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Traipsing Up to Ohio: Contemporary Southern Gothic Along the  
Borders of the Cultural South

Benjamin Douglas Caldwell

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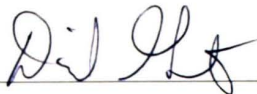
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The College of Graduate Studies  
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In Partial Fulfillment  
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Masters of Arts in English

Benjamin Douglas Caldwell


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To the College of Graduate Studies:

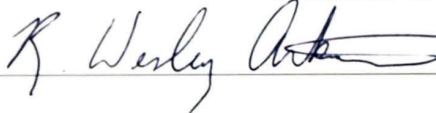
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For Mom, who told me to read “A Rose for Emily” and changed everything

## ABSTRACT

BENJAMIN DOUGLAS CALDWELL. *Traipsing Up to Ohio: Contemporary Southern Gothic Along the Borders of the Cultural South* (Under the direction of DOCTOR DAVID GUEST).

The dark and often violent genre of literature commonly called Southern Gothic is one of the most distinctive in American literature and, thanks to canonical authors like William Faulkner and Flannery O'Connor, is arguably a cornerstone of contemporary fiction. Since the turn of the millennium, however, a number of authors who originate from outside the traditional South (i.e., north of the Ohio River) have written books that have been advertised as Southern Gothic and have a number of striking similarities with the genre, despite the fact that neither the work's creator nor setting is Southern. This thesis aims to examine this trend by first determining a working definition for what makes a work worthy of the Southern Gothic label. Next, a study is made of where Southerners tend to migrate when they leave the South. Finally, this thesis concludes with a close reading of Donald Ray Pollock's 2011 novel *The Devil All the Time*, one of the finer contemporary examples of Southern Gothic produced by an author writing outside the region.

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## Statement of Critical Principles and Influences

Many thesis projects are born in the classroom. This one was not.

The idea for this project came from an observation I made while working at the local bookstore in Morehead, Kentucky, during the year between my graduation from Morehead State University in 2014 and my acceptance to Austin Peay in 2015. While taking inventory, stocking shelves, and receiving galley copies of soon-to-be-published books, I noticed that there seemed to be a growing body of works proudly advertised as Southern Gothic despite having settings outside the traditional boundaries of the region. Perhaps I could have dismissed this as simple marketing had I not read several of them and found that these works – mostly written and set in Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois – really *did* seem like Southern Gothic. The Southern “grit lit” tradition of Larry Brown seemed to have migrated across the Ohio River and settled quite comfortably just outside of Kentucky.

This observation left me with two questions: What are the traits of Southern Gothicism that make the genre unique and make these regional outliers so obvious, and why is the Southern Gothic narrative being told outside the South?

To answer these questions, I first examined the two components of the Southern Gothic label individually – that is, I considered what makes a work *Southern* or *Gothic* before I looked at work that fit both descriptors. I also felt it was important to define the regional boundaries of the South, as I was arguing for the existence of works that were Southern Gothic but not “Southern,” and so I incorporated a great deal of sociological research into my study, particularly the work of John Shelton Reed. As a final component to the study, it seemed appropriate to include a close reading and analysis of one of the works that started this line of inquiry in the first place. I chose Donald Ray Pollock’s 2011 novel *The Devil All the Time* as my representative

text, as I believe it is a fine work of literature (if an exceptionally, brutally dark work) that employs a distinctively Southern character model despite having been written by a lifelong Ohioan.

In addition to my goal of producing an effective work of literary scholarship examining very contemporary writing, I had some practical considerations in mind as I went into this project. After receiving my Masters from Austin Peay, I plan to pursue a doctorate in English literature. As I wrote my thesis, I always considered it as a potential writing sample to be included in applications, as well as a work of scholarship that I could publish and add to my curriculum vitae. Additionally, during the course of my research I found that I am fascinated with texts originating from several American border regions – for example, writings from my native Appalachia, or authors from central Texas writing at the intersection of desert, plain, and swamp. I would like to use my research on ambiguously Southern writers as a springboard into a dissertation-length project on the literature from any American borderland. In a best-case scenario, my existing work on the contemporary borders of the American South and Pollock's novel could serve as the backbone for a chapter in that dissertation.

With all these considerations, it is my hope that this project proves a fitting capstone to my Masters degree experience and the basis for many more projects to come. I feel that I have found a topic worth exploring, and this project has been a very good first step towards more in-depth exploration.



## Traipsing Up to Ohio:

### Contemporary Southern Gothic Along the Borders of the Cultural South

Late in Donald Ray Pollock's 2011 novel *The Devil All the Time*, Carl Henderson—a serial killer who preys on hitchhikers, then poses their corpses for racy photographs with his wife and partner in crime, Sandy—laments that for his most recent hunt he decided to travel through the South instead of the Midwest:

Except for the photos of the boy in Kentucky, most of the others he had taken this time were slop. Nothing had turned out right. He sat up all night dwelling on it in a chair by the third-floor window, looking down on the parking lot and rolling a dog dick cigar between his fingers until it fell apart. He kept considering signs, maybe something he had missed. But nothing stood out, except for Sandy's mostly piss-poor attitude and the ex-con who got away. He swore he'd never hunt in the South again. (264)

Carl's disdain for his venture into the South is, perhaps, both appropriate and expected. Carl and Sandy operate out of a mill-town in southern Ohio called Meade, Pollock's fictional version of Chillicothe, Ohio, renamed to reflect the real-life Mead Corporation paper mill that serves as the backbone of the local economy. Located in the foothills of the Appalachians, Chillicothe (and, by extension, Meade) sits in an oft-overlooked section of America: the intersection of Appalachia and the Rust Belt. However, because the town lies north of the Ohio River, neither Meade nor Chillicothe can readily be called *Southern*. In the context of the above quote, there is little reason for Carl—a transplant from California—to feel any sort of connection with the South or to identify as a Southerner.

Yet *The Devil All the Time* is clearly a Southern Gothic novel, with obvious stylistic and thematic origins in the works of Flannery O'Connor and so-called "grit-lit" authors like Larry

Brown. The book's religious preoccupations and graphic depictions of violence—often presented hand-in-hand—have long been go-to subjects for Southern authors, and many of the novel's flatter characters conform to roles commonly found in Southern works: the miracle-obsessed preacher, the corrupt sheriff, and the Good Christian Woman, to name a few. Although neither Pollock nor his characters can readily be called Southern, the story pulses with Southern energy.

Pollock's Southern inclinations could be written off as one author's stylistic quirks if he was alone in writing such regionally ambiguous fiction, but he is not the only author writing after the turn of the millennium whose stories are Southern in all but setting. Indiana author Frank Bill's 2011 short story collection *Crimes in Southern Indiana*, while little more than generic thriller at its worst, reads like something Larry Brown or a young Cormac McCarthy would have written at its best, with lots of good ol' boys and depictions of backwoods criminality. Ann Pancake's 2007 novel *Strange As This Weather Has Been* and 2015 short story collection *Me and My Daddy Listen to Bob Marley* tell stories of rural West Virginians—a state famously founded in opposition to the Confederacy—that find common ground in the depictions of the poor folk of Tennessee and Georgia common to O'Connor. In an area of the country that we might accurately call the southernmost extreme of the North, the longstanding Southern literary traditions of Gothicism and grotesquery are alive and well.

Far from being an anomalous occurrence, the trend of Southern-style literary work being produced outside the traditional borders of the region has traceable roots in the emigration of Southerners to factory towns in the Rust Belt for most of the 20th century. This diaspora led to enclaves of Southerners—and, after one generation, families descended from Southerners—planted all across the region, and this Southern infusion can be felt in literary depictions of the rural and industrial Midwest that are steeped in Gothicism and darkness.

Southern Gothicism is one of the most distinctive, readily recognizable forms of American regional writing, and this study begins by digging into what makes the genre tick. Specific emphasis is paid to two aspects of the writing: the way that heroic figures are portrayed in Southern writing—Gothic or otherwise—and the trend in Gothicism of all sorts to portray God as ineffectual, absent, or even cruel. From there, the study moves into the sociological with a breakdown of where the cultural borders of the American South begin and end, how émigrés from the South retain Southern cultural markers in their new homes, and what we as readers should make of works produced and set in the borderlands of the region. Finally, with these factors in mind, a close reading of *The Devil All The Time* is offered as an example of how productive a scholarly lens that leans South can be when working with these ambiguous texts. Pollock's novel has been chosen for this purpose for two reasons: first, and most simply, it is a fine novel worthy of attention; and second, *Devil's* nods to the Southern tradition (and its departures from the same) are clear and distinct, making the task of charting where the novel's many regional influences and themes originate from comparatively straightforward.

### **Southern Gothic in the 21st Century**

Not all Southern writing can be considered Gothic or grotesque; to use the label of Southern Gothic as a catch-all term for all Southern writing is to ignore the plantation romances of the Antebellum South, much of the Reconstruction era "Lost Cause" work, and the powerful calls to action and social reform of the Agrarians—to say nothing of works by African Americans living and writing in the South, which are treated by many scholars as an entirely separate school of writing defined by their authors' race instead of regional ties. However, since Flannery O'Connor's rise to both popular and critical prominence in the mid-twentieth century, Gothicism and grotesquery have been at the forefront of Southern writing. Of course, Gothicism



is far from a Southern invention; its origins in English literature are in the British Romantics of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, with elements of these first Gothic writers migrating across the Atlantic into the works of American authors like Charles Brockden Brown and Edgar Allan Poe. The question, then, is what is it about *Southern* Gothic that makes it distinct from other works that can be categorized as Gothic?

Perhaps the simplest method of determining what makes Southern Gothic unique is to look at the two descriptors individually: i.e., Southern Gothic is a mash-up genre, comprised of elements taken from stories that fit into the regional tradition of *Southern* writing with other elements common to *Gothic* stories. Though this approach is blunt (perhaps even crude) and rife with potential for oversimplification, the risks inherent in this method can be minimized with a strong understanding of what a reader should look for when considering a representative example of a work that is, individually, either Southern or Gothic.

Of the two words, “Southern” presents the greater problem. As has already been mentioned, writers throughout the American South have ventured into many different genres, and the dominant Southern narrative for much of the region’s history has not been one inflected with Gothic elements; thus, tethering the definition of all Southern work to any other single literary movement is pointless and false. Even going by the single loosest, simplest definition of “Southern”—that is, a work written by an author from or living in the American South—poses a problem, because definitions of what constitutes The South vary from writer to writer and scholar to scholar. Though more of the problem of Southern boundaries and sub-regions within the South will be discussed in the next section, it is worth noting that John Shelton Reed’s excellent essay on the boundaries of the South, “The South: What is It? *Where* is It?”, gives twenty-four different statistical attempts at determining empirically what constitutes the

American South, and while some of his graphs and maps are similar, none of his metrics produces the same results as another (*My Tears Spoiled My Aim* 5-28). Despite these problems, there is still enough critical consensus on what constitutes the body of Southern work—often determined by turning to the author’s biography and considering whether he or she self-identified as Southern—that narrative and ideological patterns begin to emerge.

Michael Kreyling’s excellent book, *Figures of the Hero in Southern Narrative*, examines one of the most enduring elements of Southern stories: the hero. Kreyling’s hero is not necessarily the protagonist of a Southern story but an individual possessed of “an inherent and instantaneously acknowledged capacity to render the provisional nature of any situation or condition into part of a consecrated pattern” (4). In other words, Southern writing and storytelling often includes a character who, by his actions, demeanor, and even physical appearance, commands enough respect and attention that his presence in the narrative is reason enough to record the narrative in the first place. To condense Kreyling’s work to a few sentences, the Southern hero figure reached its peak in the near-deification of Robert E. Lee that was common among many writers after the Civil War before being thoroughly torn apart at the Modernist hands of Faulkner. In Faulkner’s wake, the hero figure resurfaced as a kind of pretender—still possessed of great charisma, still apparently worth constructing a story around, but a man who ultimately “can never be heroic but only strive to imitate an earlier and unattainable heroic pattern” (162). The catalyst for this pretender-hero to try and attain greatness, Kreyling specifies, is violent action—the more bloodshed, the better—which is typified in contemporary grit lit and its tendencies toward brawls, murder, and sexual violence.

The path Kreyling ascribes to the evolution of Southern heroes is one of decline; the old characters are more genuine, more noble, and ostensibly occupy a moral high ground. This



downward tendency is typical of Southern writing of all kinds, heroic or otherwise. Edward L. Ayers, in his essay “What We Talk About When We Talk About the South,” writes, “For as long as people have believed there was a South they have also believed it was disappearing;” shortly after he continues, “From its very beginning, people have believed that the South was not only disappearing but declining, defined against an earlier South that was somehow more authentic” (46). This longstanding pessimism in Southern culture, when coupled with the regional tendency to incorporate mythologized larger-than-life characters in its stories, serves as a bridge for Gothicism to creep into Southern writing. Gothicism, as it manifests in Southern writing, has something of a direct link to the earliest Gothic works produced by British writers in the eighteenth century; *The Companion to Southern Literature*, in its extensive entry on Gothicism, notes that from the very first Gothic novel, Horace Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto*, Gothicism operates on “the suggestion that evil and irrationality will destroy civilization,” an all too appropriate sentiment in a region that believes itself to be in continuous decline (312).

There is also a school of Gothicism, with roots in Matthew Lewis’s *The Monk*, which operates on a premise rooted in either the failure of God to prevent a tragedy or the actions of much darker forces interested in causing chaos. In Lewis’s novel, the titular monk Ambrosio leaves his spiritual calling behind as he dives further and further into depravity; by the novel’s end, he commits murder, rape, incest, and literally sells his soul to Lucifer. Evil runs rampant in *The Monk*, and while Lucifer appears there is no corresponding sign that God is present at all; absolute evil is real, but absolute good is conspicuously absent.

In America, the Gothic narrative of evil without explanation, or of evil unmitigated by an equal good, took firm root in crime stories, particularly murder narratives; Karen Halttunen, writing about the rise of graphic depictions of crimes in American writing, notes that it was “the

peculiar nature of the Gothic narrative of murder to try *and fail* to come to terms with the shocking revelation that murder had been committed” (4, emphasis original). Gothicism in America developed hand-in-hand with what we now call true crime stories, and the genres collectively refused to offer readers either rational explanations or divine intervention.

Among Southern writers, this Gothic senselessness becomes especially prominent in the twentieth century; it can be felt in Faulkner—particularly in *Light in August*, with the ultimately pointless struggle of Joe Christmas ending in his death—and it is arguably the central theme of O'Connor's entire body of work, whose famous description of the South as “Christ-haunted” has become shorthand description for any Southern work where religion plays a narrative role, but not one that leads to a happy ending. This violent variant of the Gothic impulse is alive and well in contemporary Southern works, and has even left the confines of the novel to become arguably the most prominent of all Southern voices.<sup>1</sup>

It is worth noting, as a transitional note before moving into the discussion of where the South's borders lie, that there exists a nebulous category of literature about which little criticism has been written but which has significant overlap with contemporary Southern Gothic and grit lit: the literature of poverty. The literature of poverty, being rooted in economic concerns rather than regional, is not necessarily bound to the South, yet its depictions of hardscrabble existences of people in society's lowest classes has much in common with works such as Erskine Caldwell's *Tobacco Road*; in fact, the existence of this category seemed to be a cause of concern for Fred Hobson in his seminal *Tell About the South*, who briefly mentions in his definition of “the representative Southerner” (to list a few: a conservative, attached to the land, distrustful of

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<sup>1</sup> In 2014, for instance, two such works were released: The first season of television network HBO's *True Detective*, created by Southern crime writer Nic Pizzalatto, which is steeped in references to philosophical nihilism and centers on murders committed by a Louisiana-based cult; and Image Comics' monthly serial *Southern Bastards*, written by on murders committed by a Louisiana-based cult; and Image Comics' monthly serial *Southern Bastards*, written by Jason Aaron and drawn by Jason Latour, which concludes its first story arc with its protagonist's public beating and murder with the very weapon he believed had been given to him through an act of God.

outsiders, etc) that “many of these qualities are not so much Southern as traditional American rural” (13). Though Hobson does claim, very shortly thereafter, that poverty is not among the markers of the Southerner that have crossed regional lines, it seems hard not to consider the possibility that, if so many of the other aspects of character that make a Southerner unique can be found outside the region, why not poverty, too? However, what little reference is made to the literature of poverty in criticism refers overwhelmingly to either the works of American Naturalism—which are clearly not Southern—or to works by Southern and Appalachian writers such as Erskine Caldwell, Lee Smith, or Dorothy Allison. John Steinbeck is curiously absent from these discussions, but perhaps his California origins are moot: by some definitions, the Okies of *The Grapes of Wrath* are Southerners, and a good portion of his nonfiction travelogue *Travels with Charley* is set in the Civil Rights-era South, so perhaps Steinbeck can be considered an honorary Southerner.

### **Borderlands and the Problem of Pinning Down a Region**

All jokes about Steinbeck being a Southerner aside, questions of regional identity pose a particular problem when dealing with the study of Southern literature. As has already been mentioned, there is no single definition of which states constitute America’s South in the present day—nor is every state that has, at one point or another, been thought of as Southern considered Southern now.

Returning to the work of John Shelton Reed, whose studies of the South as a distinct region of America are exceptional, it becomes clear that while the borders of the South are malleable, there is heartland South of seven states that remains more or less constant across different popular perceptions, regardless of time frame or “Southern-ness” metric: Tennessee, Alabama, Mississippi, Georgia, Louisiana, and the Carolinas. Arkansas, Kentucky, and Virginia



are frequently included, but not universally so; Missouri, Oklahoma, Texas, and (somewhat ironically) West Virginia more rarely make the cut. Florida, although often considered a part of the South historically, is now more widely regarded as having its own unique culture unlike any other state in the Union. Making classification harder is that the states whose Southern claims are debatable can be partially Southern; for example, in Reed's analysis of how often the word "Southern" appears in local phone books (a metric based on local self-identification, and the one Reed himself chooses as his ideal), only the easternmost fringe of Oklahoma is considered Southern, and while Virginia mostly falls within the South, the northernmost parts of the state near D.C. and Maryland do not (*Tears* 27). Thus, even if one is in a Southern state, one is still not necessarily in the South.

If this seems confusing, well, it is. Especially in contemporary times, as the South's historic relative isolation from the rest of the nation is eroded, the edges of the region are harder to pin down—not only because the South is becoming more like the rest of the nation, but because Southerners are populating areas outside the usual borders of the region. Reed argues that Southerners, while defined by location and not ethnicity, have enough distinctive cultural cues that their migrations out of the South can be viewed in the same way as any other ethnic or national diaspora (*Tears* 41). As it happens, a huge number of Southerners colonized the industrial Midwest during the twentieth century; in the manufacturing and auto booms, Southerners left in droves to work in Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois, all three of which border the usually-Southern Kentucky. Reed does not go into great detail regarding how this close proximity to their home region affected the Southerners who moved into this border territory, but I would wager that staying closer to home kept the Southern culture stronger among these families—especially if their literary output is anything to go by.

Now, let us turn to Ohio, as our study begins to narrow in on *The Devil All the Time*, and consider its two regional borders: with the South (central Kentucky) and with Appalachia (eastern Kentucky and West Virginia). Central Appalachia—which I will conservatively claim encompasses West Virginia, eastern Kentucky, the westernmost tip of Virginia, and the border of Tennessee and North Carolina—is often considered by outsiders to be a part of the South. To many living elsewhere in the United States, there is no real distinction between those living in what Ayers calls “the Southern Trough” of Mississippi and Alabama and those living further north in the mountains (38).

Even if outsiders are aware of the mountain region’s unique economy (largely rooted in coal mining) and social problems (exaggerated isolation and poverty), differences in the way Appalachians are discussed or interacted with are no different than any other Southern category. Matthew Ferrence, in his book *All-American Redneck*, describes this lumping together of central Appalachians with the South at large as a result of what he calls the “Big R Redneck,” a shift he sees in the use of the word *redneck* from a term connected with West Virginia coal miners to a sort of cultural catch-all term for any of the common derogatory terms for rural white Americans: “It [Big R Redneck] relies on the distraction of semantic argument—this is a redneck, and this is a hillbilly, and this is a cracker, and this is a cowboy, and this is a shitkicker, and so forth—to assume an umbrella function” (15). It follows, then, that if *redneck*, *hillbilly* (the mountain poor of Appalachia), and *cracker* (poor white farmers in the non-mountain South) are considered by many to be slightly different facets of the same idea, those slight differences are easily ignored and discarded from cultural consciousness.

Within the South and Appalachia, a different story plays out—a story about which relatively little has been written, unfortunately, and so I must turn to personal anecdote. I am



from southeastern Kentucky, and grew up in a house a few miles from a surface strip-mining operation in Leslie County. The most prominent cultural marker for most Appalachians is the region's distinctive accent, and mine is especially prominent. Outside of my old home, this accent attracts comments far more often than I would like and occasionally proves troublesome; for example, at a pizza shop in Niagara Falls, my father and I were asked to write down our order because none of the staff could understand him and apparently didn't trust me to translate.

This kind of extra-regional problem is, perhaps, to be expected when one is just south of the Canadian border, but here's the rub: This has happened to me *even within the South*. Coworkers, fellow students, and one professor from a Southern university I met at a conference have all listened to me speak, and then tried to place me. When I tell them I'm from Appalachia, the answer is unfailingly, "Oh." The conversation usually ends shortly thereafter. Scholars of the South do often observe that central Appalachia is distinct among Southern sub-regions<sup>2</sup>, and Ferrence makes much of the role that Appalachia plays as an isolated border-region with ties to both the North and the South (31-36), but scholarship seems to stop short of what has been my own experience: That Appalachia is the South's own Other, an area the rest of the region can look down upon and hold themselves up against.

The Otherness of Appalachians among Southerners tends to vanish, however, when Southerners and Appalachians congregate outside their respective regions. As Reed notes in *One South*:

[T]he presence of a dissimilar third party emphasizes the relative similarity between two others...Differences that seem important within the group may become less so in the presence of "outsiders." For regional groups, this phenomenon becomes especially

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<sup>2</sup> For a quick confirmation, one need only look at the length of the *Companion to Southern Literature's* entries on "Appalachia" and "Appalachian Literature."

evident among migrants from the region. The differences between Appalachian whites and other white Southerners, for example, seem to be effectively submerged in the cities of the upper Midwest, perhaps partly for this reason. (17)

That the distinctions between “typical” Southerners and Appalachians seem to vanish among migrant communities, and that Reed chose as an example the Midwest, is of particular importance to Pollock’s work. Returning to Reed’s “phonebook map” of the South, Chillicothe, Ohio is just within that metric’s borderlands; it is situated in a band that stretches along the Ohio River and that, while not populated by enough self-identifying Southerners to be considered part of the South, there is still enough Southern presence that the area has distinct “Southern cultural flavor” (27-28). What makes all this important is that Pollock’s work does *not* follow the apparent Midwestern tendency to conflate Southern and Appalachian cultures—as we will discuss, while *The Devil All the Time* is quite Southern, a lot of Appalachia still shines distinctly through.

### ***The Devil All the Time* as Regional Hybrid**

Before a close reading of Pollock’s work can begin, it seems appropriate to offer both a defense and a warning to those unfamiliar with the novel. *The Devil All the Time* is not a novel for the squeamish, or for the reader who expects to like or sympathize with fictional characters. Outside of protagonist Arvin Russell’s family, every major character is either sexually deprived or emotionally stunted (if not both). Even within Arvin’s family, his father Willard and adoptive sister Lenora are religious fanatics whose faith ostracizes them from society. The novel’s many violent acts are described in vivid, blood-soaked detail, and most scenic descriptions emphasize the dirtiness of a given place. Readers who expect literature to maintain some form of Keatsian beautiful aesthetic will likely find *Devil* to be disappointing, if not appalling.

To these readers, I ask that a few things be kept in mind. First, my purpose here is not to make an argument for the canonization of *The Devil All the Time* (let time be the judge of that) but to discuss the novel as an example of a specific kind of narrative structure. Second, the presence of brutal violence in a narrative does not preclude that work from literary discussion. If that were true, then literary critics would not discuss two of Pollock's clearest influences, O'Connor and McCarthy. Indeed, the novel's hyperviolence and graphic descriptions are logical steps for the modern Gothic story to take; as a genre built on extremes, Gothicism inherently pushes at the limits of its contemporary audience, and that shock value is considered part of the genre's charm by regular readers of Gothic works. Finally, Pollock's novel was well-received by many reviewers and popular critics, which offers some validation for its consideration here.

While many reviews of *The Devil All the Time* forego regional descriptors of the work—describing it as “gothic” with no location label, or focusing on aspects of the novel shared with pulp or crime writers—those which do provide a regional tag to the novel invariably gave labels that can be described as “Southern Gothic, with provisions.” Sam Sacks of *The Wall Street Journal* noted that the novel “[e]xpertly employs the conventions of Southern Gothic horror,” but titled his review “The Comic Grotesque Goes North;” *USA Today*'s Bob Minzesheimer acknowledged the book's hybrid influences of writers both within and without the South, saying the novel “invites comparisons to Flannery O'Connor and Raymond Carver” (“The Devil Unleashed in Appalachia”). Josh Ritter of *The New York Times*—whose review is steeped in O'Connor comparisons from its title, “A Good Man is Impossible to Find”—provides perhaps the most succinct explanation: “Flannery O'Connor called Southern writing ‘Christ-haunted,’ and though Pollock is strictly speaking a Midwesterner...there's more than a little of O'Connor's Southern grotesque in his work.” From the moment of the novel's publication, *Devil*'s regional



hybridity was already earning critical attention.

The novel's own Gothicism is, as suggested by the title, strongly rooted in preoccupations with evil. The title is dropped very early in the novel, a scene that sets the tone for the entire book to come: at Willard Russell's "prayer log," his backwoods altar to God that eventually becomes the site of violent and bloody Old Testament sacrifices, our protagonist, Willard's son Arvin, reflects on his father's struggles with both good and evil. "Unless he had whiskey running through his veins," readers are told, "Willard came to the clearing every morning and evening to talk to God. Arvin didn't know which was worse, the drinking or the praying. As far back as he could remember, it seemed that his father had fought the Devil all the time" (3). In a few lines, the novel's chief religious stance becomes apparent: Evil is real, it must be battled, and Arvin is unsure of what to make of it all.

As Arvin grows older, he adopts many of the traits of the modern Southern hero Kreyling describes. Although far from wealthy—much is made of his poverty and relative lack of social status—Arvin does meet the physical description of Kreyling's hero; like the old cavaliers and squires of the South, he's "handsome" and "dark-haired" in the one physical description readers are given of him (265). Arvin is also an exceptionally skilled young man. After graduating high school, he joins a construction crew, where he succeeds by virtue of having both experience—he claims that although he had been given "supposedly the worst job on the crew, [his uncle] had worked [him] harder in the garden patch behind the house" (214)—and natural ability; when he quits the work crew before planning his departure from Coal Creek, his foreman calls him "'bout the best worker I got" and begs him to stick around (228). He cares deeply about his family, protecting both Lenora and his grandmother Emma. Arvin manages, in character and ethics, to be like the heroes of the South despite his station.

There is another facet of Arvin's character that aligns him with both Kreyling's Southern hero and something much less noble: his willingness to fight, and skill when forced to. By classic definitions of honor and chivalry, Arvin's approach to combat is base and cowardly. Although his first verbal lesson in how to fight from Willard is noble enough—"I don't condone no fighting just for the hell of it, but sometimes you're just too easygoing... Them boys might be bigger than you, but the next time one of 'em starts his shit, I want you to finish it" (4)—his first *witnessed* lesson from his father is far from traditional. There is nothing honorable or chivalrous about Willard's attack on the hunters who insulted his wife and mocked his prayer log; he jumps from his truck without any warning and attacks with ferocious overkill, so much so that months later the attack is gossiped about in town (9, 47). Troublingly, for some time after this violent day, "Arvin would often think of that as the best day he ever spent with his father" (10). Ambush fighting and extreme violence become Arvin's fondest and dearest connection to his father, and he returns to that well time and time again.

In an even bigger departure from the normal Southern narrative, Arvin's wait-and-strike method of combat, which has the peculiar effect of rendering almost all his violent acts as simple revenge, is not treated by the story as cowardly. Rather, it is cast as wise, prudent, and divinely sanctioned. As a high school student, after Arvin gets the jump on two of three male students who cornered and threatened to rape Lenora by beating them severely, the third student, Gene Dinwoodie, confronts him. Rather than immediately coming to blows with Gene, Arvin lowers his head and silently prays "for the right time" (138). A week later, Arvin finds his right time and nearly kills Gene. Of all the prayers in the narrative—and there is a whole lot of praying in the narrative—Arvin's prayer for a good time to beat Gene into submission stands out as the only one that is clearly answered; every other prayer amounts to nothing.



The God of *The Devil All the Time* is negligent in the extreme, to the point of effectual absence. Although He grants a single prayer for violence, God does not generally respond to violence committed to please Him. Willard's prayer log becomes the site of mass animal sacrifice and offerings of blood, including the human sacrifice of blood from his corrupt landlord, yet he is unable to sway God to save his wife from illness. God's presence is felt in the narrative only through the old Reverend Sykes, a man of genuine faith who believes God saved him from certain death in a mining accident, and who emerged like Christ from a mountain tomb after three days of underground captivity (24-25). By the time of the narrative, though, Sykes is an old man, living in poverty with severe health problems; God may have saved him once, but no longer seems to care.

In the absence of God, the devil flourishes and evil runs rampant. Carl and Sandy best typify the violent strain of evil that runs through the novel with their serial killing, but theirs is far from the only form taken by evil. There is, in no particular order: the quiet corruption of Sheriff Bodecker, who accepts bribes from pimps and looks the other way when crime can benefit him; the sinister selfishness of Preston Teagardin, the vilely misogynistic minister who is directly responsible for Lenora's suicide and indirectly for Arvin's transformation into a criminal; the bitter hatred of Theodore Daniels, who harbors intense disdain for God and all men after a test of faith left him crippled; and other, pettier forms of evil, such as lust and greed, which are the defining traits of many of the novel's minor characters.<sup>3</sup> Looming like a specter behind these various evils is the shadow that colors the actions of so many characters: nihilism.

Nihilist themes are not uncommon in Southern Gothic literature, especially among works

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<sup>3</sup> It is worth noting that, unlike most of the novel's deeply flawed characters, neither Teagardin nor Theodore receives even the slightest sympathy from the narrative; this suggests that of all the shades of evil in *The Devil All the Time*, their evils are the absolute worst. Theodore, who is also a manipulative and incestuous pedophile, is scarcely even regarded as human.

written after O'Connor, who gave us such memorable nihilistic characters as the Misfit and Hulga Hopewell. The nihilism of *The Devil All the Time* is a far cry from O'Connor's, however; it is not an occasional evil or sin<sup>4</sup>, but an all-encompassing force which allows for the spread of depravity and which saps the joy out of what good deeds are done. To chart the course of nihilism in *Devil*, one need only consider the character development of Lenora's father, Roy Lafferty.

Roy is introduced into the narrative as an extreme example of Appalachian faith-testing ministers; his signature sermon gimmick, in which he releases a jar of spiders over himself and even eats a few, terrifies almost the entire congregation of the little church in Coal Creek, his actions causing churchgoers to be bitten and children to break down crying (28-30). Willard even observes that Roy, with his cheap suit and slicked-back hair, "looked like the Prince of Darkness," a visible hint of the darkness that lies under his wild and ostentatious religion (27). This evil manifests itself in the murder of his wife, Helen, an act Roy committed while deluded into believing his faith gave him the power to raise the dead. While on the run after the murder, however, Roy does not descend into ever-greater evil; rather, he becomes a broken shell of a man, aware of how cut off from God he is and unable to find a solution. As Carl and Sandy pick him up on the side of the road before they make him yet another of their victims—their very last victim, in fact—Carl sees Roy's entire history in his appearance:

For some reason, [Roy] reminded Carl of a preacher, one of the real ones that you seldom run into anymore: not one of those greedy, sweet-smelling bastards just out to take people's money and make a fat fucking living off God, but a man who truly believed in the teachings of Jesus. On second thought, that was probably taking things a bit too far;

<sup>4</sup> The comparison of nihilism in O'Connor's work to sin is not hyperbole; theologian Ralph C. Wood has written a book of Baptist sermons based on her work (*Flannery O'Connor and the Christ-Haunted South*, 2004), in which he identifies nihilism as "the chief moral temptation of modernity" and calls it "morally...asphyxiating" (179).

the old boy was probably just another bum. (259)

Of course, the irony is that Roy's brand of "real" preaching was never effective, and it was by indulging the worst aspects of his faith that he committed the murder that set him on the path of homelessness, isolation, and eventually death at the hands of a pair of killers.

The wild displays of faith seen in Roy's spider-eating and Willard's blood offerings are acts steeped in desperation; in this world where God seems not to be listening, these two men hope that they can gain His attention by being incredibly loud in their religion. Roy and Willard provide the most visible examples of a desire to find some sign that their seemingly godless world still contains some trace of the divine. The search for cosmic meaning is a driving force for Carl as well, who brings his own strange brand of religion to his murders.

Carl describes the "connection" he feels with the world when he kills his "models" as "the mystery," an unexplainable feeling of reverence and peace that sounds like a monstrously distorted version of Emersonian Transcendentalism (176). He is obsessed with signs and symbols, seeking meaning in everything that happens to him; however, he is also resistant to signs he does not like or want. Early on, Carl's search for signs points him in a clearly Satanic direction when, while sitting in a fleabag motel room, he ponders his most recent hunt:

Six was the number of models they had worked with this trip; and six [dollars] was what the old bitch had charged him for the room; and now here were six poisoned flies lying in his bed... "And what do these three sixes mean, Carl?" he asked himself out loud... while searching his mind for a suitable answer, one that avoided the most obvious implication of those three numbers, the biblical sign that his crazy old mother would have gleefully pointed out to him if she were still alive. (92-93)

Carl constantly manipulates his own worldview, avoiding anything that too strongly suggests an



outcome that, in the moment, does not seem to fit connection he feels to the world. It is while searching for this connection that he decides, against all signs, to go hunting somewhere new: the South. Of course, this Southern hunt proves to be the end for Carl and Sandy when, on their return, they pick up Arvin.

Arvin, by this point, is on the run from Coal Creek after murdering Preston Teagardin for his role in Lenora's suicide—namely, getting her pregnant, then denying he'd ever touched her and telling her she was deluded by sin, an act Lenora is unable to handle. Arvin, like a proper Southern hero, has defended his family's honor, but for Arvin this defense has serious repercussions. Protecting Lenora's reputation from further damage requires some secrecy; Arvin is the only one of his family who knows Lenora was pregnant, choosing to keep that information from his grandmother for her peace of mind (224). His posthumous protection involves too much deceit among his family members to be truly noble, and this subterfuge continues when Arvin puts his skills as an ambush fighter to use and stakes out Teagardin's house for weeks, waiting for the right moment to strike, just like his father taught him.

After the murder of Teagardin, Arvin's more noble sentiments begin to fade from his character, and he reveals himself not as a genuine hero but Kreyling's pretender-hero, spurred on by this first murder to kill three more people by the novel's end: Carl, Sandy, and Sheriff Bodecker. Although all three of these later kills are made in self-defense, and none of Arvin's four victims are model citizens, in taking a human life the violence that had always existed in Arvin takes over, and he loses his roots. In the novel's final chapters, Arvin is a man on the run: first from the law in Coal Creek, then briefly from Carl and Sandy, and finally from a half-crazed Bodecker. Each leg of Arvin's flight is ended with another death, and the novel ends with him still on the run:

He would never see [Meade] again; probably never see Emma or Earskell either, for that matter. He turned and started up the deer path. When he came to the top of the hill, he brushed aside a spiderweb and stepped out of the dim woods. The cloudless sky was the deepest blue he'd ever seen, and the field seemed to be blazing with light. It looked as if it went on forever. He began walking north toward Paint Creek. If he hurried, he could be on Route 50 in an hour. If he was lucky, someone would give him a ride. (307)

Although there is some small hope in this passage in the beauty of the day, the best Arvin can hope for is to get picked up as a hitchhiker—even though hitching a ride with someone is exactly what led to him being picked up by Carl and Sandy and killing a second time. Once a respectable, if unrefined, example of the Southern hero, Arvin's story ends with him homeless, bloodied, and heading north. Whatever Southern roots Arvin may have grown are well and truly gone by the novel's end.

### **In Conclusion: The Blending of America**

In 2016, Donald Ray Pollock released a second novel, *The Heavenly Table*. Set during America's brief involvement in World War I, *The Heavenly Table* features an expansive cast of minor characters and is partially set in a much older version of *The Devil All the Time*'s Meade. Much of the novel, however, takes place along the Georgia/Alabama state line, an unambiguously Southern setting to contrast Meade's status as border town. To an uninitiated reader, the increased Southern presence in *The Heavenly Table* would suggest that Pollock has ceased flirting with the Southern Gothic genre and embraced it wholeheartedly, but this claim does not stand up when reading the novel. The principle characters of *The Heavenly Table*'s Southern chapters are a trio of brothers who have modeled their lives on a terrible dime novel, riding on horseback from town to town and robbing banks. Despite hailing from the South, the

brothers are self-consciously living the plot of a Western. Once again, Pollock presents a work in which regional ambiguity is a defining feature.

Whether Pollock is deliberately choosing to blur the boundaries of America's various sub-regions or not, he seems fully committed to writing literature that centers around aggressive conflicts. In a 2012 interview with *BULL* magazine, Pollock says, "Without serious conflict, most fiction is as boring as grandma's dishrag. Even children's fairy tales have wicked people and monsters in them" (72). If conflict is the soul of story, then perhaps the conflict can be escalated if it seems geographically misplaced; after all, what plot is older than "man fights outsider," and what better way to twist the narrative than by making all parties involved outsiders in one sense or another?

The works of Pollock and other authors from America's border regions, with their willingness to play fast and loose with the tropes and conventions of literature strongly rooted in place, may well be the direction that American literature is heading. As American citizens increasingly spend large portions of their lives outside their hometowns, whether for work or education or leisure, regional distinctions seem both less important and harder to claim. There is ample opportunity for more literary and cultural borderlands to develop and for certain kinds of stories to emerge a long way from their original home. In time, Ohio may not be the only non-Southern state producing clearly Southern authors.



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## Bibliography

The bibliography that follows has been divided into two sections. First, I provide additional context and discussion of the longer scholarly works (books and articles) that are cited within the thesis proper. No annotations are provided for the book reviews cited in my close reading of *The Devil All the Time*, as those sources are very short and the book review is a fairly self-explanatory format. Following this, I have included a short, but more detailed, list of a few works that were important for gaining background information on various aspects of the research, but which did not make their way into the final scholarship in the form of a direct quote or reference.

### Scholarly Works Cited Within the Research

Ayers, Edward L. "What We Talk About When We Talk About the South." *What Caused the Civil War? Reflections on the South and Southern History*, pp. 37-63. Norton, 2005.

Ayers' essay provides what is perhaps the most quotable insight into the character of Southern writers and their portrayals of their home: "For as long as people have believed there was a South they have also believed it was disappearing" (46). Other research done in the course of this project seems to confirm that the pessimistic course of decline Ayers' finds in discourses about the South is both very real and a dominant cultural force, but none of these other studies put the matter so succinctly as Ayers. This is a rare work of scholarship that is both informative and entertainingly written.

Ferrence, Matthew J. *All-American Redneck: Variations on an Icon, from James Fenimore Cooper to the Dixie Chicks*. University of Tennessee Press, 2014.

Ferrence's long work of literary and cultural criticism is an exceptionally thorough study of portrayals of rural Americans, covering every period of American history and a

breadth of topics ranging from the literature of Erskine Caldwell to NASCAR. Ferrence begins from the observation that within contemporary American culture – specifically, urban American culture – the word “redneck” has become a sort of cultural catch-all for anyone living in a rural area. Just as all rural Americans are given the same label, urban and suburban portrayals of the country apply the same stereotypes to very different regions of the country, such as ascribing similar accents to Appalachians and Texans.

Ferrence’s notion of rural-regional-blending has some obvious similarities to my central claim that there are literary works in the Southern Gothic tradition being written outside the South. Ferrence is also a rarity among scholars in that he acknowledges the unique status of Appalachia within the South as an intra-regional Other. As an Appalachian man working with a primary text that is at least partially Appalachian, Ferrence’s treatment of my home region is welcomed and refreshing.

Flora, Joseph M. and Lucinda H. Mackethan, editors. *The Companion to Southern Literature*. Louisiana State UP, 2002.

This excellent encyclopedia provides an almost all-encompassing overview of nearly every aspect of Southern literature, from regional distinctions to generic hallmarks to literary theory as it relates to the works of Southern authors. Although its encyclopedic nature does mean that no given entry is a completely thorough analysis of its subject, *The Companion to Southern Literature* is still enormously useful as a quick reference work and a means of establishing baseline understandings of aspects of Southern writing. Especially important to this study is the *Companion’s* entry on Gothicism, which extensively describes the course of the Gothic genre in Britain and America before relating it to the Southern Gothic sub-genre.

Halttunen, Karen. *Murder Most Foul: The Killer and the American Gothic Imagination*. Harvard UP, 1998.

Halttunen's work examines the concurrent rise of the Gothic literary genre in America with what were known in the early 19<sup>th</sup> Century as "murder narratives," nonfiction stories of heinous and violent crimes that can be thought of as precursors to the genre we now call true crime. Notably, she emphasizes that the common attitude in Gothicism towards Christianity as an ineffective or corrupt social institution took firm hold in the murder narrative, where it was a stylistic convention to deny readers any sort of religious comfort or imply any kind of rationale or reason for the actions committed by the criminals.

Although my thesis is not concerned with the true crime genre, I find that many of the genre's attitudes towards crime (monstrous, yet fascinating) are similar to those found in grit lit authors like Larry Brown, who are direct precursors to Donald Ray Pollock and his cohort.

Hobson, Fred. *Tell About the South: The Southern Rage to Explain*. Louisiana State UP, 1983.

Hobson's seminal work about Southern culture looms large over any discussion of who is and is not a Southern writer, yet within this study the work seemed unusually distant. *Tell About the South* only proved to be of direct importance to this thesis in its introduction, during a brief passage in which Hobson seems to express worry that several of the hallmarks of Southern regional literature have become associated with a general American rural. In other words, Hobson seems to have noticed the beginnings of the cultural conflation that Ferrence outlines in *All-American Redneck*.

Kreyling, Michael. *Figures of the Hero in Southern Narrative*. Louisiana State UP, 1987.

Kreyling's text is a very thorough analysis of Southern heroes across American history,



with particular emphasis on the hero as larger-than-life figure. Kreyling argues that Southern authors treat heroic men as mythic figures whose involvement in any event consequently makes that event worth recording; in other words, without the hero, there is no story. This definition of heroism reached a sort of cultural peak during the Lost Cause era in Southern writers' treatment of Robert E. Lee before falling to pieces during the Modernist period, when Faulkner's works so thoroughly critiqued and mocked this older form of heroism that writers turned to what Kreyling calls the pretender-hero, a man of action whose apparent heroism is nothing more than common bloodlust in the guise of nobility.

Kreyling's work serves as the backbone to my literary analysis. The distinctly Southern brand of hero he uncovers provided the model with which to compare *The Devil All the Time*'s protagonist, Arvin Russell, and this became the clearest indicator within the text that Pollock was dabbling in Southern tropes. In addition to the text's relevance to my research, I found that *Figures* is a fantastic work of scholarship, one which will likely play in role in my scholarship further down the line.

Reed, John Shelton. *My Tears Spoiled My Aim and Other Reflections on Southern Culture*.

University of Missouri Press, 1993.

---. *One South: An Ethnic Approach to Regional Culture*. Louisiana State UP, 1982.

I am grouping the two works I cited by John Shelton Reed together because they are very similar in content, and provide the same scholarly function within this thesis. Reed's sociological study of Southerners and Southern culture was instrumental in defining my use of the word "Southern." His work is, simply, phenomenal, and without it I feel that I would have no sociological backing on which to base my claims. The "phonebook map"



that is cited several times in the essay is one of the most important data points I have.

#### Additional Reading

Guillory, John. *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation*. U of Chicago P, 1993.

This influential scholarly text argues that the problems of creating a literary canon lie not within the literary works themselves but in a broader cultural context. Guillory uses the sociological concept of cultural capital—that is, an object of power and value that is maintained entirely by cultural norms—to show that the canonicity debate is not a self-contained problem confined to literature departments, but a byproduct of larger social justice movements that aim for better minority representation. The book includes several large overviews of the canon at different points in history, as well as a lengthy evaluation of sociological shifts in the meaning of the word “value.” *Cultural Capital* is a book of great significance—it shows up as a source or recommended reading in many of the other works listed here—but it can be a tedious read. Guillory relies heavily on sociological concepts to make his points and does not always provide an adequate explanation of the concepts to aid a reader unfamiliar with the jargon.

Kreyling, Michael. *Inventing Southern Literature*. UP of Mississippi, 1998.

Kreyling’s *Figures of the Hero in Southern Narrative* serves as the scholarly backbone to this project, and while that is only work of his directly cited in the scholarship, it is not the only work of his that is relevant to this discussion. *Inventing Southern Literature* is an excellent work of both literary analysis and historical survey that examines the beginnings of the formation of a Southern literary canon. Kreyling places the creation of a Southern canon in the 1930s, with the Fugitive/Agrarians writing out of Vanderbilt, and

argues (quite convincingly) that the push to have certain authors recognized and labeled as “Southern” was motivated by semi-separatist politics. Kreyling looks at the influence Robert Penn Warren and Cleanth Brooks in founding The New Criticism and relates their allegedly universal values for literature back to traditionally Southern values; he also examines the various ways that different critics have handled Faulkner and at times used his status as a Southerner to justify the discussion or canonization of other, lesser writers. Kreyling’s treatment of Southern literature as an entirely artificial designation is intriguing and well-argued; more importantly, if this artificiality is real, then it makes it possible for arguments like mine to exist.

Pollock, Donald Ray. *The Heavenly Table*. Doubleday, 2016.

---. *Knockemstiff*. Random House, 2008.

Donald Ray Pollock’s other two books are both worth mentioning, especially as they relate to *The Devil All the Time* and this thesis’s notion of regional authorship.

*Knockemstiff* is a short story cycle set largely in Meade, covering a time span from the 1960s (concurrent with *The Devil All the Time*) to the 1990s. When compared to *Devil*, Pollock’s short stories tend to be much less exaggerated; the subject matter is still often unpleasant, and the prose style is stark, but they never reach the levels of violence and depravity of *Devil*. *Knockemstiff* is also much less Southern than its follow-up novel, with many of the stories feeling as though they could take place in any small town in America. However, although its lack of Southern character and form as short story cycle mean that *Knockemstiff* is poorly suited for this thesis, I will argue that of Pollock’s three books, this first collection of shorter works is his best.

*The Heavenly Table* is much more recent, and a step down in quality from

Pollock's two previous books. It is a work of historical fiction that alternates between the Jewett Brothers, a trio of bank-robbing brothers running wild in the South, and a bloated cast of townsfolk in Meade circa World War I. In its weakest sections, *The Heavenly Table* is little more than a series of short anecdotes describing (in wholly unnecessary detail) the lives of characters who only figure into a single act of violence committed in a single chapter. Although not a "bad" book, it is overstuffed, and a shift away from the tighter focus of Pollock's first two books. What makes *The Heavenly Table* noteworthy, however, is that it, too, is a work written in a regionally ambiguous style. Much of this novel is set on the border of Alabama and Georgia – the "real" South – but these portions deal with horseback bandits and stakeouts in the wilderness. In other words, the Southern parts of *The Heavenly Table* are self-consciously written in imitation of dime novel Westerns, the sorts of stories that usually take place in Texas and other points westward. This suggests that Pollock is a writer who enjoys playing with regional boundaries.

Snodgrass, Mary Ellen. *Encyclopedia of Southern Literature*. ABC-CLIO, 1997.

Something of a counterpart to the *Companion to Southern Literature*, Snodgrass's *Encyclopedia* goes into much greater detail on a smaller number of topics. The work contains detailed biographies of eight important Southern writers and lengthy analyses of several important works, as well as timelines of important publications and historical events. The book also contains a truly impressive bibliography of important works and authors, perhaps the most comprehensive listing of worthy Southern writing I have ever seen.