Tanfer Emin Tunç

Still in Print: The Southern Novel Today. Jan Norby Gretlund (ed.). Columbia, SC: U. of South Carolina Press, 2010. p/bk 304 pp. ISBN: 978-1-57003-943-0. Price $29.95.

This collection of essays, *Still in Print: The Southern Novel Today,* was formulated around a rather bold premise: to introduce scholars interested in southern literature to specific novels published between 1997 and 2009 with the goal of ensuring that they remain in print. As editor Jan Nordby Gretlund indicates: "The fact is that many southern novels are published every year, but for the most part their shelf life is unreasonably short. Often a new novel — even an excellent one — appears in print, drops out of sight immediately, and is not heard about again. This is why my fellow critics and I have decided to stick our necks out and pronounce. We feel an urge to tell you about new novels that deserve to be kept in print" (vi). Gretlund's critics include eighteen experienced scholars of literature of the American South. Most of them are southerners, but six are Europeans. Thus this volume also functions as a transnational collection that introduces Americanists to the range of research being conducted on contemporary southern literature beyond the borders of America. Self-admitted admirers of the great writers of the South, the contributors are experts on classic southern writers such as Edgar Allan Poe, Mark Twain, Zora Neale Hurston, William Faulkner, Eudora Welty, Richard Wright, Flannery O'Connor, Walker Percy, Madison Jones, Alice Walker and Lee Smith (Gretlund himself is a Welty and O'Connor scholar). In this collection, however, these critics go beyond the universally accepted and undisputed works of the southern literary canon to evaluate eighteen contemporary novels which they maintain are worth reading and worthy of our attention.

The eighteen novels examined in this collection are grouped into four categories — "A Sense of History," "A Sense of Place," "A Sense of Humor," and a "Sense of Malaise." The novelists themselves include those who are actually from the South and those who write about the South but are not native southerners. The section entitled "A Sense of History" encompasses novels such as Charles Frazier's *Cold Mountain,* Josephine Humphreys' *Nowhere Else on Earth,* Kaye Gibbons' *On the Occasion of My Last Afternoon,* Pam Durban's *So Far Back,* and Percival Everett's *Erasure.*

It deals with the painful legacy of the southern past, with special attention paid to issues of race, gender, prejudice, and justice, especially in the years immediately before and after the Civil War. The second topic, "A Sense of Place," grapples with just that — the southern landscape and geography, and the ways in which family and community are indelible parts of southern identity. It spans authors and works such as Steve Yarbrough's *The Oxygen Man,* Larry Brown's *Fay,* Chris Offutt's *The Good Brother,* Barry Hannah's *Yonder Stands Your Orphan,* and James Lee Burke's *Crusader's Cross.* The following section, "A Sense of Humor," emphasizes the wit of southern customs and speech, as well as humor as a healing mechanism in southern society. It incorporates George Singleton's *Work Shirts for Mad Men,* Clyde Edgerton's *The Bible Salesman,* James Wilcox's *Heavenly Days,* Donald Harington's *Enduring,* and Lewis Nordan's *Lightning Song.* Last but not least, the final and shortest section, "Sense of Malaise," explores classic motifs of southern literature — such as loss, despair, alienation, humanity, homelessness, and death — with a more contemporary twist through novels like Ron Rash's *One Foot in Eden,* Richard Ford's *The Lay of the Land,* and Cormac McCarthy's *The Road.* While the editor undoubtedly grouped these diverse novels into four categories for organizational purposes, at times the sections seem rather contrived as certain topics such as political and religious fundamentalism; kinship and community relationships; identity in marriage; sex, violence and crime; alcoholism; the rural versus the urban South; and social initiation transgress these arbitrary boundaries and can be found throughout the collection.

Although refreshing and insightful in its approach and generally delivering on its promise of familiarizing readers with new visions of the contemporary American South, this collection is haunted by two common specters: sex and race. While the novels themselves deal with these topics quite lucidly, unfortunately the chosen authors, as well as the critics themselves, are overwhelmingly male (with only three female novelists and four female critics); overwhelmingly white (the only African American author, for example, is Percival Everett); and overwhelmingly mainstream (the majority of the novelists are university professors over the age of sixty), thus reproducing, reasserting and reifying many of the same tropes which contemporary novelists and critics have attempted to disassemble and deconstruct. Gretlund attempts to explain this away by maintaining that "just who the best critics [and writers] are varies substantially from decade

to decade; in the late 1980s and early 1990s, women dominated both as novelists and excellent critics. Now, at the end of the first decade after 2000, men clearly dominate both as novelists and critics [...] I know that this will probably change again in a few years" (viii). This rather subjective and dissatisfying rationalization leaves one with the distinct impression that more effort could have been made towards ensuring diversity, especially given the South's track record on matters concerning gender and race.

With its limitations in mind, *Still in Print: The Southern Novel Today* can and should be used within the classroom setting. The volume is best suited for graduate courses in contemporary American literature or southern literature -- especially courses designed around the collection's themes and featured authors. Specific essays can also be extracted and used in literature and literary theory courses, as well as in courses on southern culture. Moreover, the editorial introduction, which provides a succinct overview and history of contemporary southern literature, and the detailed author biographies and bibliographies included in each chapter, can also serve as important resources for further research, especially for those interested in the authors and novels covered by the collection.

Tanfer Emin Tunç
Hacettepe University