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Growing Up in the South: An Anthology of Modern Southern Literature

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GROWING UP IN THE SOUTH

AN ANTHOLOGY OF
MODERN SOUTHERN
LITERATURE

Edited and Introduced by
Suzanne W. Jones



A MENTOR BOOK

Introduction

When I think of my high school English classes in rural Surry, Virginia, in the 1960s, I vividly remember reading William Faulkner's *Go Down, Moses* in my American literature class. I had always loved reading, but the experience I had with Faulkner touched me more deeply than any other. I was moved by his provocative prose, by his sense of the past, by his passion for place, and by his intense dramas of southern race relations. Faulkner spoke to me in a way that other writers I had liked that year—Hawthorne, Dickinson, Fitzgerald—did not. In reading Faulkner's work, I found myself, my family, and my community as well as the rich, complex social history of my region. That much Faulkner was not in the standard-issue literature book for eleventh grade. I was lucky to have a teacher who believed in supplemental reading, who was trying to keep us attentive on those long hot days right before summer vacation. Her strategy worked for me.

Although Faulkner may not work for all students, I would like for more students to have the opportunity to experience the challenges and rewards of southern literature, which is why I collected these stories. Southern writers, such as William Faulkner, Eudora Welty, Peter Taylor, and Ernest Gaines, rank among the best American authors of the twentieth century. Such literature can help relate art to life, as it did for me twenty years ago, by exploring issues relevant to the South, and it can also make students more sensitive to each other as they become more aware of different viewpoints. In her autobiography, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Maya Angelou reflects on the importance of place:

What sets one Southern town apart from another, or from a Northern town or hamlet, or city high-rise? The answer must be the experience shared between the unknowing majority (it) and the knowing minority (you). All of childhood's unanswered questions must finally be passed back to the town and answered there. Heroes and bogey men, values and dislikes, are first encountered and labeled in that early environment. In later years they change faces, places and maybe races, tactics, intensities and goals, but beneath those impenetrable masks they wear forever the stocking-capped faces of childhood.¹

Some people might wonder if the South as a region still exists. Southern novelist Walker Percy claimed that the regions of the United States are becoming homogenized because of the mass media, and he bemoaned the loss of regional and personal identity that would result. Perhaps Walker Percy's fears are reasons enough to read regional literature. However, not everyone agrees that the regions of this country have lost their distinctions. As I lecture on southern literature around Virginia, hold workshops for English teachers in our public schools, and teach southern fiction at the University of Richmond, I have noticed that students, both young and old, both native and nonnative to the South, still perceive regional differences. The older people sense that the differences have to do with a southern preoccupation with history, both familial and regional; the younger people think the differences have a great deal to do with manners, not just etiquette, but customs and values—ways of being in the world. Southern literary critic Louis D. Rubin, Jr., in his introduction to *The History of Southern Literature*, defended that book's existence by saying:

... there existed in the past, and there continues to exist today, an entity within American society

¹Maya Angelou, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (New York: Random House, 1969), pp. 15-16.

known as the South, and that for better or for worse the habit of viewing one's experience in terms of one's relationship to that entity is still a meaningful characteristic of both writers and readers who are or have been part of it. The historical circumstances that gave rise to that way of thinking and feeling have been greatly modified. Yet . . . to consider writers and their writings as Southern still involves considerably more than merely a geographical grouping. History, as a mode for viewing one's experience and one's identity, remains a striking characteristic of the Southern literary imagination, black and white.²

The following stories, set in the South and a part of its still distinctive literary imagination, are about childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood. They treat concerns of growing up common to all regions: loss of innocence, sexual awakening, family relationships, social adjustment, schools and teachers; religions and values, initiation and identity, emotional development and growing responsibility. But the stories I have collected also explore regional concerns that have been specific to the South: a love of storytelling; a preoccupation with family and with manners; the support and suffocation occasioned by a close-knit community; a concern with race relations, social classes, and gender roles; and a passion for place that is tied up with the past and with rural life. Some of the interests and techniques of southern writers emanate from what was once a predominantly rural way of life; others come from the remnants of a traditional code of honor that has lasted longer in the South than in other regions of the country. Several of these threads run through the historical and imaginative fabric of other sections of this country, but their particular weave in the South makes it unique.

The stories in Part I reflect the sights and sounds of

²Louis D. Rubin, Jr., et al, *The History of Southern Literature* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1985), pp. 5-6.

many different southern places and voices. Harry Crews's autobiography, *A Childhood: The Biography of a Place*, bears the cadences of his impoverished childhood among sharecroppers in rural Bacon County, Georgia. In striking contrast is the voice of Elizabeth Spencer's mannered, genteel narrator of "A Southern Landscape," who reminisces about Mississippi summer nights and decayed colonial mansions. Yet the two narrators share the same feelings of being securely anchored by their memories of childhood places, even if those places exist "nowhere but in memory" as Crews writes. Although Crews and Spencer suggest that you do not fully know a place until you have experienced it with all of your senses and nourished it in your memory, Bobbie Ann Mason's narrator in "State Champions" wonders if you can know a place at all before you have put time and distance between you and your hometown. Her narrator's memories of junior high school coalesce around the gym in Cuba, Kentucky, home of the phenomenal Cuba Cubs basketball team, but she realizes how differently she sees that time and place twenty years later and many miles away. Alice Walker's protagonist in "A Sudden Trip Home in the Spring" reveals the sense of place that people carry with them wherever they live, and she speculates about the effect place has on identity. The black narrator of Walker's story is an art student at a predominantly white women's college in New York who thinks she feels more at home there than in her native Georgia. Yet when she returns home for her father's funeral, she understands the doubts she has had in New York about the choices she has made, and she realizes that her artistic inspiration comes from the South. But Southern places themselves are changing as the rural economy becomes more industrial, and no one documents this change better than Fred Chappell with his portrait of industrial pollution in a mountain mill town. Southern literary critic Cleanth Brooks believes that if the Southern agrarians were alive today, they would be environmentalists. Fred Chappell's work exhibits a similar concern with nature. The last two stories in this section show that even as the Southern

landscape changes, some southern customs remain the same, such as southern writers' interests in creating distinctive voices for their fiction. Eudora Welty explains why she thinks she often wrote "in the form of a monologue that takes possession of the speaker," and Michael Malone's story is evidence that the practice of creating a conversational narrative voice continues among the latest generation of southern storytellers.

The stories in Part II evoke the power of the southern family to impose roles, to provide support, to cause pain, and to celebrate life. For Lee Smith family relationships become the locus for exploring the paradox of southern manners, the way polite and decorous behavior can disguise truth and extinguish vitality. In "Artists" she examines how the revelation of family secrets can change our perception, not only of our families but ourselves. In "Homecoming" Shirley Ann Grau juxtaposes a teenage girl's reaction to a casual boyfriend's death in Vietnam with her mother's memories of her husband's death in the Korean War. The story centers upon generational conflicts over proper behavior and the correct thoughts and feelings about death and war. Focusing on new patterns of family behavior rather than old, Ellen Gilchrist evokes the contemporary urban South in "The President of the Louisiana Live Oak Society," a story of streetwise boys from New Orleans, who find themselves doing drugs and lying to their parents, who are in turn finding their own means of escape from the strains of contemporary life. The next two stories, by Mary Hood and Carson McCullers, are about the strong yet fragile bonds between family members and about the illusion of independence that occurs when people have family to depend on. In Mary Hood's "How Far She Went" the tension mounts as a grandmother must do battle with two tough motorcyclists for her teenage granddaughter's loyalty. Carson McCullers's "Sucker" is a poignant account of how we take our closest relatives for granted and of the family love that can be fostered or destroyed more easily than we ever know. Alice Walker's "Everyday Use" plays the themes of sibling rivalry and parental prefer-

ence against the question of racial identity, when a worldly daughter returns to her provincial family for a visit. Another family reunion is the backdrop for William Hoffman's amusing story "Amazing Grace." Here country and city cousins clash, and the grandmother refuses to bake bread until her grown son, who has moved to the city, is properly baptized in the river back home.

The stories in Part III illustrate the power of a community for good and ill, and the tensions created within southern communities by race and class differences, indeed by difference of any kind. In her autobiography *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Maya Angelou's remembrance of her 1940 grade school graduation shows both the power whites possessed to discriminate against blacks and the strength blacks gained as they united as a community against this discrimination. Flannery O'Connor's "Everything That Rises Must Converge" reveals the de facto segregation that continued even after segregation was outlawed in the South. In this story a white college graduate chastises his mother for her prejudice against blacks. What essentially exists as a conflict between generations is painful, but powerful to listen to. Gail Godwin's "The Angry Year" explores class divisions among whites and a young woman's struggle for identity. In Godwin's story a middle-class college junior finds herself attracted by the mystique of wealthy fraternity men and sorority women, but repelled by their superficiality and conformity. She expresses her ambivalence in her weekly campus newspaper column as well as through the two men she dates—the handsome rich president of the DeKes and the intellectual coal miner's son whose ticket to law school is the GI Bill. Another portrait of a similar dilemma, but from the upper-class white male perspective, is seen in Peter Taylor's "The Old Forest." The protagonist finds himself torn between his desire for the companionship of a bright young woman of questionable family background and his need to remain firmly ensconced in the country-club set by marrying into a prominent local family. Both Godwin's and Taylor's protagonists discover that the security of conformity is often stronger than the desire for rebellion.

In her autobiography *Proud Shoes*, Pauli Murray writes of the southern difficulty of dealing with difference, "Always the same tune, played like a broken record, robbing one of personal identity. . . . Folks were never just folks. They were white folks! Black folks! Poor white crackers! No-count niggers! Rednecks! Darkies! Peckerwoods! Coons!"³ The characters in the stories in Part IV wrestle with these labels as they try to move beyond them. The first two selections are set during the 1960s civil rights movement and are told first from a black perspective, then from a white perspective. The excerpt from Anne Moody's autobiography, *Coming of Age in Mississippi*, reveals that working for the civil rights movement sometimes meant rebelling against family prohibitions even when you were black. Although Anne Moody worried that whites would retaliate against her family because of her political activism, she defied her mother's demands that she drop out of the movement, and she braved white violence to fight for equal rights. Joan Williams's "Spring Is Now" is about integrating the public schools. The only blacks whom white teenager Sandra knows are field hands, maids, and janitors. Although her family and friends often speculate about what blacks are really like, only when Sandra gets to know a new black classmate, Jack Lawrence, does she begin to find out. Both William Faulkner and Ernest Gaines show their fascination with how individuals can break long-established southern traditions. They focus on male roles and the southern code of honor, which historian Bertram Wyatt-Brown argues made nineteenth-century Southerners put reputation above conscience. In Faulkner's "An Odor of Verbena" Bayard Sartoris is pressured by his community to avenge his father's death. This incident serves as a test of his character for he must choose between his personal code of right and wrong and his community's code of honor. In Gaines's *A Gathering of Old Men*, set a century later, Cajun Gil Boutan is

³Pauli Murray, *Proud Shoes* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1956), p. 270.

similarly put in a position of feeling forced to uphold family honor. His brother has been killed by a black man, and his family expects him to join the vigilante group they are forming. Having become close friends with a black teammate on his college football team, Gil is embarrassed by his family's reputation for harassing blacks, and he would like to leave justice to the authorities. In each story, the protagonist's masculinity is called into question because he refuses to fight. The behavior demanded by gender roles is something that also concerns Michael Malone in "Fast Love," a story in Part I. The narrator whose favorite pastimes are chess, debating, and bicycling knows that his father would have preferred a son who was less intellectual and more interested in sports and cars. In Richard Wright's "The Man Who Was Almost a Man," race and gender stereotypes create a no-win situation for Dave, who tries to increase his stature with a gun. Wright examines the paradoxical situation of a black youth growing up in a region that for so long did not allow a black man the dignity and respect of adulthood, a region that kept him a "boy." Whereas Mary Mebane must struggle against low expectations for black women in the selection from her autobiography *Mary*, Katherine Anne Porter's Miranda tries to mediate between two confining choices for the southern white woman: her vivacious Aunt Amy destined for star-crossed love and her more serious but less attractive Cousin Eva fated for a lonely career.

Although the South of Mary Mebane, Ellen Gilchrist, and Ernest Gaines is not the South of Katherine Anne Porter, Eudora Welty, and William Faulkner, these stories reveal what it means and what it meant to grow up in the South—what southern literary critic Carol Manning has called "that interesting middle ground between the universality of the process of growing up and the particularity of each individual's experience."