

NEW STORIES FROM THE SOUTH: THE YEAR'S BEST, 2003. Edited by Shannon Ravenel. Chapel Hill: Algonquin, 2003. 368 pp. \$14.95, paper.

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For the past eighteen years, *New Stories from the South: The Year's Best* has attempted to anthologize the brightest and seemingly most authentic of "Southern" writing. It's a challenge facing at least two pitfalls: the stories must affirm what is traditional without making it sound clichéd, yet they must also stretch the regional fabric without tearing it apart at the seams. Writing in the preface to the 2003 edition, Roy Blount Jr. answers the question "What is 'Southern'?" with an intriguing paradox, saying "[You] can't live in the South and be a deep-dyed Southern writer." A Southern writer by habitat, he explains, may choose his subject simply by accident, because it is convenient to him, something akin to finding tools in your toolshed and calling yourself a carpenter. On the other hand, if that subject matter turns up for a writer living outside the South, then either he has chosen it deliberately or he simply "can't help it"—it's in his blood.

Blount's argument is interesting and would be convincing if not for all the writers he might exclude. More likely, living "outside" the South means taking a step back from it in a figurative sense. Southern culture, as is no secret, has been on the run for almost a century and a half, and its greatest literature has always tried to keep pace with the unforgiving changes. The literature is Romantic in that way: the landscapes grow more precious in retrospect, only after they have become lost or endangered. Great writing serves to reveal and therefore to protect heritage—though certainly has been guilty of distorting it as well. In this latest edition of *New Stories*, the struggle takes a surprising turn, as tradition seems to become as much a target as are the forces that threaten it. Consequently, the book's richness derives not simply from writers who drink bottled Southern water, but from a broader, more complicated view of nostalgia itself.

In Brock Clarke's "For Those of Us Who Need Such Things," the question of heritage is immediately toyed with in a modern-day fable, as fantastic as it is humorously contrived. A man separated from his wife (the result of his having an affair) has purchased the entire city of Savannah from its town elders, hoping to prove himself a caretaker worthy of winning her back. The ensuing challenge is typical for such historic places: how to maintain integrity without getting embalmed in cosmetic traditions. Speaking to the reader, the husband makes his plea with tongue so firmly in cheek that he all but disguises his real pain, saying, "this is not the same world it once was, and if you hurt your wife you can't just go out and buy her flowers and expect her to forgive you, you've got to do something dramatic, like buy a city and do something real with it and distinguish yourself from those other men who buy up abandoned cities for

the wrong reasons . . ." Despite how casual he sounds, and despite all the questionable moves he makes (such as brainstorming with focus groups or installing more Irish pubs), the man succeeds in gaining our sympathy—thanks to the many stages of hope and betrayal he undergoes, including the loss of Savannah itself, which seems to restore the couple to equal footing and finally to help him win back his wife.

Reminiscent of Clarke's story, in its satire and in the dubious light it shines on convention, is Chris Offutt's "Inside Out." This story deals with a brewing romance between an undertaker and a female visitor who has asked him to "extract" her friend's bequeathed skull. It's a task he's reluctant to perform because of the family squabbles and litigation sure to follow. Not that he has any illusions about the deceased's integrity, however. Who better than a mortician to remind us of how gaudy and dehumanizing restored appearances can become? In his own words, his job is to "dress up death and transform Grandpa from outdoor roadkill to an indoor centerpiece surrounded by flowers."

If skull extraction weren't bizarre enough a premise, Steve Almond's "Soul Molecule" turns the dial even further to the right as he describes a seemingly innocent brunch between two old college mates that becomes a far-fetched confession. The narrator's friend admits to an alien implant in his brain, put there to observe human life. When the friend's parents arrive and get in on the act, the narrator feels isolated and is left to reminisce about those bygone college days, particularly a science teacher's description of the "soul molecule," a chemical "released by the pineal gland [that] triggered all kinds of mystical thoughts. Just a pinch was enough to have people talking to angels." The narrator understands, finally, that his place is not to reason with his friend but to allow him his strange conviction. Though a farce in many ways, the story turns into an examination of unorthodox faith. Almond reminds us of how impenetrable and often idiosyncratic any individual's set of beliefs may be, and how potentially disturbing to others.

This single-mindedness of faith finds its parallel in ZZ Packer's "Every Tongue Shall Confess." Her story resembles Flannery O'Connor's work in everything from its prophetic title and blunt irony to its hardheaded protagonist raising her loudspeaker to God, all the while beset by storm and mockery. Sister Clareese Mitchell, a registered nurse, spends even her off days from the hospital pestering her patients about God and annoying her coworkers. The story's title hails from her favorite hymn, which affirms that God "would know you not by what you said or did, but what you'd hoped and intended." Though fond of the injunction, Clareese is hard put to follow it. Even as the hymn gets sung at church she can't appreciate its words—she's too upset by the teens' "mumbled" verses and the lack of "vigor" in the older choir members. This irony proves more poignant than comical, for we sadly identify the righteous and most outspoken as those who often reveal their own impurities. Not surprisingly, the well-being of Sister

Clareese hinges not on converting others but on acquiring the very humility she so frequently professes.

For many other characters in the collection as well, the road toward self-understanding proves long and treacherous. The spoils of knowledge are hard earned, as in "Nirvana" by Patricia Lear, a coming-of-age story that provides a fresh view of a girl's loss of innocence. Another example is "Report from Juncture" by Brad Vice, which spins a boy's rise to manhood through the perspective of a freshman about to enter Texas A & M's football program. Each precollege summer day brings new reports of another dropout from Bear Bryant's grueling practices. Undersized, the boy has good reason to doubt his chances, yet his test arrives before he ever leaves his father's struggling farm: one day he artificially nurses a dying calf delivered by an oilman, only to discover its fate sealed by worms in the brain. In one of the most dangerous and touching scenes in the book, the boy goes against the oilman's wishes and puts an abrupt end to the animal's misery.

From its more conventional stories to its more experimental, this book's diversity completes itself with a concern for the mentally and terminally ill. Bret Anthony Johnston's "Corpus" beautifully depicts the psychologically wounded at Bayview Behavioral Hospital, the story a collage of characters and shifting viewpoints. Its companion piece in length and scope is Dorothy Allison's "Compassion," which charts the bedridden final stages of a mother's cancer.

That these are important contemporary issues does not alone justify the stories' inclusion in the anthology. Instead, it is the up-close view of family members—how they squabble and care for one another, how they share or refuse responsibility—that earns them their place. Moreover, such tenderness responds directly to Blount's original challenge regarding what is "Southern." These stories succeed in honoring the past, though in a thoroughly modern context, using up-to-date colors to depict a more timeless portrait. Indeed, when one daughter in "Compassion" describes the recurrent struggles among her sisters, she might be speaking for the entire anthology: "Twenty years after we had left so fierce," she says, "we were all right back where we started, yoked to each other in the same old drama."

