other novels, such as John Yount's recent *Hardcastle*, also set in Southern mining country, are signals. Perhaps the South is re-examining itself, and in doing so its fiction will shake out some myths, will clast some icons. If it does, it may find, as Mary Lee Settle has done, that it is mining veins which contain a great deal more than mere coal. At stake is the possibility of a whole underdiscovered new literature. □

Robert Houston is a native of Alabama who teaches creative writing at the University of Arizona. His two most recent novels are *Bisbee '17*, set during a copper miners' strike in Arizona (Pantheon, 1979) and *Cholo* (Avon, 1981).



by Toni Cade Bambara. Random House, 1980. 295 pp. \$9.95.

## The Salt Eaters

by Sondra O'Neale

Toni Cade Bambara's *The Salt Eaters* is a complicated, at first seemingly fragmented, book. But as a unique and comprehensive composite which unfolds the interior characterization of a black American woman, the novel has need for ostensible fragmentation — especially if the reader is to participate in an achievement which had eluded American writers for 300 years: a forthright image of ebon femininity in present, historical and cosmic realities. The black woman's perpetual nurturing of an alien people and this nation's determination to make her a combination Mother Earth and sacrificial Christ figure has rendered her depiction through the centuries as simultaneously of deep spirit and shallow intellect, of pure motive and sensual drive, as mysteriously spiritual yet mundane and extraordinarily humane.

These archetypal and seemingly irreconcilable myths are behind the

mental disintegration of Bambara's heroine, Velma Henry. The book's apparent disjointedness reflects Velma's fleeting mind as she bitterly recalls a community of family and folk who would not cooperate with her logical mandates for community survival. So Velma snaps, refusing to be all things convention dictates for a black woman, refusing to juggle ever-intensifying multiple roles, while having no more equipment at her command than other human beings who have difficulty managing singular lives. She is no longer willing to bear an unfaithful husband, chauvinistic political workers, a disaffected mother, and the malicious white Southern establishment — and no longer able to control and suppress the exploding, kaleidoscopic wasteland within her own soul.

"Nervous breakdown" is an inadequate term for Velma's condition. She is not just physically and mentally exhausted, conveniently disconnected from all pain of the present, she is spiritually bereft of faith in any available system which promises a black woman definitive actualization in a displaced land. The wild years, the wife years, the child years, the other meager years of unrequited service to punctilious, ungrateful men — leaders, whom it is every black woman's "duty" to support — were bare cupboards when Velma called upon them to replenish her exhausted spirit. The reader shares the experience of Velma's disorientation as she lets go of traditional attempts to make sanity out of centuries of racist madness, as she closes down the "super-

woman" factory, steps out of the facade of reality and embraces the land's confusion, devours the anger of generations of black mothers, and yields in hard surrender to an invisible universal madness that for the first time in her life makes absolute sense.

Bambara's artfully interspersed flashbacks make the reader aware of what a self-effacing effort Velma has given to "freeing the people" in exchange for what Bambara symbolizes as "matriarchal currency." We see a haggard civil-rights worker marching through the South, somehow coping even though denied the minimal feminine necessities. We see a furiously cool wife who waits for her husband, Obie, a fellow community worker who is head of the vital self-defense network known as the Academy, who thinks that Velma's totality is unnecessary and who turns to infidelity. We see an articulate soul sister allow her innate leadership qualities to remain dormant so that she can advance the soul brothers of the Movement, even when she knows that they have no capacity to guide the people:

*Some leader. He looked a bit like King, had a delivery similar to Malcolm's, dressed like Stokely, had glasses like Rap, but she'd never heard him say anything useful or offensive. But what a voice. And what a good press agent. And the people who had bought him. What a disaster. But what a voice. He rolled out his r's like*

*the quality yardgoods he'd once had to yank from the bolts of cloth in his father's store in Brunswick, Georgia, till the day an anthropologist walked in with tape recorder and camera, doing some work on Jekyll Island Blacks and would be so kind as to answer a few questions about the lore and legends of the island folks, and "discovered" him and launched him into prominence.*

*"Leader. Sheeet."*

What is more, we see a woman surrounded by a hovering spirit world, an ethereal heritage of eternity-bound spiritual mothers, initiators who would lift her above temporal failures and familiar disappointments to abide in the only authentic, un-touchable victory black women in America have ever known: ascent through the uncontainable chaos to the ancient, accessible world of immutable, supportive spirit. Velma's frustration with the fading intensity of the Movement, her bewilderment at the moral blindness of Obie and other men in the community who violate the trust of faithful women, and her own inability to maintain hope and vision produce signs of emotional alienation.

The watchful eyes of Velma's healer, Minnie Ransome, and the infinite, translucent eyes of that old woman's long-dead but ever-present godmother, Karen Wilder, view the "crackup" with full knowledge that such a release of earthly reality is necessary if Velma is to answer the call of the Spirit. Just as Karen knew that Minnie was predestined to receive "the telling" gift, to "be available to the waves from the Source," so both matron and loa knew that Velma is also chosen. They are with Velma and the "perfect" prayer circle — "the twelve or The Master's Mind" — in the Southwest Community Infirmary, which is renowned for combining medical science with natural, spiritual healing.

Velma's healing is spectacular, for within her Bambara places the anecdotal balm prescribable for all the convergent themes in her novel: physically overworked and emotionally overburdened black women; failing civil-rights struggles; the neglected healing art of the community storyteller; the lost African art of natural herb and conjure medicine; bodily and spiritual redemption and black communal wholeness; and the only secret strength that triumphant black American leaders have ever had. Salt. The redeemed ones grasped that

elementary agent as the metaphoric connection that transforms temporal crises into spiritual power for victory. All maladies have one foundation: the white enemy, the serpent's sting, a three-century battle against the domination of the serpent's children:

*Different remedies for snakebite and the bite of the serpent, she'd been hearing for a lifetime. . . . "Quick, salt," And she'd managed to find it . . . and knew somehow it was salt and not some other odd thing to be bringing along to the woods. . . . "Helps neutralize the venom . . . to neutralize the serpent's another matter." . . . She . . . was sure Douglass, Tubman, the slave narratives, the songs, the fables, Delaney, Ida Wells, Blyden, DuBois, Garvey, the singers, her parents, Malcolm, Coltrane, the poets, her comrades, her godmother, her neighbors, had taught her that. Thought she knew how to build immunity to the sting of the serpent . . . how to build resistance, make the journey to the center of the circle, stay poised and centered in the work and not fly off, stay centered in the best of her people's traditions.*

Velma's condition is Bambara's metaphor for the divisiveness that has somewhat eroded the Movement of the '60s and '70s. And "salt" or the return to traditional wisdoms that empowered these earlier black leaders is, says Bambara, needed to provide healing in many areas: (1) the black nation must be reacquainted with the Spirit, not just as it is found in the Christian religion but as it is more freely manifested and accessible in African tradition; (2) the people must return to the restorative art and mysterious power of the oral storyteller, which Bambara presents as the only medium capable of transmitting and maintaining African America's cultural and literary heritage; and (3) there must be a revivalistic re-education in the natural healing art of the "root-worker" which Western thought has attempted to eradicate by the label "witchcraft":

*Thought the workers of the sixties had pulled the Family safely out of the range of the serpent's fangs so the workers of the seventies could drain the poisons, repair damaged tissues, retrain the heartworks, realign the spine. Thought the vaccine offered by all the*

*theorists and activists and clear thinkers and doers of the warrior clan would take. But amnesia had set in anyhow. Heart/brain/gut muscles atrophied anyhow. Time was running out anyhow. And the folks didn't even have a part, a consistent domestic and foreign policy much less a way to govern. Something crucial had been missing from the political/economic/social/cultural/aesthetic/military/psychosocial/psychosexual mix. And what could it be? And what should she do?*

Through the patient healing touch of Minnie and the insistent spirit of Karen, together with her own unspoken discovery that a new way out of the dilemma is possible, Velma is resurrected and ready for what her godmother, Sophie Heywood, a prayer warrior in the Master's Mind, has planned: training in the Spirit, indoctrination in the "Salt of the Earth." Sophie, Minnie, Karen and the Southern community of root workers and prayer warriors must show Velma another codification of black existence that defies verdicts of despair and violence. Stubborn, hard-headed Velma may at first doubt the orientation but she must accept the proven way if she is indeed to be an effective community leader: "Of course she would reject what could not be explained in terms of words, notes, numbers of those other systems whose roots had been driven far underground." At last the healing is complete. "Velma, rising on steady legs, throws off the shawl that drops down on the stool a burst cocoon."

In this her first novel, Bambara presents the complete condition of black femininity, ever skirting the borders of insanity, searching for strength to remain at once in the simplistic images which black people have always needed for succoring, while at the same time struggling to reveal her true complexities and those similarly complex, usually violent, choices which daily accompany black life. Without alternatives for women like the spiritually restored Velma, spiritless, moral-less, loveless institutions like Obie's Academy will indeed seek destructive alternatives for the Movement's survival. All communities in the New South in the '80s need rekindled Velmas to apply salt to the serpent's bite. The novel's unraveling of interior suffering and resolution in a black woman's soul is Bambara's magnificent achievement and contribution toward that communal victory. □



## John Beecher: A Political Poet

by Frank  
Adams

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is name was suggestive: even so a superficial reading of his poetry proves conclusive: John Beecher was a radical poet, perhaps America's most persistent for 50 years, the heir of an Abolitionist tradition and proponent of the dispossessed seizing power. His most enduring lyrics are about the downtrodden's fight for economic justice, human dignity and political freedom. He heard the music in their voices with uncanny accuracy.

His own life, too, was an obstinate confrontation against being reined in, or, what he feared as passionately in his later years, unwarranted obscurity. For years, save what publicity he could generate himself, John Beecher

failed to gain much notice. His subject matter was one reason; his fiery character another. A friend, maybe his only ardent personal admirer in Montgomery, Alabama, once described Beecher as a perpetually sore toe in a too tight shoe.

Beecher was well born. His father owned a large share of Tennessee Coal and Iron, a prosperous firm in Grundy County, Tennessee, which was bought up by U.S. Steel and the J.P. Morgan banking interests. John was born in New York City on January 22, 1904. As an adult, he seldom let the opportunity pass to remind listeners, in his usually small audiences, that among his father's family was a galaxy of the celebrated — New England Calvinist Lyman Beecher, Henry Ward Beecher, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Catherine Beecher, Isabella Beecher Hooker, General James Beecher and Dr. Edward Beecher, the family's pioneer abolitionist. The poet wore this heritage proudly.

While John was still a boy, his father was sent by U.S. Steel to Birmingham, where John was reared a Catholic amidst the revival of the Ku Klux Klan. During the summers, he attended military camps; he graduated from high school at age 14, still too young for the military career he was planning. So his father got him a

job in the steel mill's laboratory, mostly running errands. Some months later, in 1919, he enrolled at Virginia Military Institute, the youngest cadet in that gray collegiate corps. Perhaps it was the Calvinist in him, but during his sophomore year Beecher's dreams of a military career were dashed. He refused to "rat" on a roommate and was "shipped."

For the next six years, his life was a mixture of academic vagabondage punctuated with sweat-streaked stints at the faces of open hearth furnaces in the Birmingham mills. Those were the days of the 12-hour shift, six days and seven nights turn and turn about, even for the boss' son. Here he wrote his first poetry; here was the source of his idealism, and here were the voices he would chronicle with force, simplicity and clarity, much in the tradition of Whitman. His first poems, "Report to the Stockholders," were as sardonic as their title and presaged much of his later work. One sample:

*he didn't understand why he was laid  
off  
when he'd been doing his work  
on the pouring tables OK  
and when men with less age than he  
had  
weren't laid off  
and he wanted to know why*

*but the superintendent told him  
to get the hell out  
so he swung on the superintendent's  
jaw  
and the cops came and took him away*

Knowing he wanted to do more with his life than pitch coal into a furnace, John enrolled at Cornell to study engineering. His poems caught the attention of William Strunk, Jr., an English instructor who was elaborating a few simple rules of writing and later would be lionized. Strunk introduced Beecher to Carl Sandburg and other working poets. Engineering paled. He quit Cornell to return to the steel mills and writing. Eventually, he finished college at the University of Alabama in 1925, and that summer went to Middlebury College's Bread Loaf School of English, where he studied with Robert Frost. Again he returned to the mills, but this would be the last time for he was badly injured. He wrote eloquently and often about occupational hazards in those early poems — with especial poignancy about surviving cripples:

*he shouldn't have loaded and wheeled  
a thousand pounds of manganese  
before the cut in his belly was healed  
but he had to pay his hospital bill  
and he had to eat  
but he found out  
he was wrong*

Beecher never wrote private poems only for his own ear, or to provide engaging complexities for the learned or the critic. Like Isaiah, or Bunyan, and even Sandburg for a time, his poems were for average people. Beecher seemed to know instinctively that poetry was not just for the critics, but that people used it in one way or another every day not to flatter but to survive, to express the uncommon or mysterious in their own, often tragic, lives. The poet's task was to listen, to record, then to chant his poetry. Much of what he heard, even as a young man, was the voice of rebellion, the experiences of poor people, untarnished by propaganda or ideological platitudes.

In the mid-1920s, Beecher left the South for Harvard to study literature for a year. He then won an appointment to Dartmouth as an English instructor. A year of that and he left for Europe to study at the Sorbonne. When the stock market crashed in 1929, Beecher was back in Birmingham in the mills, working as an open hearth metallurgist. More defiant poems rolled from his experiences:



*old man John the melter  
wouldn't tap steel till it was right  
and he let the superintendents rave  
he didn't give a damn about tonnage  
but he did give a damn about steel  
... and the steel got sorrier and sorrier  
and the rails got to breaking under  
trains and the railroads quit buying  
and the mill shut down  
and then the superintendents asked  
old man John  
to come and tell them what was wrong  
with the steel  
and he told them  
too many superintendents*

Restlessness struck again in 1929. It had a perpetual place in his life. He left the mills to join Dr. Alexander Meiklejohn's famed, but short-lived, Experimental College at the University of Wisconsin in Madison as an English instructor. He taught there four years, earned a master's degree and sharpened his inherent civil libertarian's instincts at the side of Meiklejohn, already a noted dissenter.

Beecher landed in Chapel Hill next, helping Howard W. Odum at the University of North Carolina compile his influential *Southern Regions of the United States*. In 1934, Beecher was asked to study sharecroppers' organizations. He published his findings in *Social Forces*, a respected journal of sociology. But what he'd seen and heard of Alabama sharecroppers during his research propelled him into a more direct engagement with the defiances he witnessed. He began a long narrative poem about two ignored American patriots, Cliff James and Ned Cobb, who fought and suffered trying to build a tenant farmers' union. Their heroics brought out the best in Beecher. The resulting epic, "In Egypt Land," is an evocative tribute to two men, who happened

to be black, who refused to behave with the submissiveness demanded of them as black tenant farmers. His poem, like their defiance, was out of kilter with the times. Polite circles, even liberal ones, did not want to hear of blacks taking command of their own destinies, of their using guns, of their asserting a sense of self not beholden to whites.\*

*"You"  
Cliff James said  
"nor the High Sheriff  
nor all his deputies  
is gonna git them mules."  
The head deputy put the writ of  
attachment back in his inside  
pocket  
then his hand went to the butt of his  
pistol  
but he didn't pull it.  
"I'm going to get the High Sheriff  
and help"  
he said  
"and come back and kill you all  
in a pile."*

*Cliff James and Ned Cobb watched the  
deputy whirl the car around  
and speed down the rough mud road.  
He took the turn skidding  
and was gone.  
"He'll be back in an hour," Cliff  
James said  
"If'n he don't wreck hisself."  
"Where you fixin' to go?" Ned Cobb  
asked him.  
"I's fixin' to stay right where I is."  
"I'll go git the others then."  
"No need of ever'body gittin' kilt"  
Cliff James said.  
"Better gittin' kilt quick*

\* See *Southern Exposure*, Vol. 1, No. 3-4, for the complete text of "In Egypt Land."

than perishin' slow like we been  
a'doin'" and Ned  
Cobb was gone.

For years the poem's only notice were the rejection slips sent to Beecher. He fumed at being spurned, wondering aloud about "gutless publishers" in sometimes petulant terms. Other poems he was writing at the time weren't being published either. "In Egypt Land" and other poems of the South's people before the second world war were eventually printed by Beecher himself in a volume titled *To Live and Die in Dixie*. (Not until 1974 did a "regular" publication — *Southern Exposure* — print "In Egypt Land," and the magazine's editors endeared themselves to Beecher forever.) On the other hand, Beecher's irascibility came out most clearly after the publication of *All God's Dangers*, an oral history of the life of Ned Cobb. The author's note in the first edition of the book contained a reference to Beecher's pioneering in the struggle 40 years before, but mentioned neither "In Egypt Land" nor the *Social Forces* article. Beecher, who had in fact introduced Ted Rosengarten to Cobb's story, was furious. The paperback reprinting of *All God's Dangers* after the book received national acclaim fully acknowledged the author's debt to Beecher and to "In Egypt Land."

By the completion of "In Egypt Land" in 1940, Beecher had left Chapel Hill to run a succession of New Deal agencies. He administered relief in North Carolina. He supervised a study of cotton tenancy in the Mississippi Delta, then surveyed farm labor conditions in the Southeast. He helped resettle farm families, and managed a resettlement project himself for three years. He opened resettlement camps in the Florida Everglades before abruptly quitting government employ to write editorials for a Birmingham newspaper, and then report news for the *New York Post*.

In 1943, he joined the Merchant Marine and was assigned to a liberty ship, the *Booker T. Washington*, one of the few commanded by a black sea captain. In March, 1945, a book about his two years in the North Atlantic and Mediterranean war zones, *All Brave Sailors*, was published to modest acclaim.

Teaching again lured him at the end of the war, and in 1948 he was appointed assistant professor of sociology at San Francisco State College. At 44, life was good to him: he had a wife, son and daughter; his courses were thriving; the college was growing to university status; San Francisco

was grand. In the fall of 1950, just as he was up for tenure, he and other professors were asked to sign a loyalty oath brought on by the anti-left hysteria of McCarthyism. Beecher balked. The oath, he said, was repressive and unconstitutional. He offered to teach without pay until the matter could be settled. Instead, he was fired by the college for "gross unprofessional conduct." There was no appeals hearing. His poem, "Reflections of a Man Who Once Stood Up For Freedom," recounts the events which followed:

*And so I got the old heave-ho  
from my profession as perhaps  
I should have known and after that  
I found myself an outcast. Friends  
quite naturally avoided me  
lest my unclean touch defile them  
and when I tried to find a job  
all doors were closed against me.*

*"Why,  
it would be easier to place  
a convict on parole than you!"  
they told me at the office where  
I went to seek employment. Then  
my son quit college and my daughter  
also. She'd wanted to be a teacher  
like me. She's now a secretary  
while my son, embittered, drifts  
from job to job. Their mother failed  
to appreciate my heroism.  
Quixotic was the kindest term  
she found for my behavior. First  
we separated. After that  
divorce was natural. We'd been  
so close for more than twenty years!*

Gradually, Beecher regrouped. He bought a small ranch near Sebastopol in Sonoma County and began raising chickens, sheep and fruit. He began writing poetry again, and remarried; his second wife, Barbara, created memorable woodcuts to illustrate her husband's poems. Together, they started Morning Star Press to publish blacklisted or ignored works, including Beecher's. All the while, he brooded over what his principled refusal had cost.

*I'll hardly live to see the day  
when I'll be justified at last  
if ever that day comes.*

He was more fortunate than some. His name was stricken from the banned list in nine years, and soon he was back teaching, this time at Arizona State University, the first of a nearly endless string of places where he'd visit, lecture or reside as "poet in residence." Seventeen years after he'd been dismissed, the U.S. Supreme Court found loyalty oaths unconstitutional. He got hints that his old job could be his if he wanted. Beecher,

however, wanted more than a job. He wanted justice and retribution.

By this time, with his flowing white beard and shock of silver white hair, he looked like an Old Testament prophet. He sounded like one, too. Patiently, but never once letting up the pressure, he argued his reinstatement with pay at San Francisco State. Finally, in 1977, the California legislature, perhaps not wishing to have his anger on their consciences, passed a special resolution reinstating him as a full-time professor at San Francisco State University. Beecher was living in Burnsville, North Carolina, when the news arrived. He was 73. Joyously, he left North Carolina to take up a joint appointment in four departments — creative writing, English, humanities and sociology. In 1979, he was awarded \$25,000 compensation for financial losses he'd suffered.

Unhappily, his last days were not spent teaching or cherishing honors belatedly given, although some did come his way. Shortly before he re-joined the faculty at San Francisco, Macmillan brought out a collection of his poems written during a 50-year span. Recognition was his at last. There were promotion tours; Birmingham set aside a special day in his honor soon after publication; reviews were full of praise. But the book's sales never took off. Five years later, after the dust settled, Beecher wrote a bitter attack on the editor of the publishing house (see page 91). Macmillan had failed to distribute the books to reviewers, he said, or to advertise the book in any customary way, and it printed fewer than 5,000 copies — despite rave reviews in *Time* and the *New York Review of Books*.

A final irony in this poet's life occurred just before his death in San Francisco on May 11, 1980. Beecher had spent several years researching the populist movement in the upper Midwest, particularly those rebellious men and women who developed the Grange and People's Party in the late 1800s. His book on the subject, *Tomorrow Is a Day*, was finally published by the Independent Publishing Fund of the Americas, a house Beecher himself had helped start in 1976 to support the works of "well-known but underpublished writers."

Beecher's poetry represents a tradition at odds with the prevailing styles in the United States between the great wars. He heard the musical sounds in human struggle and protest. Imagery never replaced logic or the uniqueness of the individual's experience. His social criticism never dwelled upon personal malaise, emotional despair, dissatisfaction with the superficial

ugliness or the standardization of industrial America. Instead, his poetry and his criticism spoke with a deeper sense of life's driving urge for freedom and dignity. His philosophy molded his style, and dictated the forms, but that philosophy grew from the object of his lyrics. Form and matter coincided. He was indeed a political poet. □

*Frank Adams is a teacher and writer and a long-time friend of the Institute for Southern Studies.*

## Sharecropper Novels

by Paul  
Foreman

S

ome of the South's most powerful — but often overlooked — novels have explored the struggles of sharecroppers and tenant farmers. Long ignored by the literary establishment, many of these novels, written in the first third of this century, are now making their way back into print as the working class recovers its heritage. These novels, I believe, will be read 100 years hence when those of O'Hara, Auchincloss and Bellow, who wrote of and for the rich, will have dropped into the dustbin.

One of the first sharecropper novels is W.E.B. DuBois' *The Quest of the Silver Fleece*, first published in 1911 and reissued in paperback in 1969 by Mnemosyne Publishers. Set in Alabama and Washington, D.C., it outlines the basic problems of tenant farmers: their slavery to the old plantation system, King Cotton, and the slavery of the entire working-class South to the vagaries of the cotton futures trading board on the New York Stock Exchange. In eloquent and moving prose, DuBois tells the story of Bles Alwyn, who goes through the rural Smith school in Tooms County and eventually makes his way to Washington as a clerk. While Bles flounders in the federal bureaucracy, Zora Cresswell, the woman he leaves behind, a woman of mixed black, white and red parentage, becomes the natural leader of her people — the very role Bles has always envisioned for himself. Bles finally returns to the



Alabama cotton fields to take his stand with Zora and help the black tenant farmers educate themselves in their own schools and wrench their land from the corrupt and fading plantation system. DuBois' prescription is radical: the land for those who work it.

*In the Land of Cotton* by Texas novelist Dorothy Scarborough details the perils of white tenant farmers during the boom-and-bust years around the first World War. Published in 1925, a particular richness of the work is the number of black folk songs that are interspersed with the text and comment on it. The novel centers on Ben Wilson, a young man growing up on his parents' tenant farm, and his efforts to improve himself with education. It's all for naught, however, as Wilson in the end fails to get the hand of his beloved and then falls victim to mob violence while defending her father's cotton gin during hard times. Scarborough is especially good at depicting the vicissitudes of nature,

the boll weevil, the pink bollworm, the floods and droughts in the Brazos River area around Waco. Equally penetrating are her descriptions of the manipulations of the cotton futures traders that enslave and oftentimes destroy the tenant farmers. This novel is less romantic than *The Quest of the Silver Fleece*, yet Scarborough may have a little more faith in the workings of the system than DuBois — as the heroine cajoles her father and a young lawyer friend into a pilgrimage to the governor's office, where they successfully obtain a parole for a young black runaway from a chain gang whom the family had harbored until the posse and the hounds arrived. Long out of print, *In the Land of Cotton* may be reprinted soon by the University of Texas Press, which in 1980 successfully reprinted Scarborough's novel *The Wind*.

An even better novel is Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, first published in 1937 and reprinted as a Fawcett paperback in

1969. Hurston was born to tenant farmers in 1901 in Eatonville, Florida, the first black town incorporated in the U.S. While the major thrust of the book is a deeply poignant love story between the heroine, Janie, and her man, Teacake, and their tragic losing fight against a hurricane flooding Lake Okeechobee, there is an extremely vivid portrayal of the black migrant workers planting and harvesting the vegetable crop on the muck of the Everglades. Hurston tells the entire story in black dialect, forging a classic, heartbreaking novel. I cannot recommend it too highly.

A fourth novel, *The Stricklands*, by Edwin Lanham of Weatherford, Texas, tells the story of two brothers who live in the dryland peanut and cotton farming area of Oklahoma during the height of the Depression. One, Jay Strickland, is a union organizer for the Oklahoma Farm Tenants Union, and brings a strong presence of the Oklahoma Indians to the novel, for Jay is organizing *all* farmers — white, black and Indian. His brother Ben is a roustabout oilfield roughneck who turns to bank robbing. Lanham shows that Jay's social revolution is doomed to failure as society's "respectable" crust fights the "radicals" with all its might, going as far as to stir up mob violence against a black union organizer. Told effectively in the same stream-of-consciousness style Faulkner employs in *As I Lay Dying*, *The Stricklands* ranks in power and depth with Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*.

Another Texan, George Sessions Perry, gives us *Hold Autumn in Your Hand*, a novel published in 1940 that tells the story of tenant farmer Sam Tucker, his wife, kids and grandmother, who fight for survival on a 60-acre blackland farm in the lower Brazos Valley. Sam combats the elements, the penury of his landlord (who starts him out with a one-dollar "gift" of grub) and a wicked flood that wipes out his crop. His one "play-pretty year" turns to bitter dust in his mouth. According to his biographer, Maxine Hairston, Perry had to change a more radical ending to get his novel published. Nonetheless, it went on to win the National Book Award for fiction in 1941 and was made into a memorable movie, "The Southerners," directed by Jean Renoir. And — a hopeful sign that the region is starting to recover its heritage — the book was recently reprinted by the University of New Mexico Press.

The enormous tragedy of the pressures to conform in our society to notions of "respectable" lifestyles, politics and, yes, "respectable" servi-

tude, echoes throughout these radical novels. All three novelists tell their stories from the mouths of the people they knew best: the people of the farming communities from which they came. They all treat as injustice the fact that most of these farmers do not own their land and that all their efforts at raising the crops that feed a hungry nation go to enrich others while they themselves live on the edge of starvation.

After the '30s many such writers suffered as New York publishers made

a big right turn. B. Traven, the radical and popular author of *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*, had his third novel, *The Wobbly*, rejected by every major New York publishing house. It wasn't until the 1970s, after Traven's death, that Hill and Wang finally published it under the title *The Cottonpickers*. Edwin Lanham suffered a similar fate. While he completed about 20 novels, including *Thunder in the Earth*, the best novel ever written about the oil fields, Lanham eventually — in the McCarthy era of the late '40s and early



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'50s — had to turn to writing mysteries to support himself.

In the 1950s two other writers came of age in Texas, both of whom are worthy successors to these radical "sharecropper" writers of the '20s and '30s. One of them, John Howard Griffin, recorded in his runaway bestseller *Black Like Me* his pilgrimage through the deep South after having his skin pigmented black. The book's title echoes that of *Black No More*, the novel of the famous black writer of the '30s, George Schuyler. With it and his excellent, thoughtful novels, Griffin represents the active conscience of the white South during the burgeoning Civil Rights Movement of the '60s when, as during the '30s, radical change threatened to undermine the old, discredited social and legal structures that kept so many people in economic bondage and second-class citizenship.

The second writer of note from this period is Chester Seltzer. Seltzer, the son of a famous Cleveland newspaper editor, began writing after serving three years in federal prison for refusing induction into the military during World War II. Having settled in El Paso, he married Amada Muro, a woman from Chihuahua, and adopted the masculine form of her name — Amado Muro — as his pen name. Throughout the '50s and '60s his stories won wide acclaim. Some critics have called him the best short story writer to come out of Texas or the Southwest — the region that also produced Katherine Anne Porter.

Seltzer writes of homeless and hungry men, fieldhands, the tenant farmers who must still pick the crops even when they no longer live on the land. He identifies with the homeless, whether they are white, black or Mexican. He has a powerful sense of humor and of poetry. Most often he depicts people at the extreme edge of life and existence and shows the fullness and greatness of their humanity. His underlying theme is that something is wrong in a land where the poor and the old are treated like dirt; where the farmers, those who plow, plant and harvest the crops, are cast aside by big agribusiness, with machines and technology — rather than human hands — being called upon to do the work. Behind Seltzer's stories is the specter of the cotton-picking machine that has destroyed hundreds of thousands of families throughout the South.

The question arises: are most of these novels and stories nostalgia for a bygone age when human hand labor worked the fields, or do they have wisdom for our present age and life?



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I affirm the latter, and I believe the greatness of these works transcends their subject matter and speaks of the most important relations of all, people's faith with themselves and their faith with their brothers and sisters on the highway of life. An economic system that casts aside human beings the way it does worn-out hubcaps deserves to die and a better way to be born.

I have been able to do no more than scan a few of these novels in these pages. Discussion of any one of them could have taken the space by itself. Fortunately, these books are making their way back into print. Many are still in the libraries. Search them out and read them, and find yourself richer, wiser and more prepared to meet the day for having done so. □

*Paul Foreman is the author of two books of poetry, Redwing Blackbird and Texas Liveoak, and a novel, Sugarland, set in a Texas prison in the '50s. His second novel on Quanah Parker and the Comanche Indians in Texas will soon be out. He is also the publisher of a considerable body of fiction and poetry under his own imprint, Thorp Springs Press, including The Collected Stories of Amado Muro. And he runs the Brazos Book Shop in Austin, Texas, an independent bookstore that features the works of local authors and small presses.*

## Books on the South

*This list consists of books published since October, 1980. Book entries include works up to May, 1981. All books were published in 1981 unless otherwise noted. Dissertations appeared in the Dissertation Abstracts Index between September, 1980, and January, 1981. All dissertations are dated 1980 unless otherwise noted.*

*The entries are grouped under several broad categories for your convenience. Mention of a book here does not preclude its being reviewed in a future issue. Unsolicited reviews of publications of general interest to our readers are welcome. Recent works are preferred.*

*Copies of the dissertations are available from: Xerox University Microfilms, Dissertation Copies, P.O. Box 1764, Ann Arbor, MI 48106.*

### ECONOMICS, HISTORY AND POLITICS

"Access to Health Care in a West Dallas Community," by Anne Marie Gurnack. Univ. of Texas at Arlington, 1979.

**The Afro-American Slaves: Community or Chaos?**, ed. by Randall M. Miller (Huntington, NY: Robert E. Krieger Pubs.). \$5.50.

"The American Colonization Society in Virginia, 1816-1832: A Case Study in Southern Liberalism," by Marie Tyler McGraw. George Washington Univ.

**City Behind A Fence: Oak Ridge, Tennessee, 1942-1946**, by Charles O. Johnson and Charles W. Jackson (Knoxville: Univ. of Tennessee Press). \$14.50.

**Claiborne County**, by Edgar A. Holt (Memphis: Memphis State Univ. Press). \$12.50.

"The Collapse of Zion: Rural Progressivism in Nelson and Washington Counties, Kentucky," by James Larry Hood. Univ. of Kentucky.

"The Cotton Holiday Movement in the South," by Robert Edward Snyder. Syracuse Univ.

"Delinquency Among Seminole Indian Youth," by Susan Paula Robbins. Tulane School of Social Work, 1979.

**A Deplorable Scarcity: The Failure of Industrialization in the Slave Economy**, by Fred Bateman and Thomas Weiss (Chapel Hill: UNC Press). \$19.00.

"Depression and New Deal in Pendleton: A History of a West Virginia County from the Great Crash to Pearl Harbor, 1929-1941," by John Craft Taylor. Penn State Univ.

"The Development of Advanced Capitalism: A Case Study of Retired Coal Miners in Southern West Virginia," by Stephen Paul Legeay. Univ. of Notre Dame.

"An Ecological Study of Southern Homicide," by Howard Paul Myers. Florida State Univ.

"Economic Development in Texas During Reconstruction," by Larry Earl Adams. North Texas State Univ.

"The Economic Significance of Right-to-Work Laws," by A. Rebecca Schumacher. Lehigh Univ.

"The Effects of Collective Negotiations and Unionization in Selected School Systems in Other States and Their Implications for South Carolina Public School Superintendents," by Clogie Julia Etta Heaton. Univ. of South Carolina.

**Florida's Politics and Government**, ed. by Manning J. Dauer (Gainesville: Univ. Presses of Florida). \$10.00.

**Gilded Age City: Politics, Life and Labor in Petersburg, Virginia, 1874-1899**, by William D. Henderson (Washington: Univ. Press of America, 1980). \$25.50.

**An Imperfect Union: Slavery, Federalism and Comity**, by Paul Finkelman (Chapel Hill: UNC Press). \$22.00.

"An Inquiry Into the Social Accounting Practices and Disclosure Policies of Selected Firms in the Pulp and Paper Industry of the Southern Pine Forest Region," by Mitchell

Parker Granger, II. Univ. of Arkansas, 1979.

"King Midas and Old Rip: The Gold Mining District of North Carolina," by Brent David Glass. UNC-Chapel Hill.

**Living Hard: Southern Americans in the Depression**, by John L. Robinson (Lanham, MD: Univ. Press of America). \$10.75.

"Markets and Merchants: Economic Diversification in Colonial Virginia, 1700-1775," by Peter Victor Bergstrom. Univ. of New Hampshire.

**NAACP: Triumphs of a Pressure Group**, by Warren St. James (Hicksville, NY: Exposition Press). Price not set.

"Your Obedient Servant: The United States Army in Virginia During Reconstruction, 1865-1867," by Penelope Aspasia Kantgias Majeske. Wayne State Univ.

**The Only Land They Knew: The Tragic Story of the American Indians in the Old South**, by J. Leitch Wright, Jr. (New York: Free Press). \$17.95.

"Parents and Children: North Carolina Planter Families, 1800-1860," by Jane Turner Censer. Johns Hopkins Univ.

"Patterns of Medical Care Utilization: Child Birth in Three Texas Towns," by William Lybrand Kean. Univ. of Texas at Austin.

"Petticoat Politics: Political Activism Among Texas Women in the 1920s," by Emma Louise Moyer Jackson. Univ. of Texas at Austin.

"Plantation and Farm: Social and Economic Change in Orange and Green Counties, Virginia, 1716 to 1860," by John Thomas Schlotterbeck. Johns Hopkins Univ.

"Planter Politics in Georgia, 1860-1890," by Lewis Nicholas Wynne. Univ. of Georgia.

"Political Mobilization in the Rural South: A Case Study of Gadsden County, Florida," by Paige Alan Parker. Univ. of Florida.

"Prisoners of War in Texas During World War II," by Richard Paul Walker. North Texas State Univ.

"Problems of Government Regulation: The Mississippi Railroad Commission, 1884-1956," by Daniel Camille Vogt. Univ. of Southern Mississippi.

"Radical Reconstruction and the Gospel of Prosperity: Railroad Aid Under the Southern Republicans," by Mark Wahlgren Summers. Univ. of California-Berkeley.

"Rise and Fall of the Antebellum Virginia Aristocracy: A Generational Analysis," by Lorraine Eva Holland. Univ. of California at Irvine.

"The Rise of the Civil Rights Movement and Its Movement: Black Power Structure, 1953-1963," by Aldon Douglas Morris. SUNY-Stony Brook.

"Shaping Ideas and Actions: CORE, SCLC and SNCC in the Struggle for Equality, 1960-1966," by Emilie Schmeidler. Univ. of Michigan.

"Shifts in the Distribution of Wealth Among Blacks, 1890-1915," by Anne R. Lockhart Hornsby. Georgia State Univ. College of Business Administration.

"The Slave Trade and the Development of Capitalism in the United States: A Critical Reappraisal of Theory and Method in Afro-American Studies," by Ronald William Bailey. Stanford Univ.

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**State Government in Georgia**, by Lawrence R. Hepburn (Athens: Univ. of Georgia Inst. of Government). \$10.00.

"Technology as a Factor in the Gulf Coast Shipbuilding Industry, 1900-1945," by Robert Houston Peebles. North Texas State Univ.

**Texas Politics: Economics, Power and Policy**, by James W. Lamare (St. Paul, MN: West Pub. Co.). \$7.00.

**Texas Railroads: A Record of Construction and Abandonment**, by Charles P. Zlatkovich (Austin: Univ. of Texas Bureau of Business Research). \$7.00.

**Time of Hope, Time of Despair: Black Texans During Reconstruction**, by James M. Smallwood (Port Washington, NY: Kennikat Press). \$17.50.

"Union Representation and Job Satisfaction," by Lee Elliott Baldwin. North Texas State Univ.

"The Universal Sisterhood of Women': Women and Labor Reform in North Carolina, 1900-1932," by Marion Winifred Roydhouse. UNC-Chapel Hill.

**We Shall Not Overcome: Populism and Southern Blue-Collar Workers**, by Robert E. Botsch (Chapel Hill: UNC Press). \$22.00.

"White Land, Black Labor: Property, Ideology and the Political Economy of Late Nineteenth-Century Georgia," by Charles Lenean Flynn, Jr. Duke Univ.

"A World Within A World: Black Nashville, 1880-1915," by Faye Wellborn Robbins. Univ. of Arkansas.

#### BIOGRAPHY & AUTOBIOGRAPHY

"Against Principles: An Examination of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s Nonviolent Ethic," by William Donnel Watley. Columbia Univ.

**Arthur Lee: A Virtuous Revolutionary**, by Louis W. Potts (Baton Rouge: LSU Press). \$25.00.

**The Governors of Arkansas: Essays in Political Biography**, ed. by Timothy P. Donovan and Willard B. Gatewood (Columbia: Univ. of Missouri Press). \$24.00.

"Hale Boggs: A Southern Spokesman for the Democratic Party," by Dorothy Nelson Kirn. LSU.

"James McBride Dabbs: A Life Story," by Thomas Lindermann Johnson. Univ. of South Carolina.

**Lord, the People Have Driven Me On**, by Benjamin E. Mays (New York: Vantage Press). \$7.95.

"Major Richard Robert Wright, Sr., and Black Higher Education in Georgia, 1880-1920," by June Odessa Patton. Univ. of Chicago.

**Mary: An Autobiography**, by Mary E. Mebane (New York: Viking Press). \$11.95.

**Mary Chesnut's Civil War**, ed. by C. Vann Woodward (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press). \$29.95.

"The Public Career of James Carroll Napier: Businessman, Politician and Crusader for Racial Justice, 1845-1940," by Herbert Leon Clark. MTSU.

**The Pursuit of a Dream**, by Janet S. Hermann (New York: Oxford Press). \$15.95.

"Quest for Equality: The Life of Mary Eliza Church Terrell, 1863-1954," by Beverly Washington Jones. UNC-Chapel Hill.

"A South to Save: The Administration

of Governor Leroy Collins of Florida," by Thomas Ray Wagy. Florida State Univ.

"The South's Wealthiest Planter: Wade Hampton of South Carolina, 1754-1835," by Ronald Edward Bridwell. Univ. of South Carolina.

"Unreconstructed Rebel': The Political Thought and Senate Career of Carter Glass, 1929-1936," by Alfred Cash Koenigh. Vanderbilt Univ.

"William Atkinson Jones, 1849-1918: Independent Democracy in Gilded Age Virginia," by Charlotte Jean Shelton. Univ. of Virginia.

**Your Cheatin' Heart: A Biography of Hank Williams**, by Chet Flippo (New York: Simon & Schuster). \$12.95.

#### EDUCATION

"The Antebellum Southern Evangelical and State-Supported Colleges: A Comparative Study," by Joe Lyons Kincheloe. Univ. of Tennessee.

**Black Baptist Secondary Schools in Virginia, 1887-1957** (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press). \$12.50.

"The Educational Program at Black Mountain College, 1933-1943," by Charles Martin Garren. UNC-Chapel Hill.

"The History of Public School Finance in Mississippi," by Earl Wayne Adams. Univ. of Mississippi.

"The Impact of a Health Education Program on Poor, Black Older Persons," by Emily Louise McClinton Moore. Univ. of South Carolina.

"The Impact of Race on a Desegregated School District as Perceived by Selected School Administrators," by Allen Lee Treadwell. East Texas State Univ.

"Practical Education and the Negro College in North Carolina, 1880-1930," by Kenneth Ray Warlick. UNC-Chapel Hill.

"Public Policy in the Expansion of Higher Education in the State of Alabama, 1963-1978: A Case Study in the Politics of Higher Education," by Samuel Norris Gibson. Univ. of Pittsburgh.

**Reading, Writing and Reconstruction: The Education of Freedmen in the South, 1861-1870**, by Robert C. Morris (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press). Price not set.

"A Study of Policymaking Processes in Local School Division in Virginia," by Jerry Michael Griffin. VPIU.

#### CULTURAL PERSPECTIVES

"An Analysis of Family Structure and Family Values of Central Appalachian Migrants in Akron, Ohio," by James Kenneth Crissman. Univ. of Akron.

"The Black Baptist Church: A Social Psychological Study in Coping and Growth," by Sadye Maria Louise Logan. Columbia Univ.

"Black Women Basket Makers: A Study of Domestic Economy in Charleston, South Carolina," by Doris Adelaide Derby. Univ. of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

"A Descriptive Analysis of the Syndicated Religious Television Programs of Jerry Falwell, Rex Humbard and Oral Roberts," by Mark Lewis Lloyd. Univ. of Michigan.

"The Effect of Pastor-Deacon Relationships Upon the Life and Ministry of a Small Southern Baptist Church," by Warren Wells

Burnham. Eastern Baptist Theological Seminary.

"Florida and the American Motion Picture Industry, 1898-1930," by Richard Alan Nelson. Florida State Univ.

"The Folklore and Culture of the West Bank of St. John the Baptist Parish," by Mary Marcia Gendron Gaudet. Univ. of Southwestern Louisiana.

"The History of the National Basketball Tournament for Black High Schools," by Charles Herbert Thompson. LSU.

"Hollybush: The Eclipse of the Traditional Building System in a Mountain Community: An Architectural and Oral Historical Study," by Charles Edward Martin. Indiana Univ.

#### SOUTHERN LITERATURE

"Absalom! Absalom! And the Curse of Inherited Fiction: Wherein A Student of Faulkner Reclaims Her Education and Requests Title to the Deed," by Ellen Ruth Rifkin. Univ. of California, Santa Cruz.

**Black Novelists and the Southern Literary Tradition**, by Ladell Payne (Athens: Univ. of Georgia Press). \$11.00.

"Caroline Gordon as Novelist and Woman of Letters," by Rose Ann Cleveland Fraistat. Univ. of Pennsylvania.

"Comedy and Tennessee Williams," by Robert Leland Starnes. Yale Univ., 1965.

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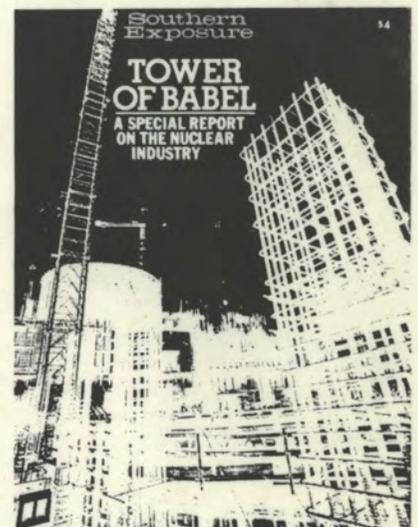
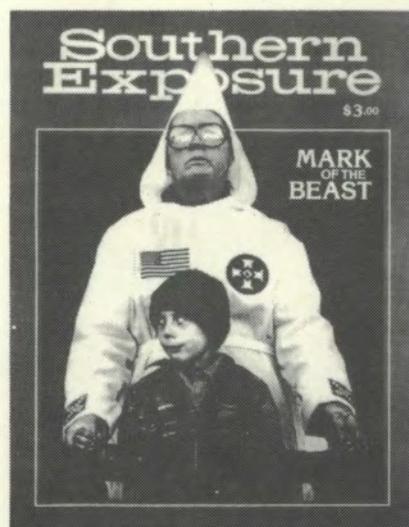
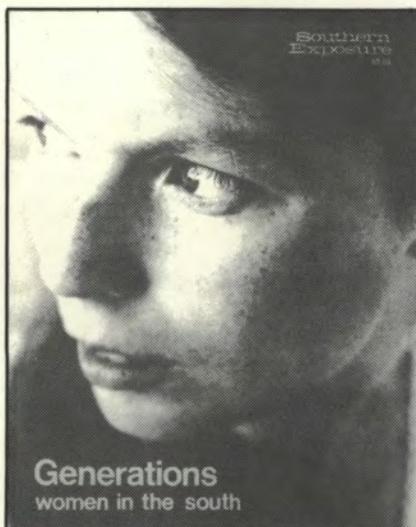
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