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The Neon Bible, From Page to Screen: John Kennedy Toole's Portrait of Small-Town Southern Life



BY HEATHER DUERRE HUMANN

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1 INTRODUCTION

The small town in American and southern literature has long been a critical topic, especially in the Modern period. Yet, as is the case with much of Modernism, what began as a breaking of convention developed into an established paradigm. This revolt against convention has since normalized because its “conceptions of small-town America have become a lasting motif in American literature of the twentieth century and beyond” (Price 3). Thus, the small southern town in American literature functions more as an ideal that permeates the cultural imagination.

Exemplary of this trend is the portrait of small-town life that can be found in the fiction of Louisiana-born writer John Kennedy Toole (1937–1969). While Toole represents the South in such a way that stereotypes about the region are brought to bear, he also uses his novels to question the culture of the South. In this manner, Toole offers a multifaceted portrait of the region while also raising questions about the nature of representation. Specifically, Toole, in his fictional portrayals, probes the degree to which storytelling can capture the essence of a region, while also pushing his readers to consider the extent to which stereotypes and biases influence views about a particular place. It is in this spirit that this southern writer approaches the South in both his short novel, *The Neon Bible* (1989), and in his better-known tragicomic novel, *A*

Confederacy of Dunces (1980), two literary works that critique, while also calling attention to, stereotypes about the American South.



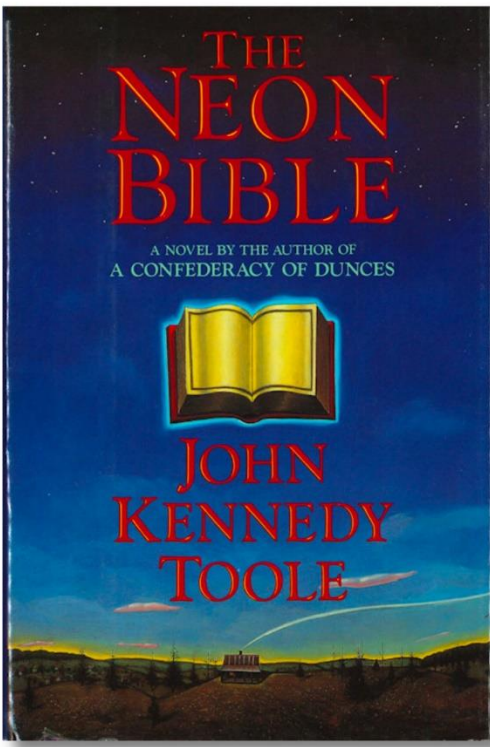
Photo of John Kennedy Toole

While Toole's portrayals of southern life are remarkable, he is far from the only writer to focus on the region. In recent years, there has been a spate of novels, films, and television shows that call attention to the pervasive stereotypes of the American South. From books, such as Stephanie Powell Watts's *No One Is Coming to Save Us*, Cathy Holt's *Summer in the South*, Gillian Flynn's *Sharp Objects*, Donna Tartt's *The Little Friend*, and Sue Monk Kidd's *The Secret Life of Bees*, to a range of well-known films including *Forrest Gump*, *The Lucky One*, *Selma*, *12 Years a Slave*, and *Django Unchained*, and on to popular television shows like *Justified*, *Hart of Dixie*, *Ozark*, and *Friday Night Lights*, there are myriad examples from popular culture that highlight the ways in which the South has been pigeonholed.

Yet, despite the ample stereotypical representations of the South that persist, the region remains difficult to define. This dilemma has encouraged much debate—of both the scholarly and water-cooler variety. Much of this dialogue, however, has assumed that questions of representation are something new to address within the field of southern studies, while the truth is that these discussions have been going on for quite a while. The reality is that it has been—and remains—complicated, and even problematic, to discuss the South.

Part of the difficulty resides in the fact that, as Deborah Barker and Kathryn McKee argue in their book *American Cinema and the Southern Imaginary*, the South has “failed to call forth a

set of stable defining features" (2). The difficulty in defining the region also has to do with the fact that outsiders have attempted to characterize the South in ways that reveal their own biases and fit their own agendas. Nonetheless, and as the examples mentioned above suggest, even those who are native to the South have played a role in the creation of these conflicting (and at times, competing) images of southern life. Certainly, the fact that "Southerners themselves have been active participants in alternately rejecting and embracing, and continually reinventing, understandings of themselves likewise complicates any effort to offer a fixed summary of what it means to claim a Southern identity" (Barker and McKee 3).



2 JOHN KENNEDY TOOLE, A SOUTHERN WRITER

A native of New Orleans, Toole is best known for writing *A Confederacy of Dunces*, the novel for which he was posthumously awarded the Pulitzer Prize in 1981. Toole, however, also penned an earlier novel, *The Neon Bible* (published in 1989), which he wrote in 1954 when he was only sixteen years old. Although this short novel has not garnered as much critical attention as *A Confederacy of Dunces*, *The Neon Bible* still boasts a wide readership and is noteworthy for the moving portrait it offers of small-town life.

In his short book, Toole, in fact, makes manifest both the charms and pitfalls so frequently associated with life in a close-knit community. For instance, Toole uses his fiction to showcase how everyone in town seems to know everyone else's business—and he thus points to how

many small-town residents can be close-minded and judgmental. This point becomes particularly apparent in the sections of the book that detail the attitudes demonstrated toward his Aunt Mae, who becomes somewhat of a notorious figure in the minds of the townsfolk. However, Toole also highlights the quaint nature of living in such a small community, through his vivid descriptions of the town and its inhabitants. Interestingly these depictions derive in part from Toole's own experiences in a small city with neighborhoods that are almost small towns themselves (like Carrollton, the Irish Channel, and the French Quarter—all with which he was well acquainted). Despite the book being grossly underexplored, *The Neon Bible* works well as a case-in-point to address concerns about the South's representation.

The Neon Bible comes across as a touching coming-of-age story that critiques and calls attention to stereotypes about the American South.

While some scholars have suggested that its main appeal is that it affords an early glimpse at the writer's development, *The Neon Bible* comes across as a touching coming-of-age story that critiques and calls attention to stereotypes about the American South. In much the same manner, Terence Davies's film *The Neon Bible* (1995)—a faithful adaptation of Toole's short novel—works well to trace pivotal moments in its narrator David's young life, while also offering a scathing indictment of mid-twentieth-century small-town southern life. Both the film and the short novel make vivid the religious hypocrisy and the racial and social inequity that for so long characterized the South: social realism with a regional focus. Indeed, as closer analysis of specific passages and scenes will demonstrate, both texts highlight how religion can become a rationale for close-mindedness. Moreover, these texts highlight how religious intolerance can exacerbate already-present injustices (related to both socioeconomics and race). It is worth noting that Davies's film is particularly interesting since it is an example of a southern story being adapted by an outsider (Davies is British). Davies's film adaptation proves noteworthy as well because it reached a much wider audience than the novel, thus affording a greater reach for Toole's narrative.

3 THE NEON BIBLE AND SOUTHERN STEREOTYPES

Toole's *The Neon Bible* is set in rural Mississippi from the 1930s to the early 1950s, and it centers on a naïve boy named David as he struggles growing up. Divided into ten chapters, the narrative features a series of flashbacks to David's early life, which he narrates from aboard the train he has taken in order to flee his hometown in the aftermath of a violent encounter with the town's preacher. Each chapter, in addition to portraying pivotal moments in his childhood and offering insights into his family life, also illustrates young David's developing awareness about the racial, social, and religious climate of the Deep South during the mid-twentieth

century. Coming of age in rural Mississippi, David gradually learns the difficult lessons about religious intolerance while he also begins to confront the pervasive stereotypes that persisted about race, gender, and social class. He does this as he bears witness to his father's escalating physical abuse of his mother, which takes place across several scenes as the family, already in a precarious financial situation, faces bigger economic woes after his father loses his blue-collar job. Since this literary work is highly autobiographical, it works as an outlet for Toole to reflect back on his own coming of age and burgeoning awareness of the region. In this sense, the novel provides an interesting perspective on both Toole's own early years while also shining a light on competing perspectives about southern culture.



From The Neon Bible, dir. Terence Davies (1995)

Specifically, Toole calls attention to the degree to which “the South” gets perpetually rewritten and recontextualized. Following a trend set by other southern writers (like Faulkner and Welty, among others), Toole rereads and rewrites the heritage of the region and projects it into new modes of expression that can accommodate post-modern experiences—and thus attempt to reconcile a double crisis: that of their own identity (amidst the backdrop of their native region), and that of their native region against the background of contemporary history. This trend is one that Gabriela Dumbrava explores in detail in her 2007 article, “From Archetype to Stereotype: A Postmodern Re-reading of the American South.” There she argues:

Southern literature itself supported this shift from archetype to stereotype by promoting such Southern cultural labels as the “burden of the past,” “the sense of place, history, and community,” “the defeated nation,” largely endorsed by scholars in Southern studies, whose vision was biased by their being natives of the region.

Such a shift can, in fact, be readily observed in Toole's fiction. While much scholarly attention has been paid to his *A Confederacy of Dunces*, *The Neon Bible* also highlights the importance of

the past and reflects the shifting notions about the South as a region. Indeed, *The Neon Bible* calls particular attention to popularly held notions about southern culture, such as the region's religious intolerance and the South's struggle to achieve racial equity, ultimately appraising it with a critical eye while also challenging certain assumptions about the region.

4 ON PAGE AND SCREEN

Filmed in Georgia, Davies's film adaptation similarly portrays rural southern life in a moving and realistic way. As film adaptations go, Davies offers a faithful interpretation by bringing Toole's *bildungsroman* to life on the screen. Indeed, in both the film and novel, scenes from David's childhood comprise the narrative.

In *The Neon Bible*, Toole takes care to paint small-town life in rural Mississippi in a realistic manner, describing in intricate detail the landscape and especially the townspeople, who are a colorful cast of alternately eccentric and hardworking individuals trying to make a living in difficult economic and political times. For instance, the text pays particular attention to David's father, a man who, though he comes across as abusive, retains a degree of sympathy since the hard luck he encounters plays such a role in his maltreatment of his family. Similarly, David's Aunt Mae comes across as quite the vivid character. Not only does her presence help challenge gender stereotypes—even while calling attention to them—in the way that she forges her own path, despite the obvious disapproval of David's father and so many of the townsfolk. Since she became such a source of comfort and support for young David, his Aunt Mae also shows how a strong female could exist during this time (even as she also became the subject of much gossip in the town).

The screen performances of the film's actors, particularly Drake Bell (who plays David as a child), Jacob Tierney (who portrays David as a teenager), and Gena Rowlands (who plays the part of David's Aunt Mae), bring to life the book's vignettes, which center around David's early life. To be sure, in Davies's film adaptation, the quality directing and acting make these characters come across as both sympathetic and compelling. Both the film and novel are narrated from aboard a train, and both narratives focus on David's difficult childhood, depicted through a series of flashbacks.

A number of these early memories concern Aunt Mae, a former singer who has moved in with David and his parents, Frank and Sarah. Aunt Mae's arrival and continued presence in the family home fuels an already-tense family dynamic. It seems her reputation, style of dress, and mannerisms attract the wrong kind of attention in a small Mississippi town populated by stereotypically narrow-minded southerners—and this, consequently, brings unwanted attention to David's white working-class family, as well. While her clothes would be considered tame by today's standards, both the "flashy" nature of her dresses and her careful attention to her physical appearance (she spends considerable time fixing her hair and applying quite a bit

of make-up) set her apart from the other women in the town—and thus, she becomes a source of gossip for the rural Mississippi townsfolk.

5 CONFLICT AND CLASS TENSIONS

A passage that points to the resulting conflict appears early in the narrative—and, actually, this scene is similarly and compellingly rendered in Davies's film adaptation—when, shortly after Aunt Mae comes to town, Frank's mother Sarah sharply criticizes her. Not only does Sarah admonish Mae, saying, "You had no right to dress that way," but she also accuses Mae of wearing provocative clothing in order to "deliberately hurt me and all of Frank's friends" (Toole 6). Sarah, in fact, goes so far as to say to Mae, "If I knew you were going to act this way, I would never have let you come to live with us" (7).

Mae, however, offers a great deal of support for the family, particularly in the way she looks after young David. For his part, David, who does not get on well with other boys his age, comes to lean on his aunt. When other boys call him a "sissy" and pick fights with him, it is Aunt Mae who tends to him (12). Her company serves as a source of comfort for him, even as he grows older and especially in the difficult years caused, in turn, by the Great Depression, his father Frank's loss of his factory job, the family's subsequent struggles to eke out an existence, Frank's death in combat in Italy during World War II, and his mother's ensuing suffering from grief and mental illness.

Many scholars have speculated that, besides working to develop the novel's characters and to reveal the milieu of small-town Mississippi life, the narrative's focus on these minute details of David's childhood reveal much about Toole's own early life. In particular, the novel's depiction of family dynamics and its emphasis on the role played by social class in southern society suggest the types of struggles that John Kennedy Toole himself faced as he came of age. While Toole scholars rightly value *The Neon Bible* for the insights the book provides about Toole's troubled background, this early novel also proves noteworthy for the way it calls attention to the religious hypocrisy that characterized the region. In particular, the novel underscores the judgmental nature of many southern (so-called) Christians and how appearances mean so much to them. Indeed, in writing *The Neon Bible*, Toole, as Cory MacLauchlin highlights in his biographical study, *Butterfly in the Typewriter: The Tragic Life of John Kennedy Toole and the Remarkable Story of A Confederacy of Dunces*, "drew upon tensions between religious virtue and sins of the faithful" (36). To be sure, beyond the novel's literary value, *The Neon Bible* comes across as a worthwhile text because of both its biographical and cultural significance.

6 PUBLICATION AND INITIAL RECEPTION

Despite these merits, it was only after a long, complex, and circuitous series of occurrences that *The Neon Bible* came to be published at all. Indeed, some critics, like Pat Carr, who discusses

the book in his article, “John Kennedy Toole, *The Neon Bible*, and A ‘Confederacy’ of Friends and Relatives,” consider *The Neon Bible*’s path to publication to be a more remarkable story than the one within the short novel. The novel, as Carr notes, was “written for a high school contest when Toole was only sixteen,” and only later became the “center of a bitter family feud and publishing controversy that is ultimately more intriguing than the novel itself” (716). In fact, as W. Kenneth Holditch summarizes in his introduction to the novel, *The Neon Bible* was not published until 1989, more than thirty years after it was written, owing to “a strange and ironic chain of events” (v).

When Toole committed suicide in 1969 at the age of thirty-one, he left behind two unpublished manuscripts. Half the rights to his literary estate were owned by his mother Thelma Ducoing Toole (and it was she who possessed the copies of the manuscripts of both *A Confederacy of Dunces* and *The Neon Bible*), but as Holditch describes the situation, a consequence of Louisiana’s Napoleonic inheritance laws meant that the other half of those “rights belonged to her husband’s brother and his children” (ix). Thelma Toole had difficulty finding a publisher for *A Confederacy of Dunces*, but she eventually—and only after much campaigning—convinced Walker Percy to read the manuscript. Once he read it, Percy became the book’s champion and helped to secure a publisher. When *Confederacy* became a Pulitzer Prize winner and achieved commercial success, Toole’s relatives (who allowed *Confederacy* to be published without much hassle), refused to give up their share of the rights to *The Neon Bible* because they believed its publication would bring them a considerable financial profit. For her part, Thelma Toole decided that did not want the book published if it meant that a substantial part of its profits would go to these relatives. Hence, as Holditch explains, a disagreement ensued between Toole’s mother and his father’s surviving family members, which meant that the book remained unpublished until after Thelma Toole’s death, when a lengthy courtroom battle left the novel finally “freed for publication” (x).

A contemporary review of the novel, which appeared in the *New York Times*, went so far as to claim that *The Neon Bible* is actually the superior of Toole’s two published novels.

Once the novel was eventually published, *The Neon Bible* was met with a mixed reception. Some critics saw the work primarily as a window into the mind of the young man who would one day become a gifted writer. In this spirit, one reviewer decreed that the novel was nothing more than “interesting juvenilia” (Anderson 26). Similarly, another scholar labeled *The Neon Bible* “juvenile work,” useful primarily to be “read against his later novel” (Rudnicki 281). Certain other critics were even harsher in their assessment. For instance, J. T. Scanlon was quite disparaging in his appraisal of the novel, arguing in “Toole’s Early Novel Strictly for Cultists,” that *The Neon Bible* “offers little of the attractive, but unprincipled, indignation of *Dunces*” (H11). His negative characterization went as far as to suggest that Toole’s “adolescent

performance is, alas, another shallow coming-of-age novel set in an unenlightened, lower middle-class South" (H11).

Others, however, praised the novel. One such critic is Bruce Benidt, who describes in his review how "*The Neon Bible* is not an uplifting book, but it is beautifully—in places sweetly—written" (11F). Another contemporary review of the novel, which appeared in the *New York Times*, went so far as to claim that *The Neon Bible* is actually the superior of Toole's two published novels; indeed, when Michiko Kakutani reviewed the book, he stated that he preferred *The Neon Bible* to *A Confederacy of Dunces*:

Whereas *Dunces* was animated by anger, *The Neon Bible* seems rooted in melancholy and nostalgia. If less overtly ambitious than the previously published book, *The Neon Bible* also emerges as an altogether more organic and satisfying novel—a novel that works on the reader not through willful manipulation, but through heartfelt emotion, communicated in clean, direct prose. (C29)

To be sure, while some reviewers were lukewarm, or worse, in their assessment of the novel, certain others found Toole's literary debut to have much merit.

7 RELIGION, RACE, POVERTY, AND PLACE

Notwithstanding the debate about its literary merits, there is little doubt that *The Neon Bible* is significant for being an early novel written by an important southern author. Moreover, as a lyrical and realistic portrayal of small-town Mississippi life, *The Neon Bible* succeeds as social criticism by its implicit attack on the entrenched culture of the Deep South. To be sure, the novel not only details how young David fares growing up in a small community in rural Mississippi, but it also calls attention to the racial tensions, socioeconomic inequities, and (as the novel's title implies) overwhelming religious hypocrisy that plagued David's small southern town, and many others like it, during the mid-twentieth century. This last point is driven home by the way that the novel (and its film adaptation) make it clear that young David coming to blows with the town pastor is the catalyst for his decision to run away.

Given the historical context, it makes sense that, while aboard the train fleeing town, David's mind wanders to thoughts about the many tensions present in his home community. This facet of the novel is not surprising, since it takes place in the period between the beginning of World War II and the mid-fifties, an era rife with racial and social tensions. These problems, which had long existed but were becoming more apparent to many, form the backdrop of so many of the experiences that young David underwent. Indeed, in this respect, the statement Toole makes in *The Neon Bible* shares much in common with the types of pointed criticism found in Flannery O'Connor's fiction, which makes sense given Toole's long interest and admiration of O'Connor and her writing. (In fact, Toole actually visited her hometown of Milledgeville, Georgia, just prior to his suicide in Biloxi, a small town on the Mississippi Gulf Coast.)

To be sure, alongside the coming-of-age story, which is at the heart of the narrative, Toole's sustained focus on the blatant religious hypocrisy that characterized the American South. The fact that the church proved to be such a judgmental place—to both Toole personally and to the characters he depicts in *The Neon Bible*)—reinforces stereotypes about the region, while also becoming a central theme of the text. As Beverly Jarrett argues, Toole believed “that the church had failed him,” so it is not surprising that “religion is the undisguised villain” of the book (435–36).

Referring to the title Toole chose for his first novel, MacLauchlin notes how it alludes to an “ironic symbol” for the “tension between religion and commercialism” that Toole places “at the center of the book” (36). This tension that MacLauchlin takes notice of is central to the narrative and part and parcel of the stinging social indictment Toole offers in this short novel. Toole himself acknowledges this dimension of *The Neon Bible* in his own characterization of his first book, since he reportedly once described this first foray into fiction as a “grim, adolescent, sociological attack upon the hatreds caused by the various Calvinist religions in the South—and the fundamentalist mentality is one of the roots of what was happening in” the American South during these years (Nevils and Hardy 143). This debate, which may be unfamiliar to outsiders, centers on theological differences between the denominations and the resulting rancor that became evident between them. At stake are fundamental beliefs about who the church says can be “saved” and the need for evangelism. Calvinism, which is traditionally the domain of Reformed churches like Presbyterians, differs from traditional Baptist theology in key aspects, especially regarding the question of salvation. Toole was keenly aware of this divide. Indeed, his own description of his first attempt at fiction highlights his interest in religion and the theme of religious hypocrisy. In making his film adaptation of the novel, Terence Davies also exposes the darker side of religion in the landscape of the American South. From the movie's opening credits, when the camera lingers on the title *The Neon Bible* spelled out in glaring neon lights, to repeatedly homing in on the same image of an adolescent David sitting alone in a seat aboard the train (a shot the camera returns to time and again), to the many flashbacks where David waxes nostalgic about his childhood, and on to the more violent imagery deployed when David recalls his abusive father's cruel inclinations and the many other vicious underpinnings of small-town southern life, Davies uses the medium of film to faithfully render Toole's coming-of-age story.



From The Neon Bible, dir. Terence Davies (1995)

A good example of how Davies maintains the spirit of the novel can be found in his interpretation of the passage from the book that describes when Frank (David's father) knocks his mother's tooth out in a fit of anger. Frank, who at this point has lost his job and has, out of desperation, taken on part-time work at the local gas station, returns home with the unsettling news that he has spent his week's pay on seeds to follow through with what his wife calls a "crazy plan to grow things on the hill" near their home (Toole 29). Frank's mother Sarah has been waiting on his father's return all day because the family is too broke to even buy food. In fact, the only money they have in the house is "twenty-three cents" that young David keeps in his piggybank. David's mother refuses to take the boy's coins, and she has promised her young son that once his father comes home, there will be "money with him" to buy what they need (28). Yet, when Frank arrives home, he has already spent all of his paycheck. Sarah grows dismayed and angry upon learning that he used the money to buy seeds (to fuel what she clearly sees as a pipe dream) instead of giving the money to her to buy much-needed food. Consequently, there is a heated confrontation.

For his part, Frank reacts quite violently to his wife's questioning him about how he chooses to spend his paycheck, ultimately knocking her tooth out with his knee, a bloody altercation which young David bears witness to:

I saw Poppa's knee coming up, and I called out for Mother to get off the stairs. She was crying and didn't hear me, and Poppa's knee was already at her chin. She screamed and rolled backward down the stairs. I got to her just as she reached the floor. The blood was already flowing out the sides of her mouth. (30)

As this passage makes clear, David sees firsthand how his parent's disagreement over money quickly escalates. Moreover, the fact that it has come to this shows the family's extreme poverty and how desperate they have become. While Toole's novel does much to communicate these characters' various emotions—their anger, fear, betrayal, desperation, and confusion—in Davies's film adaptation, the scene is rendered as ultimately more moving and complex, thanks

in large part to the actors' fine job of expressively conveying these characters' mixed emotions, which Davies captures on camera by panning in to close-ups of their faces as they act out this heart-wrenching scene.

This scene, indeed, highlights a larger trend of Davies's filmmaking, which is his ability to take source material and translate it in a way that stays true to the original but utilizes the medium of film—and the visual components inherent to it—to breathe life into the text. As a director, Davies has, in fact, over the years come to be well known for his quality adaptations of literary works—such as his film adaptation of *The House of Mirth*—but when he set about bringing Toole's novel to the screen, he was then best known the feature films *Distant Voices*, *Still Lives* and *The Long Day Closes*, both of which drew inspiration from his life—and which remain, to this day, films that Davies is celebrated for. Set in the 1940s and 1950s in Liverpool, where Davies was born and grew up, both of these early films are considered to be highly autobiographical. Davies garnered critical attention for these decidedly personal film narratives, and he also started to gain a reputation as both a formidable screenwriter and director.

8 CONCLUSION

To be sure, what makes it so difficult to portray the South in all its complexity has to do with the fact that outsiders have made attempts to characterize the region in ways that reflect their own stereotypical notions. Yet, Toole and others who are native to the region have also created conflicting images of southern life. While Toole's depiction highlights many of the region's stereotypes, he also uses his novels to interrogate the culture of the South. In this manner, he presents a complex portrait of the region.

Certainly, texts like *The Neon Bible*, which are critical of southern culture and call attention to the problems that have for so long plagued the region, not only stand in contrast to more romanticized notions of the South, but they also serve as cases in point to illustrate the degree to which Hollywood and, by extension, the American public—has a love/hate relationship with the region. Part of this ambivalence derives, of course, from stereotypes about the region that have long existed and persist to this day. America's conflicting views about the South, however, also have to do with the fact that the region, despite its mythic place in American memory, remains hard to define.

Heather Duerre Humann is the author of four books: *Domestic Abuse in the Novels of African American Women: A Critical Study* (2014), *Gender Bending Detective Fiction: A Critical Analysis of Selected Works* (2017), *Another Me: The Doppelgänger in Twenty-First Century Fiction, Television, and Film* (2018), and *Reality Simulation in Science Fiction Literature, Film, and Television* (2019). She earned a PhD in American literature from the University of Alabama and

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