

# HEADS ON FIRE

I went out to the hazel wood,  
Because a fire was in my head,  
And cut and peeled a hazel wand,  
And hooked a berry to a thread;  
And when the white moths were on the wing,  
And moth-like stars were flickering out,  
I dropped the berry in a stream  
And caught a little silver trout.

William Butler Yeats  
*from "The Song of the Wandering Aengus"*

Jan Nordby Gretlund

# HEADS ON FIRE

Essays on Southern Fiction

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I dedicate *Heads on Fire* to  
The members of the European  
*Southern Studies Forum* (of the EAAS)  
now in its 26th year.

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## PREFACE

I admire the writers of the South and deal with their works on a daily basis. This means that I work not only on literature by established authors, but also on writers who are now making a name for themselves, and I feel a special urge to tell you about fiction that deserves to be kept in print. You will note that several themes are recurring, so it is relatively easy to select overriding ideas for an essay, for a thesis, or for a course. But no two readers will see exactly the same topics in the texts, and this is one reason why the writers deserve our attention.

I ask a couple of simple questions, such as: who is a good southern writer? And what can I do to make people read their works? I am thinking of the lay reader, the guy lost before the screen, or behind the sports pages, and general readers both within and outside the academy. The idea is to convince everybody that these writers are worth reading, deserve attention, and should be better known than they are.

You may look in vain for the name of your favorite southern writer and ask: why did he pick these southern writers? Why are there no essays on William Faulkner, Flannery O'Connor, Walker Percy, or Josephine Humphreys? The answer is that I have written on their achievement in other contexts, for example in my collection of essays titled *Frames of Southern Mind* (Odense U.P. 1998). The essays selected for *Heads on Fire* offer one trail of southern literary excellence and there are others; but the literary achievement of the writers selected is undeniable, and they will influence and help shape the future of American fiction. Hoping for a discussion, I have selected essays that focus on points rarely made, and arguments that I think should be brought up. Already in these opening pages I indicate why an essay has been selected for the collection. The essays introducing the fiction are short, but offer enough insight to enable you to decide whether you want to read a text. I obviously think you should, as the texts deserve attention and are, or have the potential to become, classics.

Today it is clear that in the short period from 1832 to 1836, and with 1835 as the defining year, there was a flowering of southern writing. It

was a time of achievement with promises of a grand future for southern letters. A more complete listing of the new titles of that year in the South would support the claim that 1835 was indeed a remarkable literary year. Augustus B. Longstreet is among the most famous of the writers who published in 1835; his *Georgia Scenes* ushered in a new genre, which was called "Southwestern Humor."

Nothing in literary history rivals this year as regards the productivity in southern letters until the year 1936 at the height of the Southern Literary Renaissance. It is the literary achievement of 1835 that justifies the use of the term 'a renaissance' about southern literature of the 1930s. As the reader has realized by now, I am trying to rewrite literary history by emphasizing the ignored fact that the literary rebirth of the 1930s was indeed preceded by a birth in the 1830s. Nathaniel B. Tucker's *The Partisan Leader* (1836), is, however, a novel in which all art is dwarfed by political propaganda; the political emphasis in the novel was a clear indication that the brief flowering of southern letters was over almost before it began. From the late 1830s and almost for a century, southern literature would be generally 'hag-ridden' by politics and political rhetoric.

In the 1820s and 1830s 'southern' meant, especially for the upper-classes, to be in a displaced England, financially, mentally, and culturally, and closer, as Poe wrote in "To Helen," "To the glory that was Greece/ And the grandeur that was Rome," i.e. closer to classical learning and observation of the world than Americans were in general. In other words 'southern' meant to be less nationalistic American and also less religiously religious than New England. To be a man cultured in European thinking mattered in Virginia society; it was much less obvious that anybody should take particular pride in being an American. To read this will irritate Americans of today, but that is exactly my point: we have lost the ability to imagine what being 'southern' meant in Poe's time.

Believing that he had to invent his life as well as his art, Poe played many parts in the course of his forty years: but the part to which he was consistently attached was that of a Virginia gentleman, which he was by inclination. Poe's ante-bellum southern ideology is quite openly present in his writings. It is clear that his beliefs are conservative: he is preoccupied with the past in the present, he is constantly aware of the existence of evil, change is hardly ever positive, hierarchy is necessary and should be maintained, and abstractions are generally false. "As for

American Letters, plain-speaking about *them* is, simply, the one thing needed,” and Poe was merciless in his appraisals of the American literary achievement of his time. We need to read Poe in terms of the American regional debate in order to understand his criticism, fiction, and poetry, and we should keep in mind that it is the debate of the 1820s - 1840s that should be in focus.

In the tradition of the Transcendentalists, Mark Twain’s concern was for the welfare and morals of the common people and he left no doubt that they were better off in the New World. Twain became the Victorian inspector of the morals of the world, and in his fiction his condemnation of the imperialistic societies was only relieved by his admiration for people untouched by western civilization. Twain is so furious in his indictments of imperialism that the reader is never fully convinced that he is reading the private thoughts of King Leopold or Czar Nicholas II, in the satirical soliloquies; in both essays the message is obviously more important than the art. The lasting power of these pieces is in Twain’s message to us, which is to stop the rulers and people like them. During his last decade Twain became even more outspoken in his criticism of the colonial powers. He was prompted to write critically of the Boer War, the Spanish-American War, and the Boxer Rebellion in China.

Twain made choices grounded in his Missouri childhood, he decided that he did *not* really believe in a rejection of the past, or in progress, or in human perfectibility. Today most people probably think of Twain as a ‘southern’ writer, and it may come as a surprise that he was not always considered southern, neither in the old Confederacy nor outside the South. I have made it my purpose to find the answers to a few questions: why was Twain’s ‘Little Dixie’ background an unspoken fact for so many years? And exactly *when* did Twain become a southern author; and *why*? Although the South molded Twain, it did not retain him as a southern writer; his star has only been rising south of the Mason-Dixon Line since the late 1950s. My point is that Twain’s enduring art, the fiction which gave the American novel its language, is southern in attitude and in subject matter. His fiction grows identifiably out of his background. And *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is now considered “one of the world’s great literary achievements,” maybe because the novel deals with the most controversial of all American issues.

There was a dramatic change in Mark Twain’s relations with southern literature between Louise Manly’s 1895 anthology and subsequent

anthologies up to and including the Young, Watkins, Beatty 1952 anthology on one hand and the Davis, Holman, and Rubin 1970 anthology on the other. What brought about the change? The answer resides in the Civil Rights changes during exactly this period, 1952-1970, Twain's life-long criticism of southern race relations no longer made him an outcast in the South, on the contrary it now had to be admitted that Twain had been decades ahead of most southerners. It might be appropriate to question our general politics of anthologizing and regionalizing any writer, as politics are always involved. There are at least nineteen thought-provoking short texts from Twain's final years that we ought to read; texts that would improve any anthology of American literature.

To what extent, we ask, does a writer's life translate into her fiction? What I ask is a related, but rarely voiced question: does fiction translate into a life? In other words, instead of reading biography in the fiction, I suggest that we consider the fiction in the biography; also in Eudora Welty's best-selling autobiography. We have been conditioned to think of the difference between fact and fiction as fundamental, but the dividing line between them is often invisible. Should we expect to find not only the life in the art, but also the use of the art in the life?

The obvious difficulty for the fiction writer as biographer is to combine the literal transcription of her life with her creative freedom of the imagination. The problem is in short, how to write autobiography in the manner of fiction without actually making it fiction. In *One Writer's Beginnings* Welty remembers through a finely honed narrative consciousness, belabors her private experience, and creates a great fictional memoir with her mother as the main character. We have to accept that, like all autobiographers, Welty was an unreliable informant about her life, and fully as imaginative in compensating and distorting as any other writer of postmodern fiction.

Madison Jones had a dark view of human experience. He was preoccupied with the inexplicable presence of good and evil in man, in a classic Greek sense. Out of his preoccupations came impressive lessons in the possibility of the immediate. He created an emphatically moral world that had its origins in a self-knowledge and compassion that transcend their southern particulars.

Jones' words express the order and economy of great art. But the reader's interest is not focused on the style, which does not call attention to itself, for every detail is essential in relation to the novel as a

whole. Instead the austerity of the form, also of *To the Winds*, allows us to think about what the events will mean for the individual characters and to wonder how they will be shaped by them. People kill, have abortions, and commit suicide also in his novels, but the violent events are not just shock effects as they appear necessary for the organic whole. Madison Jones created a moral world and raised existential issues that transcend his time and place; his novels deserve to be kept in print.

In the Faulknerian tradition, Pam Durban impressively experiments in the art of storytelling, which turns out to be closely related to the art of quilting, knitting, and sewing. Prejudice is a topic in her novel *So Far Back*. Durban shows us that we can try to escape the racist within ourselves, but he will still be there. The lingering and inherent prejudice is perhaps her main theme. *So Far Back* asks questions, such as: is there any point in trying to understand past injustice and prejudice now? The fact that the past proves *not* to be impervious to change gives the novel its depth.

Durban also asks: to what extent is falsified history a part of our identity? She takes us back to the Charleston of 1837, a year of yellow fever, racial unrest, and a cotton-market crash. Past and present are thoroughly intermingled, and the present is finally informed and improved by the past. *So Far Back* is a novel with an emphasis on the importance of remembering, and on what the loss of memory does to our sense of identity. The radical sense of displacement in the modern South, which may seem unburdened by a memory of the past, is brought to life by Durban. Injustice is not merely far back, it is still with us and we should try to do something to change that fact. We may finally realize the subjectivity of the memory of the past, and in doing so, the subjectivity of our experience of the present.

Clyde Edgerton created Hansen County, North Carolina, which is the setting of much of his fiction. His topics are often the extended family and their relationships. This is not just to illustrate small town social comedy, it is also a postmodern interrogation into serious existential issues such as living, aging, and dying.

Old age is described as an extended period of losses, especially the loss of the self through the interference of strangers. What is gained in old age is equally dismal; especially that time changes into “a little bunch that seems about a year or two old,” and is right behind you. Edgerton shows that many old people, suspected of beginning senility

can still manage surprisingly well in a crisis, even if their speech patterns are so full of non-sequiturs that they sound as if they were in a post-modern absurd play. His criticism of society is that neither the nursing homes nor the churches do a good job helping the elderly. He suggests that a combined effort by the two, in 'nurches,' might help improve the quality of life of many people and help them retain a sense of identity. Edgerton's fiction demonstrates that old people need to be responsible for something that matters and they need something worthwhile to do every day. Otherwise it will be difficult to distinguish between old people and ancient mummies dug up in the West.

All contemporary southern writers were born burdened with a past of racism. I am interested in the continuity – or lack of continuity – between the racial attitudes, assumptions, and values that used to inform southern literature. The southern culture of today is clearly the basis of new fiction and new thinking also in matters racial. On the last page of a novel, a character named 'Not Sidney Poitier' receives a special award, in Hollywood, as "Most Dignified Figure in American Culture," presented to him by Harry Belafonte and Elizabeth Taylor. Not Sidney has once again been mistaken for the actor; once again others have given him an identity. With this statement Percival Everett has efficiently used fiction as a weapon in the rejection of racism, including that within the black establishment. The novel makes it clear that not all Not's goals are realizable within the framework of racist America, the stain of racism and pestering prejudice is still there and at times in places where you would least expect to experience it. With *I Am Not Sidney Poitier* Everett has created a significant novel with a difference, a novel liable to upset a number of today's established black Americans.

The racial topic that is at the core of Madison Smartt Bell's *Devil's Dream* cannot be seen in an orderly narrative progression, as the racism that made slavery possible is not limited to any time. As a part of the human condition, racism has not been eradicated and will not disappear, so as regards that topic, it does not make sense to distinguish between then, now, and tomorrow. This *is* historical fiction, but Bell's account is also the history of today and tomorrow; and as regards pestering prejudice, "the separation between past, present, and future is an illusion." *Devil's Dream* will irritate a lot of readers because it gives Bedford Forrest a black family, but then it will irritate many others because the

novel makes Forrest appear as a positive human being. In short, Bell challenges all preconceived notions about a man and his time.

Chris Offutt's southerners are often encapsulated in time. In his novel *The Good Brother* he makes it clear that prejudice is not just a question of hate, racial hate, but often prejudicial ideas are used to justify class issues and continued financial exploitation. In general racism has not been ignored or suburbanized away in contemporary southern fiction. Prejudice still exists and today's novelists, exemplified by Percival Everett, Madison Smartt Bell, and Steve Yarbrough cater to our needs and realities by accentuating the issues.

We may well question whether the minds, the egos, of the pale riders in Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian* are in control of their not so pale passions and energy, or if their ids take control and decide what they do. Their ids clearly pervert the riders who set the pleasure of money-lust and blood-lust above anything dictated by their egos or super-egos. The dismal declaration that the riders have no place they can claim as home does not invite sympathy; the more we read about the homeless men, the less we like them. With their cruel acts they demonstrate man's inhumanity to man. Death and dying, a simple lust for the end of the world is *the* topic that K. A. Porter, D. H. Lawrence, and Cormac McCarthy have in common. The fact that McCarthy pursued "inversions without end upon other men's journeys," is one reason why *Blood Meridian* is such a difficult novel to read and interpret.

The idea of all mankind as fools dominates. There is no real difference between itinerant performers we see and their audience, which includes the readers. McCarthy keeps the true nature of his characters in doubt; he recognizes that man in his isolation, struggling with his limitations, is a pathetic creature, more to be pitied than condemned. The degree of compassion McCarthy does achieve can be described as an understanding so devoid of sentimentality that it takes on an obvious allegorical quality. McCarthy has the courage it takes to leave his readers absolutely nobody to identify with.

McCarthy's characterizations go well beyond simple indifference, it is more a *revulsion* at being faced with the true nature of mankind. No character in *Blood Meridian* could pass muster under ethical scrutiny; nobody cares who dies, or how, or why. To ask for the reader's compassion, is to ask much, but that is in essence what McCarthy asks of us. His message in the novel is that we should worry about our inhumanity

toward others. In the tradition of Mark Twain's best work, McCarthy shows us the history of mankind without a romantic veil. When he perseveres in presenting us with an overload of *man's inhumanity to man*, the novelist does so because his conviction is that we need to be made aware of the inhumanity in ourselves, constantly and endlessly.

The survivors in *The Road* will, of course, try to interpret the catastrophe in their attempt to survive in the now toxic environment. But McCarthy does not make this into science fiction about a future world, as the father and son's quest for survival and comprehension does not essentially distinguish itself from the reader's everyday struggle to stay alive while trying to understand his existence.

The novel does not encourage optimistic interpretations, as McCarthy lets us witness both the ecological and the spiritual catastrophes and lets them stand in their threatening reality, now that civilization is not only encroaching on the wilderness of the world, but has finally managed to destroy it. There is nothing optimistic about the ending of the novel. Soon there will be no witnesses to tell about the great disaster; and even if there were, there will be nobody to listen to the tale. In that case, what will it matter whether it happened or not? The end of the road is indeed *the end*.

I suggest that we, as fond readers of southern fiction, should be grateful to the writers who have made it clear to us how we have lived our lives, shown us the way we live now in arresting detail, and are making the vain effort to predict exactly what our way of living will lead to in the future. There are still heads on fire all over the South.

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