

Look Homeward: Journeying Home through 20th Century Southern Literature

My collection was born on a rainy afternoon in Boston, when I ducked into a small thrift store to avoid being soaked in an unanticipated downpour. In retrospect, that robust (almost Southern) rainstorm, so unlike New England's characteristic unending rain "spit," was fitting. Because, in that store, among tattered copies of used textbooks and romance novels, the brown leather spine of Robert Penn Warren's *All the Kings Men* stood out like an old, sore thumb. I picked it up and smiled because it was old and Southern, but my amusement turned to stunned silence when I saw the date on the inside cover: 1946. I remembered enough from my high school English class to realize I was holding my own window into literary history. And I wondered at the clever Boston reader who had rushed out to buy the brand-new book of a regional writer before it had made him a Pulitzer Prize winner and household name. Yet, beyond my passion for literature and literary history, I was most grateful that day for the comforting connection the book gave me to the past and to the South, as a college student far from and homesick for her native West Virginia.

Throughout my youth, I read incessantly to escape the small rural town in which I grew up. I traveled the shores of Prince Edward Island with *Anne of Green Gables*, covered most of the English countryside between the Bronte sisters and Jane Austen, and, in my teen years, grew obsessed with the Italy and Greece through my discovery of Greek and Latin. My first plane ride was to London and my second was to Italy. I wanted nothing more than to explore the world. With a limited budget for airfare, books were my fastest means of transport. For me, Southern Literature was like exploring my backyard – less enticing for its lack of exoticism, but comforting because it felt created by my neighbors. And though, like any young Southern girl who loves books, I dog-eared the pages of *To Kill a Mockingbird* and harbored secret aspirations to become the next Harper Lee, I never felt transported to other lands, as I did with non-Southern books.

That changed on that rainy day in Boston, with my momentary journey home. I would build an academic path around that feeling, later declaring a Classics and English joint major and writing an undergraduate thesis on the Roman poet Virgil's influence on the Fugitive Poets in 1920's Nashville. My academic passion was to show how the literary works from thousands of years prior acutely shaped how these Jazz Age poets helped make sense of the modern issues they faced – from world warfare to economic and social upheaval in the South. But most importantly, I wanted to establish how this group early twentieth century writers were using these ancient motifs specifically to try to explain these modern issues in a boldly dispassionate and non-apologetic way. That is, they set out to be among the first to denounce the antebellum longing of late Victorian and early 20th century Southern writing and to present the South to the world in all her troublesome glory.

In many ways, I was researching and writing (and building a book collection) around the experience I was living. I set out from the South determined to broaden my understanding of the world and, in doing so, contextualize my own Southern upbringing. For me, these writers of the past provided guidance during what felt like a foreign experience; coming to understand how they, in turn, were looking to writers of the past to understand their own experiences was an oddly comforting cycle. My career has veered far from Southern literature and closer to the people of the South in the years since my collection began. My extracurricular interest in health, inspired by watching the health struggles of my West Virginia town, sent me to medical school and, most recently, to business school. And finally, after ten years away, I returned to the South. Though I no longer need my collection to bring me closer to the Southern experience, it continues to provide me with a visual reminder of why I returned. After all, my medical career involves listening daily to the stories of the South's inhabitants and working tirelessly to understand and serve its residents. The authors in my collection, in their own continued struggles to capture Southern characters, are my perpetual reminder that this journey of understanding and its application in my career are an unending learning process.

Annotated Bibliography

Lee, Harper. *To Kill a Mockingbird*. New York: JB Lippincott Company, 1960

Lee's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel tells the story of the trial and conviction of a black man, Tom Robinson, in the small southern town of Maycomb, Alabama during the Great Depression. Lee captures the racial injustice through the eyes of Scout Finch, the 10 year-old daughter of Robinson's lawyer, Atticus Finch. Despite its non-apologetic view of Southern racial politics in the first half of the twentieth century and the fact that it was openly modeled on real events in Lee's hometown of, Lee's novel has become a classic of both Southern and American Literature more generally, in part because the story is told through a child's innocent eyes.

My copy, an early printing from 1960, was a gift to me from my town small-town lawyer father on my college graduation. My second copy is a 50th anniversary printing purchased in the bookstore inside the courthouse of Monroeville, Alabama, Lee's hometown. I journeyed there the summer prior to starting medical school as a way to soak up what was most important to me in Southern culture before heading back north to contribute my education.

Warren, Robert Penn. *All the King's Men*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company. 1946

Warren's novel, winner of the 1947 Pulitzer Prize, details the political career of Louisiana politician Willie Stark – or simply “The Boss.” The novel was a departure for Warren, who was a poet first; but it served as a kind of bridge between the poetry describing Southern life Warren wrote as a member of the Fugitive Group and his economic and political musings for the South's future as part of the New Agrarians. In the novel, Warren details the complex political world of the South as he describes Stark's transition from hopeful lawyer with visions of social reform, to corrupt don of the local political scene.

My copy of Warren's novel, an early edition from 1946, was the beginning of my modern Southern Literature collection. I've always been captivated by the way the novel serves as a transition from Warren's poetic work to his novels, political essays, and later criticism. Although his and other Agrarians' political writings have been largely discredited, Warren's novel suggests they were rooted in a deep curiosity to try to explain why and how the problematic politics of the early modern South had arisen. As someone who has transitioned from reading about the South to working with Southern communities, the difficulty of this transition continues to resonate deeply with me.

Styron, William. *The Confessions of Nat Turner*. New York: Random House, 1967.

Styron's novel is a historical portrait of Nat Turner, the leader Virginia slave rebellion. Styron goes to great length in the novel to explore the character of Nat Turner far more than historical events, ultimately portraying him as a rebel not by nature but by necessity. The novel, which won the 1968 Pulitzer Prize, presents not only Nat but also white slaveholding characters as equally complex, refusing to take a clear stand on any character being purely in the right or in the wrong. In doing so, Styron follows in the footsteps of earlier modern Southern writers in this collection by presenting the best and worst elements of Southern characters melded together. But he does so while taking on the most controversial of Southern subjects – slavery, making the book an instant controversy.

My copy is a Book-of-the-Month Club edition from 1967. I purchased the novel in the latter part of my college career, inspired by a seminar series I was fortunate enough to encounter in college on poetry and human rights activism led by Styron's widow, Rose. I'm fascinated by Styron's effort to cover a highly political issue as a writer in the 1960's with such multifaceted characters.

Tate, Allen. *Stonewall Jackson*. New York: Minton, Balch and Company, 1928.

Tate's book is not a novel per say, but a novelistic biography of the famous Confederate general, Stonewall Jackson. It represents the first of a series of historical writings on Confederacy figures he wrote at the end of his Fugitive Career, and represents his own transition from that group to more political and economic writings with the Agrarian

group. Unlike Warren with *All the King's Men*, Tate's work contains a much more palpable tension in Tate's presentation of Stonewall's character and the flawed crusade of which he was a central part; and, unlike Warren, Tate's book was never a large commercial success.

My copy of this book, an edition from 1928, was purchased from a William Faulkner bookstore in New Orleans, on the same Southern road-trip as my visit to Harper Lee's Monroeville. The book has become one of my most prized parts of my collection, as the edition belonged to and is inscribed by one of Tate's key editors, Louis Rubin. Rubin has written candidly on Tate's own personal struggle to make sense of the South's convoluted history. His copy of this book, in which Tate's struggle was perhaps most evident, is a tangible reminder that this group of Southern writers were writing to seek meaning and understanding more than to provide it.

Faulkner, William. *The Reivers*. New York: Random House, 1962.

Faulkner's novel tells the story of the young boy Lucius Priest, a character in Faulkner's larger Yoknapatawpha County literary world, as he journeys from Mississippi to Tennessee. Although it is not one of Faulkner's more widely studied novels, he was awarded his second Pulitzer Prize for it. Lucius' geographic journey is a chance for him to be exposed to and navigate the many moral hazards of the world. Ironically, Lucius is not a passive observer but an active part, as the car in which he's traveling is stolen. In fact, the novel's title, "The Reivers" suggests that the book is about thieves or criminals.

My copy of the novel is a first printing of a Book-of-the-Month Club edition from 1962. Though the *Reivers* does not contain the same degree maddeningly delightful poetic language of Faulkner's better known works, I'm captivated by the notion of journeying that Faulkner captures in the book, and the vehicle of the journey to describe the process of understanding the moral complexities of the Southern world.

Welty, Eudora. *The Golden Apples*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1949.

The *Golden Apples* represents a collection of Welty's short stories set in a Mississippi community. The collection begins with amusingly forceful disclaimer that the characters are "products of the author's imagination and...not intended to portray real people or situations." Despite her protestations, Welty's focusing on the search for happiness and understanding by her characters draws unavoidable parallels to efforts at self-understanding in Welty's own writing. This is furthered by the fact that the stories cover a significant time range in the life of the community, giving the sense that the reader is capturing the experience of a generation.

My copy, a first edition, was a purchase of mine during my working years after college. I was drawn to the title because it elicited Classical reference, and I was acutely homesick not just for the South but for my Classics career. Though the title is actually inspired by the poet Yeats and not directly by ancient poets, I continue to be charmed by the idea that Welty was capturing this generational Southern experience while actively reaching back to a poet from another age.

Ransom, John Crowe. *Selected Poems*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1945.

Ransom, a member of the Fugitive Poets, first wrote many of the works captured in this collection in the 1920s. His style is unflinchingly crisp and undoubtedly influenced by his employment as a secondary school Latin teacher just prior to his joining the Fugitives. One of the most celebrated poems in this collection, "Bells for John Whiteside's Daughter," quickly transitions from a description of a rambunctious (almost naughty) little girl to that of her funeral scene. The subject of the poem is not overtly Southern or opinionated, but the description of the little girl's misbehavior and behavior "taking arms against her shadow" suggest the flawed portrait of the South the Fugitives were trying to capture as a group.

My copy, a first edition, was rescued from a dark corner of the Strand bookstore in New York, along with a small contingent of other "unpopular" Southern authors. I had come to New York to interview for medical school and was

feeling out of my element as a Classicist-turned-medial trainee and a small-town kid in one of the largest cities on the planet.

Porter, Katherine Anne. *Ship of Fools*. Boston: Atlantic-Little, Brown, 1962.

Porter's book is one of the least overtly Southern in the collection, detailing the experiences onboard a ship sailing from Mexico to Europe. The book is meant to make political allusion to the rise of Nazism (reflecting the fact that it was written in piecemeal for decades prior to its publication), and describes the experience of idealist individuals setting out for a better experience in Europe, only to find a disturbing complexity rather than setting for a new utopic experience.

My copy is a 1963 Book-of-the-Month Club edition. I'm drawn to this novel again as an allegory of journey, in which characters attempt to escape a complicated history only to find that such histories dot the landscape of every locality.

Gordon, Caroline and Allen Tate. *The House of Fiction: An Anthology of the Short Story*. New York: Charles Scribner and Sons, 1950.

In this anthology, Gordon and Tate set out to understand the form of the short story from Flaubert to Faulkner. The criticism is kind of a meta-understanding, given that Tate was writing about many of his literary peers and describing, therefore, his own pursuits for writing with this format.

My copy, an early printing, comes from a Faulkner bookstore in New Orleans. Though the book, as a work of literary criticism, is less in line with the remainder of my collection, I'm fascinated by the fact that it was a joint collaboration between Tate and his wife. Women were relatively marginalized in the Fugitive and other early modern Southern writing movements, although gaining stature in the latter half of the twentieth century. Gordon was herself a writer, operating in parallel with the efforts of her husband, and the fact that this work brought them together represents itself a kind of progress for Southern Literature.

Welty, Eudora. *Losing Battles*. New York: Random House, 1970.

Welty's novel describes describing a family reunion in her preferred character community of Mississippians. A strong theme within the novel is a character Jack's struggle for understanding and education. Welty writes the character as understanding more already of family history and human experience than the kind of overt knowledge of education.

My copy, an early edition from 1970, was a purchase made during a period of my medical training when I felt much more overwhelmed by formal education than by the human understanding that talking to patients requires.

Mitchell, Margaret. *Gone with the Wind*. New York: Macmillan, 1936.

Mitchell's tale of Scarlett O'Hara's quest to survive the changing landscape of the South during the Civil War needs no introduction. Mitchell has been criticized, including by many of the other authors on this list, for simplistic portraits of the backward-looking Ashley and Melanie and the sometimes unsavory calculations of both Scarlett and Rhett. Beyond her treatment of Southern history, Mitchell treats Scarlet is a flawed character looking to survive an uncertain world. In doing so, she joins the larger modern Southern Literature movement to describe a complex reality.

My copy, from the fourteenth printing in 1936, comes from a small used book store in Virginia.

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WISH LIST

I wish to use any proceeds from this contest to purchase five more of Louis Rubin's books from the Faulkner bookstore in New Orleans. I was and continued to be disturbed by the idea of these books being separated from each other, and I would like to be able to purchase more of the fiction works in Rubin's collection than my relatively limited student budget would allow.