

New Stories from the South

Shannon Ravenel, Editor

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In the preface to this pleasing collection of short stories, culled from magazines printed in 1998, Tony Early fires a shot across the bow. The target: anyone who presumes from the title that what follows is a batch of condescending, stereotypical tales of drunken, trailer-trash rednecks who burn crosses and conceive illegitimate children with their cousins. Early is contemptuous of writers who feed on such prejudices: "In creating our own literature, a Southern literature, we often go for the quick laugh, the easy buck, the cardboard character. When we do that, we eat away at the foundation of that literature from the inside."

Early's point is not that there aren't ignorant, drunken louts in the South. Rather, it's that writers who choose to portray them should create genuine characters, with the depth and complexity of real human beings, instead of crude caricatures. For the most part, the stories in this volume appear to pass that test. Even more refreshingly, many of the characters don't come across as rednecks at all. They're just people, grappling with essentially the same problems as would be experienced by, in Early's words, "any Cheeverian Westchester County housewife." Yet the inherent Southernness of the people and places who enrich these stories is as unmistakable as the August heat of an Alabama hamlet described by Michael Knight in "Birdland": "one-warming inertial heat, humidity thick enough to slow your blood."

Amid religious fundamentalism, racial slurs and football fanaticism in Knight's tale is the heartwarming story of a New England scientist who makes peace with the South while falling in love, however reluctantly, with one of its sons. With characteristically wry humor, Clyde Edgerton pens "Lunch at the Piccadilly," a simple tale of a man struggling to tell his elderly aunt she no longer can drive. William Gay's "Those Deep Elm Brown's Ferry Blues" weaves mystery and heartbreak into the story of an old man's descent into senility. Another tale of aging, Rick DeMarinis' "Borrowed Hearts," relates a man's brush with death and subsequent determination to live his remaining days to the fullest.

Southern fiction? Absolutely, from vivid descriptions of "the hot, sleepy drone of dirt daubers" to colorful yet realistic Carolina dialogue: "Like to drove me crazy." Above all, however, these are stories about life—about people who could live anywhere but are firmly rooted in the soil of America's forever fascinating South.

JOHN FLESHER (July / August 1999)

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