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- 1 A collection of eighteen essays addressing novels written by southern writers between 1997 and 2009, this volume aims to inform readers about contemporary novels that deserve to be kept in print. The essays have been written by both American and European scholars and each essay focuses on one novel and includes a brief biographical sketch of the author and an extensive bibliography for those who want to read more fiction by this author. The contemporary southern writers included in the collection write about the reality of life in the South today and deal with the historical, political, social, cultural and ethnic issues of the region by viewing them in the context of time. The arrangement of the essays is based on the following four topics: history, place, humor, and malaise.
- 2 A helpful introduction by the editor highlights the issues that will be examined in connection to southern culture and the concerns of contemporary southern writers. Gretlund maintains that in order to decide who is a southern writer the criteria include more than geographical location: to be called a southern writer, the person must have spent most of their life in the South and to be “faithful” to the reality of life he/she sees about them. Gretlund takes issue with the title of Michael Kreyling’s work *Inventing Southern Literature*, disagreeing with the way Kreyling connects the adjective “southern” with the ideologies of the 1930s. He moves to discuss the latest critical development in the field,

that is, the New Southern Studies which is based on placing the South in a trans-national framework and, thus, projecting a global South and adding new dimensions to the canon of southern literature. Even though the editor considers the New Southern Studies development "praiseworthy," he criticizes it as an idealistic undertaking which does not reflect the reality of the contemporary South as regards its novels, writers, and literary critics. The editor's concern is to look at what has happened to southern writers as the South has been undergoing change with the onslaught of the twenty-first century: do new topics emerge and is there less reliance on the topics of the past? He also questions whether the new southern writers view the past "as a storehouse of values and guidelines for living" or focus on an existentialist sense of "sickness unto death." Gretlund is also critical of commentators of the South who view its past as stable and permanent and consider its present chaotic. He claims that the South has always been in a state of change and trying to reinvent and refashion itself.

- 3 The first section is titled "A Sense of History." M. Thomas Inge explores how Charles Frazier in his novel *Cold Mountain* depicts the impact of the Civil War on ordinary people of the Appalachian Mountains who fought and were caught in the harshness and brutality of it. Clara Juncker argues that Josephine Humphreys in *Nowhere Else on Earth* succeeds in transforming the burden of history into art through the poetic narrative of her heroine Rhoda Cowrie. Kathryn McKee examines how Kaye Gibbons in *On the Occasion of My Last Afternoon* explores the life of a seventy-year-old woman writing in the year 1900 to preserve the events of her life and to illustrate how domestic space figures as a crucial testing ground for the boundaries of race relations with the mammy figure Clarice. Jan Nordby Gretlund analyzes the function of prejudice in Pam Durban's *So Far Back* and the connection between loss of memory and identity. Gretlund claims that the author follows the tradition of William Faulkner in showing that "the past can be manipulated and altered." Tara Powell argues that Percival Everett's *Erasure* is a satire of the publishing industry and shows how the expectations and prejudices of society hinder the protagonist's efforts to choose his identity and get rid of racial stereotypes.

- 4 In the second section titled "A Sense of Place," Thomas E. Dasher explains how in *The Oxygen Man* Steve Yarbrough portrays the individual as a product of his family and community, tied to his memories and his past, but at the same time as a being in a constant process. Jean W. Cash discusses Larry Brown's novel *Fay* as a modern version of a female Bildungsroman and sets up a parallel to earlier novels about women from the working class, such as *Moll Flanders*, *Sister Carrie*, and *Light in August*. Carl Wieck demonstrates the similarities between Chris Offutt's *The Good Brother* and Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and praises the author's perceptive treatment of nature, especially the Appalachian region of Kentucky. Owen W. Gilman, Jr. discusses Barry Hannah's novel *Yonder Stands Your Orphan* as a southern Gothic novel focusing on sex, violence, music, religion, and humor in postmodern Mississippi, which is presented as a "very rough place," peopled with a diverse cast of eccentric characters. Hans H. Skei focuses on the crime novel *Crusader's Cross* by James Lee Burke, who incorporates social criticism in his work and reveals through a group of strange characters the impact of American capitalism and greed on a Louisiana community.
- 5 In the next section, titled "A Sense of Humor," Charles Israel illustrates how George Singleton in his novel *Work Shirts for Madmen*, following in the long tradition of southern comic writers such as George Washington Harris and Mark Twain, creates an image of the rural South filled with hyperbole and characteristics of the southern tall tale. John Grammer points out the influence of Flannery O'Connor's work on Clyde Edgerton's *The Bible Salesman*, which uses picaresque narrative and slapstick comedy to illustrate the protagonist's spiritual quest as he moves from the innocence of childhood to the problematic worldly experience. Scott Romine in his discussion of James Wilcox's *Heavenly Days* explores the struggle of the protagonist to ground her own identity through a series of diverse incidents in a comic plot that reveals the influence of C.S. Lewis's vision. Edwin T. Arnold analyzes Donald Harrington's novel *Enduring* as the fourteenth book of his *Stay More* saga, and traces the influence of William Faulkner and Vladimir Nabokov on the mythical world he creates, a place populated by hillbillies. Marcel Arbeit looks at how Lewis Nordan, in his coming-of-age novel *Lightning Song*, mixes the serious with the comic, and examines the

family stresses and traumas and the great impact they have on the young protagonist's initiation into manhood.

- 6 A concluding trio of essays under the title "A Sense of Malaise" begins with Thomas Aervold Bjerre's discussion of Ron Rash's *One Foot in Eden*, focusing on the clash between past and present, the Old and the New South, and a fierce attack on the destruction of the land due to industrial progress. Robert H. Brinkmeyer explores the ways in which Richard Ford deals with the randomness and impermanence of life as reflected in his novel *The Lay of the Land*. Richard Gray's concluding essay on Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* emphasizes the intertextuality of the novel and analyzes the parameters of the post-apocalyptic landscape through which father and son travel in the surreal nightmare depicted in the work.
- 7 The essays in the collection address a diverse range of issues and emphasize the redeeming features of each novel. The contributors of the volume illustrate how the contemporary southern writers included in the collection reflect in their novels the continuity of distinctiveness in southern fiction by focusing on the historical, cultural, political, social and ethnic landscape of the American South. A scholar or student of southern literature will find in this book a very useful guide to navigate through the abundance of contemporary southern novels and an inclusive treatment of the themes that concern southern writers today.

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