

The Artificial Southerner: Equivocations and Love Songs

Philip Martin

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The author introduces his collection of southern-themed essays by recalling an interview he once conducted with Los Angeles-born actor Nicolas Cage. While that may at first seem an odd choice, it is actually quite appropriate. Martin realizes that in the twenty-first century, after more than fifty years of the homogenizing cultural effects of television and the Internet, anyone claiming a distinctive regional identity is playing a role. "I am the first to concede," Martin writes, "that there is something willed about my Southernness, that it is, to one degree or another, something decided upon."

Martin has a particular affinity for exploring the South through its creative individuals—its writers, musicians, architects, even its politicians. It is through the works of Tom Wolfe, Lucinda Williams, Larry Brown, and their ilk that the South is continuing to redefine and recreate—and perpetuate—itsself. Martin has that rare ability to capture a person on the printed page through careful observation of details and an ear for simile. "You look at Larry Brown," Martin writes, "and you don't see much that seems extraordinary; a wiry guy with receding chestnut hair and sad-dog eyes patting his pockets for that pack of Marlboros. You get close and see his face is tanned and creased like a farmer's, and when he speaks the words back out slow and careful, like eighteen-wheelers creeping to the loading dock behind the Wal-Mart."

Being from Arkansas, Martin devotes a significant number of pages to discussing Bill Clinton. While his observations about Clinton and his faults and successes are not dramatically original in their conclusions, they are nevertheless clearly presented. More memorable, perhaps, is Martin's humorous piece about dealing with the Secret Service as a result of being a neighbor of Hilary's mother.

Most of the essays in this collection were originally published as columns in the Arkansas Democrat-Gazette, and the reader may sometimes be frustrated by their resulting brevity. A few essays seem misplaced in a collection focusing upon Southernness, such as the one detailing Martin's encounter in Mexico with Bharati Mukherjee and a crocodile. These, however, are minor complaints. As a whole, *The Artificial Southerner* is a fine collection, and worthy of a reading by anyone interested in the contemporary South.

ERIK BLEDSOE (March / April 2002)

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