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General

The Cry of an Occasion: Fiction from the Fellowship of Southern Writers
Richard Bausch, editor
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Bausch has gathered an assemblage of writings that would do Robert Penn Warren, Eudora Welty, Walker Percy, and Cleanth Brooks proud. Each of these nineteen stories was written by someone Bausch considers a personal hero from amongst the Fellowship of Southern Writers, a literary society founded in 1987 "to encourage and stimulate good writing in the South." The authors in this first book include Madison Smartt Bell, Allan Gurganus, and founding members Shelby Foote and George Garrett. Although some of these stories have been widely anthologized, their collection here testifies to the fine legacy of Southern writing.

From drinking boys to sinning church ladies, these characters bust open the stereotype of Southern life. In telling the saga of a flamboyant librarian akin to Tennessee Williams who was a one-time drinking buddy, Barry Hannah's narrator recognizes his own lost identity. With his marvelous knack for cadence and story-telling, it's no wonder that Hannah won the society's coveted Robert Penn Warren prize. In Madison Smartt Bell's story, two hung-over pals discuss the virtues of the naked lady one has sculpted:

Soon's I made her mouth she started in asken me for stuff. She wants new clothes and she wants a new car and she wants some jewry and a pair of Italian shoes.

And if I made her that stuff, Monroe said, I know she's just goen to take it out looken for some other fool. I'll set here all day maken stuff I don't care for and she'll be out just riden and riden.

These stories revel in narrative as they reveal the history of Southern peoples. In a brilliant, gory deposition, Shelby Foote recounts the fictional vengeance and suffering of one native tribe, disclosing the Catholic irony of belief. In chapter excerpts from his novel Tehano, Allen Wier practically incants the story of Knobby Creek's ancestry and his naked escape with his women toward the safe harbor of Texas. Tehano refreshes slave narrative with a new story and voice.

Contemporary family life down South provides the stuff of many of these stories, yet some focus on displacement. In Jill McCorkle's "Life Prerecorded," a chain-smoking pregnant woman who's newly moved to Beacon Hill, Boston has guilty dreams of her childhood back home, snitching that first pack from Junior's Texaco. She vacations in the U.S. Virgin Islands because, "I just didn't feel I could be pregnant and in another country."

Each of these stories offers an experience as profound as birth. They cry out for an occasion to be read and to celebrate life.

Jo-Ann Graziano