

Hans H. Skei *Reading William Faulkner's Best Short Stories*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1999. 263 pp. ISBN 1-57003-286-6, \$39.95 cloth.

Hans H. Skei (ed.), *William Faulkner's Short Fiction: An International Symposium*. Oslo: Solum Forlag, 1997. 329 pp. ISBN 82-560-1097-5, \$39.95 cloth.

If you ever read a short story by William Faulkner and had a suspicion that you did not *quite* get it (and who has not felt that), you will be happy to know that Hans Skei has written *Reading William Faulkner's Best Short Stories* just to help you.

Hans Skei is a veteran plowman in the well-tilled fields of Faulkner scholarship. He has published two other books on Faulkner's short fiction, both are scholarly studies contributing to an academic debate. After having been locked up in an isolated Mississippi barn with his slightly deranged fellow Faulknerians, Skei has escaped and come out among ordinary people, as all scholars should feel obliged to try to do every so often, to inform us of the twelve *best* (out of 120 published) short stories by William Faulkner. Most of them are from the early 1930s, and seven of the twelve stories can be found in Faulkner's *These 13* (1931). As could be expected Skei includes the Faulkner classics 'A Rose for Emily,' 'Barn Burning,' 'Spotted Horses,' 'Dry September,' 'Red Leaves,' and 'That Evening Sun.' They are analyzed sensibly and reasonably, although there are moments when the focus of the scholar is too rigidly on the text, so the possible readings, of for example 'That Evening Sun,' become unnecessarily limited. Skei gives particularly

engaged readings of 'Wash,' and 'Pantaloons in Black,' and I suspect that 'A Mountain Victory' is included to tell the fans of Charles Frazier that the old master was in the cold mountains first.

The selection criteria are initially propped up by much reasoning, but the picking gets tough when the three last stories are to be chosen, and it becomes obvious just how subjective selection criteria are. But to read the existentialistic 'Carcassonne,' the overlooked story called 'The Hound,' and the often ignored 'Victory' with Skei's analyses by the hand is a welcome chance to expand our individual Faulkner canons. Skei's argument for leaving out 'The Bear,' without doubt Faulkner's best story, is delightfully provocative, but totally unconvincing. He knows it and keeps coming back to the subject.

The book does have the detailed notes (with really useful information) and the elaborate, up-to-date bibliography (of twenty pages) that we expect from a university press, and the reader will find numerous references that will help further study. But Skei's purpose in reading the twelve short stories is 'to address as many aspects of the text as possible,' and on the whole he does this admirably without getting stuck in the usual quagmire of Faulkner biography.

The heart of Skei's book are the twelve close-readings of individual stories. Read them, they will help you understand Faulkner's stories. We have not, since the days of Cleanth Brooks, had such an informed and entertaining book in plain English by a Faulkner scholar.

If you must know what Faulkner scholars talk about when they are among themselves, check out *William Faulkner's Short Fiction*, which is the result of an international symposium organized by Hans Skei. The collection of essays offers an unparalleled lineup of Faulkner specialists and a multiplicity of approaches. The critics discuss genre, interdependency of stories and novels, narration, and Faulkner's place in the short story canon (i.e. in relation to Ernest Hemingway and Eudora Welty, but really to surprisingly few of the great short story writers). There are contextual and cultural studies on Faulkner and African Americans, Native Americans, poor whites, the arts, various ideologies, and predictably provocative essays on gender issues by Anne Goodwyn Jones and Susan Donaldson.

The well-established greats among Faulkner critics, such as André Bleikasten, Joseph Blotner, Michael Millgate, Richard Gray, and David Minter have contributed excellent essays and do not disappoint. They are experienced essayists and it shows. Minter's essay on 'Faulkner's Imagination and the Logic of Reiteration' is a particularly impressive study, focused on 'The Old People.' And not surprisingly the most readable essays deal with individual stories. It is refreshing and rewarding to read Sandra Lee Kleppe on 'Pantaloons in Black,' Gene M. Moore on 'Red Leaves,' Lothar Hönnighausen on 'Carcassonne' (this essay is much too short), and Thomas L. McHaney on the neglected story 'Beyond.' It is in these contributions that it becomes obvious that Faulkner's aim was to render man in his ageless struggle by arresting his motion for a moment, and that he managed in his stories to show the human spirit in some of its best and worst moments.