

BOOK REVIEWS

Still in Print: The Southern Novel Today, edited by Jan Nordby Gretlund. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2010. 285 p. ISBN 978-1-57003-944-7.

Southern studies in Europe are alive and kicking. As Jan Gretlund notes in his introduction to this collection, southern literature is still widely taught and studied in Europe, actually to a larger degree than in the United States. Reading the collection, one certainly comes away with a renewed sense of hope that the American South remains a very distinct region, producing a very distinct kind of fiction. Gretlund's collection *Still in Print: The Southern Novel Today* brings together eighteen critics of southern fiction, discussing the same number of southern novels chosen by the critics themselves. As noted by Gretlund in the preface, the critics are a mix of established, prominent critics and young, talented ones who will hopefully dominate the field in the future. Much as the hope is to keep the southern novel in print, the hope is clearly also to keep these upcoming critics—and with them southern literary criticism—in print.

The essays are grouped into general areas or topics that will not come as a surprise to readers and critics of the South and its writers: A Sense of History, A Sense of Place, A Sense of Humor, and A Sense of Malaise. On the surface it might appear as if southern writers always write about the same themes and have done so for at least 150 years, or more. And in many aspects this assumption is correct. But just as southern identity is “always being created, lost, and reinvented,” to use Gretlund's words, so are the consistent themes southern writers tend to write about. *Still in Print* sets out to prove why southern fiction and these themes (history, place, humor, malaise) are forever topical and relevant, both in the South and beyond.

Jan Gretlund's introduction can be read on its own as a stimulating and thought-provoking status report on southern fiction in the first decade of the 2000s by someone who has read, taught, and studied the field for more than thirty years. One of the most interesting sections is his assessment of New Southern Studies, a direction that operates with the idea of an intellectual “global South,” thus placing the South in a transnational framework. Gretlund appreciates the effort, but ultimately deems it too idealistic and not grounded in realism, saying that if “literary critics propose what novelists should write, it is putting the cart before the horse.”

However, Gretlund's chief and most interesting concern in the introduction is to some extent linked to the discussion on New Southern Studies and the idea of a “global South.” He discusses the question of regionalism and the local against the global and the cosmopolitan world of the new millennium. What happens to the local in a globalized world? Does it disappear completely? Or does the local actually stand out more strongly as a distinctive and unique element, though still seen in the context of the global? Perhaps the local and global can indeed successfully merge, creating a new hybrid: the “glocal.” Even

if Gretlund never uses this word, he hints at it throughout his introductory remarks, where he assesses the traditional themes of southern fiction, linking the past and the present. He shows how relevant the merger of the local and global becomes when we talk about southern fiction. Near the end of his introduction, Gretlund poignantly concludes: "It is the preoccupation with the human condition that gives southern fiction a place in world literature." On this basis, one might call good southern fiction "glocal." The best southern—or regional—fiction manages to meticulously describe its particular region or place and people while also describing and commenting on a universal phenomenon. On the one hand, it is impossible to imagine that Flannery O'Connor's southern grotesques could live, (barely) function, and speak from any other place than the South. On the other, they are all displaced persons and Misfits, "much like yourself perhaps," to take a line from Cormac McCarthy's portrayal of the murderous but oddly sympathetic necrophile Lester Ballard in *Child of God* (1973). Gretlund's introduction, then, aptly sets the stage for the essays and novels to come by convincingly showing that the best southern fiction skillfully depicts the South while simultaneously dealing with global issues.

The first part of the collection, *A Sense of History*, discusses novels by Charles Frazier, Josephine Humphreys, Kaye Gibbons, Pam Durban, and Percival Everett. M. Thomas Inge's essay on Frazier's *Cold Mountain* constitutes a somewhat uneven opening to the section on history. Although Inge's approach is very academic—relying on other scholars, research into inspirations for the novel and its title, and quotes from Frazier himself—the essay, while interesting in parts, is not particularly successful in its attempt to convince a reader who has not read *Cold Mountain*, such as myself, why I should, and why it is a magnificent and important novel that deserves to remain in print. Unfortunately, *Cold Mountain* disappears along the way because Inge does not let the novel speak sufficiently for itself. In the end I learned more about the Chinese poetry that inspired the title and place than about the merits of the novel.

Clara Juncker's essay on Josephine Humphreys' *Nowhere Else on Earth* is excellent, precisely because Juncker allows the novel to do most of the talking. She quotes extensively from *Nowhere Else on Earth* and perceptively comments, interprets, and contextualizes throughout. Extremely well-written, the essay points to several themes and characteristics in Humphreys' novel. One is left with the feeling that this novel is interesting, needs to be read, and has plenty of substance for further studies by students and scholars. While not on the level of Juncker's essay, the other essays in this part of the collection—focusing on Pam Durban's *So Far Back*, Kaye Gibbons' *On the Occasion of My Last Afternoon*, and Percival Everett's *Erasure*—are all good, interesting reads that should inspire potential readers to seek out the novels, *Erasure* especially. Jan Gretlund—here writing on Durban's *So Far Back*—has said elsewhere that *Erasure* has the potential to become a classic, and he is right.

In the section titled *A Sense of Place* we encounter novels by Steve Yarbrough (*The Oxygen Man*), Larry Brown (*Fay*), Chris Offutt (*The Good Brother*), Barry Hannah (*Yonder Stands Your Orphan*), and James Lee Burke

(*Crusader's Cross*). Much like Clara Juncker's essay, Jean W. Cash's piece on Larry Brown's *Fay* is an example of what this collection can do at its best: Cash outlines the novel clearly and discusses the themes it explores. Throughout, she compares Brown's themes and characters to those of other southern works. Editor Jan Gretlund did not want the contributors to make comparisons, but rather wanted them to focus solely on the novel they had each chosen. However, most contributors, if not all, point to possible influences from and connections to other works in English literature. Apart from Carl Wieck's essay on Chris Offutt's *The Good Brother*, which is as much about Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* as it is about *The Good Brother*, none of the contributors provide long, developed comparisons between their featured novel and other works. They are, however, attentive to other works and place them in a wider context of southern, American, and/or English fiction, and this is a definite plus for the collection. After all, as Cormac McCarthy reminds us, "[t]he ugly fact is that books are made out of other books." The balanced references to other works and authors also underline why this collection is well suited for teaching purposes and as inspiration for further studies by students and scholars.

Humor is the theme of the third part of the collection: George Singleton (*Work Shirts for Madmen*), Clyde Edgerton (*The Bible Salesman*), James Wilcox (*Heavenly Days*), Donald Harington (*Enduring*), and Lewis Nordan (*Lightning Song*). Any reader of southern fiction is accustomed to the language, which is often one of the great joys of reading fiction out of the South. Charles Israel writes that the tall tale is a mainstay of southern fiction and shows how Singleton's *Work Shirts for Madmen* continues this tradition by weaving related tall tales into a novel. Humor as a topic in a southern context usually means that tragedy and darkness are forever looming in the background. Much as "[t]he possibility of death is clearly indicated . . ." in the pages of Wilcox's *Heavenly Days*, the possibility and, undeniably, reality of sadness and despair are not far removed from these humorous novels. The contributions on humor successfully convey why this dynamic makes for truly stimulating works of fiction.

To show how closely connected light and darkness often are in southern letters, the collection ends, following the section on humor, by being plunged into darkness—A Sense of Malaise—with Ron Rash (*One Foot in Eden*), Richard Ford (*The Lay of the Land*), and Cormac McCarthy (*The Road*). Death, both psychological and literal, dominates this final section of the collection. Richard Gray notes that the landscape in *The Road* defies definition and distinction, and that it progressively becomes a landscape of vacancy, of empty space. In Ron Rash's *One Foot in Eden*, the South is a disappearing place. In Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*, the whole world is a disappearing place—or perhaps the disappearance is already complete. *The Road* has been called McCarthy's artistic return to the South—even if one can ask whether there is a South, or a North, or a West, or an East in the world the novel depicts—and indeed it corresponds with his earliest Appalachian novels, which Gray also points out in his essay, more than the Border Trilogy does. But *The Road* is as much *Blood Meridian* as it is *Outer Dark* or *Suttree*.

Richard Gray's essay on *The Road* is one of the gems of *Still in Print*. He manages to place the novel in a wider context (for instance, arguing why it can be read as a post-9/11 novel) and relies on several sources to demonstrate the many layers of the novel. But *The Road* is always present and it speaks throughout. One would think that *The Road* is one novel that will definitely survive the test of time—thank you, Oprah.

Generally, the final section of *Still in Print* is one of the best. Thomas Ærvold Bjerre's essay on Rash's *One Foot in Eden*, Robert Brinkmeyer's piece on Ford's *The Lay of the Land*, and Gray's musings over McCarthy's *The Road* constitute a strong finish to a solid collection.

As briefly mentioned above, one of the best qualities of the collection is how suited it is for teaching. From a teacher's perspective, the collection can spawn plenty of different courses on southern/American fiction. Whether it is a survey course on southern fiction, or a course approaching one or more specific themes, there is plenty of potential in the collection. While the essays are grouped together with a heading suggesting their overall theme, they all share some of the same themes, styles, and characteristics. Steve Yarbrough's *The Oxygen Man*, for instance, is as much a novel about A Sense of History or A Sense of Malaise as it is a novel about A Sense of Place (the section in which it is placed).

Every essay comes with a brief biography outlining the life and body of work of each author. The essays all emphasize the important characteristics and themes of the novels, while making comparisons to Faulkner, Alice Walker, Joyce, Dickens, Flannery O'Connor and many more. Since none of the essays are absolute in their interpretations, they will no doubt help inspire students when they assess the novels critically in class, or when writing essays and assignments. The same can be said for scholars who are interested in fiction from the South and wish to go into greater depth with one or more authors or themes. Additionally, a helpful tool, a list of works cited and consulted, is included at the end of each essay. Ultimately, Jan Gretlund has successfully put together a collection that is an engaging and stimulating point of departure for further reading and study. Just like the novels it tackles, this book deserves to stay in print.

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Kolář, Stanislav, Zuzana Buráková, and Katarína Šandorová. *Reflections of Trauma in Selected Works of Postwar American and British Literature*. Košice: Pavol Josef Šafárik University, Faculty of Arts, 2010. 129 p. ISBN 978-80-7097-849-8.

Trauma studies belongs among the fastest-evolving disciplines of social sciences. It provides a theoretical framework for understanding trauma and its psychological consequences for the minds of both individuals and groups. With the growing emphasis on interdisciplinarity of all academic research trauma theory has recently also entered the field of literary criticism, combining philosophy, psychoanalysis, sociology, and literature.

As the history of Western literature has proven, trauma can be successfully represented as a narrative. Numerous events leading to trauma are often unspeakable or incomprehensible. That is why the process of writing or using literary language can often function as a therapeutic device. The application of trauma studies to literature can therefore be seen as a valuable tool for critical inquiry into multiple aspects of trauma in art, offering new interpretations and perspectives to literary criticism, social sciences, law, or education. In the United States, this new collaborative approach has already inspired diverse studies and numerous projects (let me name only the emergence of *The Journal of Literature and Trauma Studies* or the *Center for Literature and Trauma* in 2007), whereas in the Czech and Slovak literary contexts it has been neglected so far. That is one of the reasons why the collection *Reflections of Trauma in Selected Works of Postwar American and British Literature* represents an influential and pioneering study.

In the "Introduction" to the volume, Stanislav Kolář outlines diverse approaches to trauma and points out the elusiveness of the term. Confronted with the naming of the unnameable, the author presents a substantial theoretical background based on the research of influential critics dealing with trauma studies and selects the main points of interest for the collection, namely memory, accuracy, identity, and the trans-/intergenerational effects of traumata.

As one of the most significant traumatic events in European history was the Holocaust, its representation in American literature is analyzed in the first and longest chapter of the volume, called "Trauma and the Holocaust in the American Novel." By means of an illustrative sample of American Holocaust writing Stanislav Kolář explores the literary techniques used to represent trauma and pays significant attention to the ethical side of recreating events in which the authors were not personally involved. He concentrates on seven texts from different decades, namely Edward Lewis Wallant's *The Pawnbroker* (1961), Saul Bellow's *Mr Sammler's Planet* (1970), William Styron's *Sophie's Choice* (1979), Art Spiegelman's graphic novel *Maus* (1986, 1991), Cynthia Ozick's *The Shawl* (1989), Jonathan Safran Foer's *Everything is Illuminated* (2002), and Dara Horn's *The World to Come* (2006).

The novels that are analyzed differ significantly in their presentation of the Holocaust and provide a solid ground for a detailed academic inquiry into the representation of trauma from multiple perspectives. Whereas some

works emphasize the psychological consequences and examine the role of memory, other focus on the intergenerational aspect of trauma and the search for accuracy in the survivors' narratives. In the works that are presented America, the *goldene medine* as the Jewish immigrants often saw it, is transformed into yet another prison which only deepens and reopens old wounds and consequently also affects the following generations. Even though none of the selected writers had direct or personal experience of the Holocaust (except for Art Spiegelman, whose father was an Auschwitz survivor), their urge to depict it proves that coping with collective traumatic history forms a "hugely significant part of Jewish collective identity" (55).

The second and shortest chapter, called "Nuclear Holocaust and Trauma: John Hersey's *Hiroshima*," also by Stanislav Kolář, suggests even with its title the connection between these two events. *Hiroshima* is the only book in this collection that is not fiction but "a novel of contemporary history," as Hersey preferred to call it, or a non-fiction novel rendering historical events as imaginative literature. Nevertheless, Kolář calls it "a detailed reportage" or "a work of non-fiction" (61). Even though genre analysis is not the primary aim of this essay, the critical approach taken to various types of texts significantly affects the interpretation. If *Hiroshima* is indeed seen as a journalistic presentation of facts, its place in this volume would be disputable. The chapter focuses on the consequences of trauma caused both by a lack of knowledge and fear of the unknown and ungraspable. The trauma is thus presented not only as a result of the atomic explosion itself but also of anxiety and insecurity prior to the attack. As Hersey's work is partly based on interviews with survivors, a closer examination of oral history and its relationship to trauma studies and literature would enhance the contribution of the volume that is presented, especially when the accuracy and truth of the victims' narratives are set out as some of the proposed topics of the collection.

The third chapter, named "Finding Identity through Trauma," by Zuzana Buráková, focuses again on American Jewish literature and examines the transmission of trauma onto the following generations in connection with the formation of their identity. Not avoiding the Holocaust completely, Buráková also explores other sources of trauma connected to the self-definition of American Jews, such as displacement or exile. In her thorough analysis of three contemporary works—Jonathan Safran Foer's *Everything Is Illuminated* (2002), Lara Vapnyar's short stories *There Are Jews in My House* (2003), and Gary Shteyngart's *Absurdistan* (2006)—she persuasively draws a link between a traumatic historical event and the formation of identity. Confrontation with the past of their nation often forces the characters to redefine their relationship with their culture and heritage. Trauma can thus be seen as a positive source of self-reflection and discovery. Even though the complexity of American Jewish identity is pointed out, a deeper explication of this concept would be highly beneficial, as the understanding of traditions and roots as defined by Irving Howe has been considerably shifted since then, especially in the later generations of American Jews.

The final chapter, "Whose Trauma Is It?," focuses on the sources and forms of trauma faced by lesbian women as depicted in three novels by contemporary British writers: Joanna Trollope's *A Village Affair* (1990), Jeanette Winterson's *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* (2001), and Sarah Waters's *Tipping the Velvet* (2003). Katarína Šandorová persuasively argues that "it is not only orientation as such which operates as a traumatizer, but also public opinion" (97). As she asserts, the trauma is a consequence of the characters' newly found lesbian identity, which affects them both on the individual/intimate and social levels. This chapter undoubtedly offers a new perspective on the representation of trauma in fiction, but as it is the only essay dealing with British literature, the question remains to what extent it is illustrative of this cultural context.

The search for identity has become one of the most exploited literary themes. In connection to the dramatic events of the twentieth century and their effects on the human mind, the employment of psychology (mainly Freudian psychoanalysis or the Jungian theory of collective consciousness) as a critical tool for text analysis has already proved fruitful. Trauma studies represent yet another step in merging psychology and other fields with literature. As each theory has its limits, the main danger here lies in the "over-traumatization" of stories, authors, characters, and whole social or ethnic groups. This monograph avoids such simplifications and confirms this transdisciplinary approach as a legitimate critical tool.

The application of trauma theories to the study of literature is a logical consequence of the dramatic events of the last century and of the growth of postcolonial and minority writing, be it ethnic or religious. Trauma studies can also provide a significant contribution to studies of genre, namely horror or apocalyptic stories. In Western literatures, most attention is paid to the representation of Holocaust, African American slavery and its consequences, Native American uprooting, or alienation, and the social stigmatization of gay authors.

However, this potential is exploited only partially in this collection. Even though the authors made a significant contribution to different aspects of literary renderings of trauma, they maintain the Western perspective. Moreover, British literature is considerably under-represented. These limitations are sufficiently compensated for by the illustrative choice of works and their in-depth analyses. The authors convincingly assert the connection between trauma and the formation of identity on both the individual and group levels in their respective papers, and yet their shared findings are not explicitly pointed out in the "Conclusion." On the whole, the monograph presents an authoritative point of reference for further studies or projects and proves to be a significant academic contribution to this transdisciplinary inquiry.

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