

did, O'Rourke said it didn't. Somewhat surprisingly, Swirski finds the score O'Rourke 1: Zinn 0. Federal outlays on welfare *did* exceed defense expenditure 1980-2005 (although *discretionary* spending is another matter, in which case military outlays were greater). So maybe it should be a draw.

Ars Americana is a valuable book for U.S. cultural studies for a number of reasons. It challenges the notion that the academy should be stuffy; it takes popular culture seriously; it seeks intersections between politics, history, and the arts; and it sugars the pill of cultural and political analysis without losing substance. And along the way, myths are exploded. According to Swirski, the Black Panthers (like the Hamas today) were more concerned with grass roots social reform (housing, education, justice, peace) than with the violent overthrow of the status quo. Right wingers, moreover, can be curiously left wing, and vice versa, and both right and left can be devastatingly critical of the powers-that-be. Take, for example, O'Rourke's pointed aphorism: "everyone prefers to give war a chance." Highbrow can meet lowbrow: parallels can be drawn between Swift, Twain and Michael Moore, and Rabelais and Imelda Marcos can share the same sentence. Or as Swirski puts it: "The largest cultural denominator ... need not be the lowest." And if the assumption that politics ruins art still holds in some quarters, *Ars Americana* asks us to think again.

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Approaches to Southern Literature

Matthew Sweney. *Still in Print: The Southern Novel Today*, Jan Nordby Gretlund, ed., preface and introduction. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2010. 285 pages. ISBN: 978-1-57003-943-0, hardcover; paper ISBN: 978-1-57003-944-7, paperback. \$59.95, hardcover; \$29.95, paperback.

This is one of those rare sightings for academic book-watchers, an accidental migrant: a *useful* book, uncluttered with professional jargon, giving readers advice on what to read (or reread) and why. But there is more to it than that.

The title is meant to be its aim: a word-act on the part of the eighteen critic-contributors herein to write essays of praise in order to keep worthy, individual books of southern literature in print: specifically recent novels

(published between 1997 and 2009) by American southern writers. The roster includes writers whose names might not be so well-known, as well as writers who are well-known, but whose recent books one might have missed, and it is worth stating in full: M. Thomas Inge on Charles Frazier's *Cold Mountain*, Clara Juncker on Josephine Humphries's *Nowhere Else on Earth*, Kathryn McKee on Kay Gibbons's *On the Occasion of My Last Afternoon*, Jan Nordby Gretlund on Pam Durban's *So Far Back*, Tara Powell on Percival Everett's *Erasure*, Thomas E. Dasher on Steve Yarbrough's *The Oxygen Man*, Jean W. Cash on Larry Brown's *Fay*, Carl Wieck on Chris Offutt's *The Good Brother*, Owen W. Gilman Jr. on Barry Hannah's *Yonder Stands Your Orphan*, Hans H. Skei on James Lee Burke's *Crusader's Cross*, Charles Israel on George Singleton's *Work Shirts for Madmen*, John Grammer on Clyde Edgerton's *The Bible Salesman*, Scott Romine on James Wilcox's *Heavenly Days*, Edwin T. Arnold on Donald Harington's *Enduring*, Marcel Arbeit on Lewis Nordan's *Lightning Song*, Thomas Ærvold Bjerre on Ron Rash's *One Foot In Eden*, Robert H. Brinkmeyer Jr. on Richard Ford's *The Lay of the Land*, Richard Gray on Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*.

Each essay begins with a brief biographical sketch of the author, followed by a detailed description of the book and finally a short bibliography of works cited and consulted (with the exception of James Lee Burke, whose novels are further listed according to character-series.) These are useful signposts for scholars and readers alike.

The book divides the essays into four categories, according to the novels' themes: "A Sense of History," "A Sense of Place," "A Sense of Humor," and "A Sense of Malaise"—however, the essays themselves do not reflect these categories. They are for the most part concerned with the novels as *sui generis* and tend to give away too much of the plot (probably an editorial insistence on very close reading); still the novel as a work of art is not dependent on surprise but on the depth which is discerned in rereading.

In terms of making a case for these books to remain in print, it is astonishing that one finds (with only one exception, Inge on *Cold Mountain*) no superlatives here, no mention of the word "masterpiece," nor anyone making cases for greatness. This is a refreshing critical attitude for those of us accustomed to reading book reviews and surely must be another dictate of the book's editor. The critics here make their cases for the books they have chosen to single out, but the cases are made incorporating testimony from the devil's advocate—even for the entries on *Cold Mountain* and *The*

Road, where it is certain that the critics writing on them believe them to be masterpieces, the novels' criticisms or possible shortcomings are noted. The eighteen contributors prove themselves to be critics, as opposed to fans.

While there is not space here to debate all eighteen critics, I would like to mention a few. Predictably serviceable essays are provided by Inge, Dasher, Cash, Bjerre, Brinkmeyer and Gray. I can state that I was best persuaded by Tara Powell's essay on *Erasure*—a complex novel about a writer who has readership and marketing problems which, not surprisingly but with almost unbearable irony, had publication troubles of its own to be kept in print, due to stereotypes on race. Hans H. Skei's argument for James Lee Burke as a major novelist is also compelling, and deserves book-length exposition. Kathryn McKee's essay on *On the Occasion of My Last Afternoon* points out the complexities of the novel about the white/black, but never black-and-white, transformation of women in the South from 1830 to 1900 which one might miss on a first reading. Marcel Arbeit's essay on Lewis Nordan grounds the humor in Nordan's writing against the background of clinical psychology and in addition attends to a writer who deserves more attention. Edwin T. Arnold's essay on Donald Harington gives the fullest picture of the writer behind the stories (perhaps because he knows him personally) and at the same time explores the Cartesian dilemmas of fiction writing and reading.

I have very few real criticisms of this book. The first is that Gray does not actually give any biographical details in his "Biographical Sketch" on Cormac McCarthy. And the second is more of a personal reaction: I think Owen W. Gilman Jr.'s essay omits describing the quality of Barry Hannah's prosody, which I feel is more important than his plots.

The beauty of this collection lies in that I believe each reader will be persuaded differently. But, curiously, what *Still in Print* left me with was something more profound: a series of observations on what contemporary Southern literature represents. There are surprising elements of Southern literature, not commonly acknowledged, to which these critics prove that they are integral, not only to its reading but also to its understanding. European philosophy as an influence is one such case, and it appears not only in the Cartesian dilemmas of Harington, but also becomes part of the focal point for the characters themselves in Singleton's works. Eastern philosophy is found to be just as important as the Civil War in *Cold Mountain*.

Rereading this book has left me convinced that Southern literature in the period chosen by this book's editor may well be seen as a classic period in

American literature: an important turning-point in letters, when regional authors who first put pen to paper in the period before the information explosion also published works after that explosion, trying to make sense of the bombs' ingredients and exploring the craters left behind, in order to see what is left of regional literature in a world gone global; and because of that, the eighteen books listed here represent some of the best writing of their time, even in the global context.

There is perhaps an unintentional double meaning in the title: writers still in print as opposed to on-line. Part of what makes these writers interesting, and therefore important, is that they possibly make up the Last Generation of writers who feel they need to come to a reckoning with the ghost of Faulkner and the ghosts of the American South, and in addition to the contemporary South, a South without borders having a hard time trying to keep its identity in the information age. And therein lies a paradox.

As Gretlund points out in the introduction, the readership for southern literature abroad (he specifically mentions Europe, which is also reflected in the make-up of the critics featured in this book) is potentially larger than in the U.S. and just as literate in terms of their awareness of the South. As an American who lives in Europe, I can testify that Europeans appreciate the struggles that Southern writers have gone through and are going through with local history and regional attitudes—their native senses of history, place, and humor—being put pressure upon by international forces, and may understand the reasons for their malaise better, from a distance. The essays here by European critics are proof of that.

And so perhaps this word-act *is* possible. Perhaps by changing the concept, the marketing idea of what the readership for Southern literature is, good Southern novelists will find their readers, enough to keep their books still in print. The saviors of this literature could be the small presses, including university presses—those small, content-specific distribution channels for physical books in the digital age—which can market books to Southern literature readers via internet e-shops, on tiny or non-existent advertising budgets. In today's global village it is not just a question of what Southern writers see in their world, but what the world sees in them.

This is a book sure to be bought by libraries, literary critics, and academics, but it is intended, above all, for readers of challenging contemporary fiction. Highly recommended.