

New Voices of the American South

BY ELIZABETH GONZALEZ JAMES



Relative to its geographic size, the South occupies an out-sized space in the American literary imagination: William Faulkner, Flannery O'Connor, Walker Percy, Eudora Welty, and others remain some of America's most celebrated authors. Faulkner, in particular, has inspired more scholarship than almost any other writer since Shakespeare.

Discussions of Southern literature and its creepy cousin, Southern Gothic, tend to focus on the weight of history on Southern writers and their characters. As Faulkner famously said, "The past is never dead. It's not even past." Throughout classic Southern fiction, characters live alongside the figurative ghosts of the past: the loss of family fortune in Flannery O'Connor's short story "Everything That Rises Must Converge," the humiliation of the South following the Civil War in Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936), or the legacy of slavery and institutionalized racism in Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960). This acute awareness of history often crushes characters. The protagonist of Barry Hannah's hilarious *Geronimo Rex* (1972) becomes

convinced he is the reincarnation of Geronimo and must seek vengeance for the murder of Medgar Evers. Speaking about the South's preoccupation with history, Hannah said, "All the generations of wonderful dead guys behind us. All the Confederate dead and the Union dead planted in the soil near us. All of Faulkner the great. Christ, there's barely room for the living down here" (*Boomerang*, 1991).

But there is, of course, plenty of room for the living—in particular, contemporary writers of the South. New voices are simultaneously reporting on the South as it exists today and shaping how it will be inscribed for generations to come.

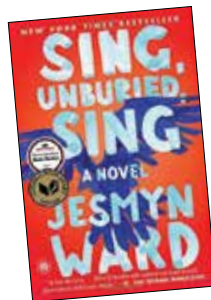
Today, as in the past, there are many Souths. Is the South of the 21st century the lawless Ozarks of Daniel Woodrell's reckoning, a writer described as the "battle hardened bard of meth country" (*Esquire*)? Or is it a land of surrealist satire, where a taxidermist gets a new brain, courtesy of shady scientists, as in Julia Elliott's *The New and Improved Romie Futch* (2015)? Or is it the modern-

day Atlanta of Tayari Jones’s novels, populated by African American middle-class professionals for whom grappling with racial identity is no longer part of the equation? The South is all these things, and more: a kaleidoscope of people and experiences that mirrors America as a whole. Hurricane Katrina figures in several novels, underscoring the devastation of the storm both to physical property and the mind. We present a selection of the new voices of the South. Their writing, much of which takes place in the South, is both familiar and unexpected, hideous and hilarious, and it pays homage to the past while simultaneously burning it to the ground.

William Faulkner would be proud.

JESMYN WARD (1977–)

Born in DeLisle, Mississippi, Jesmyn Ward has won two National Book Awards—for *Salvage the Bones* (2011) and *Sing, Unburied, Sing* (2017)—as well as a MacArthur Genius Grant. Writing from her experience of growing up poor and black in coastal Mississippi, her first novel, *Where the Line Bleeds* (2005), describes the struggles of a family living along the rural Gulf Coast. Following that book, Ward’s family lost everything in Hurricane Katrina, an experience that informs *Salvage the Bones*. Set during and immediately after Katrina, this novel follows a working-class Mississippi family as they prepare for the worst and then sift through what remains after the devastating storm. In her memoir, *Men We Reaped* (2013), Ward writes about her brother’s tragic death and the deaths of four other young men in DeLisle over the course of a few years. *Sing, Unburied, Sing* uses multiple narrators and a wide lens to tell the story of a mother driving with her children to pick up their father from prison. Compared to Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987) and George Saunders’s *Lincoln in the Bardo* (2017), *Sing, Unburied, Sing* has already been declared a Southern Gothic classic.



BRAD WATSON (1955–)

Another Mississippian, Brad Watson is concerned with accurate portrayals of real Southerners: “For all the ways [the South] is struggling and, yes, deficient, or failing, flailing, it is also a place full of wonderful people” (*Salon*). The *New York Times* described his first book, the short story collection *Last Days of the Dog-Men* (1996), as “near-perfect.” *The Heaven of Mercury* (2002) “offers us necrophilia, murder, a talking cat, strange goings-on with an excited human heart and a number of ghostly apparitions” (*Guardian*). And yet

it is a relatable, deeply human, and optimistic novel with a powerful and transcendent conclusion. The beings in the short story volume *Aliens in the Prime of Their Lives* (2010) are from this planet but move through life isolated and delusional. *Miss Jane* (2016) is a very personal novel, based on his own mysterious great-aunt, a woman born with a peculiar defect. Watson contains a whole life in his novel, starting with Jane’s conception, and the result is a tender and gorgeous story that reminds us “that we are each of us limited” (*New York Times*).



TAYARI JONES (1970–)

Tayari Jones hails from Atlanta, and the city she presents is one that simultaneously has shed the mantle of history and, in other ways, still carries the legacy of slavery and the Civil War. Her first novel, *Leaving Atlanta* (2002), was inspired by her own childhood and a series of unsolved murders of African American children in the 1970s. Her second book, *The Untelling* (2005), follows a woman who is haunted by the tragic deaths of her father and younger sister and who receives the devastating news that she will never be able to have children herself. *Silver Sparrow* (2011) starts with the iconic line, “My father, James Witherspoon, is a bigamist,” and follows two half-sisters and the secrets that knit them together. Her latest novel, *An American Marriage* (2018), an Oprah’s Book Club Selection, tells the story of newlyweds, Celestial and Roy, whose lives are ripped apart when Roy is accused and imprisoned for a crime he didn’t commit. In her effusive praise for Jones’s latest novel, Oprah Winfrey said, “It’s among Tayari’s many gifts that she can touch us soul to soul with her words.”



JOHN GREGORY BROWN (1960–)

John Gregory Brown was born and raised in New Orleans, the epicenter of Southern Gothic. And while the darkness and mystery of the Big Easy inform his work, he eschews the grotesque imagery and violence of many Southern Gothic novels for a more introspective and delicate approach. *Decorations in a Ruined Cemetery* (1994) begins with the collapse of the Lake Pontchartrain Causeway and leads to the unraveling of secrets in a family built on deceit. In *The Wrecked, Blessed Body of Shelton Lafleur* (1996), Brown returns to New Orleans to tell the story of Shelton

Laffeur, a black child adopted by a wealthy white family during the Depression. In a dark and intensely psychological look at the time John James Audubon spent in New Orleans, *Audubon's Watch* (2001) focuses on the famed naturalist. In Brown's most recent novel, *A Thousand Miles from Nowhere* (2016), a man fleeing Hurricane Katrina finds solace in an epic poem and decides to return to his hometown to right some wrongs. Beautiful and restorative, the novel also casts a sharp eye on some strange people. "Flannery O'Connor would recognize a kindred spirit in these characters. And approve" (*Chapter 16*).

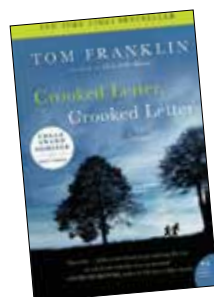


sesses the family's home. "Serious as a snakebite" and "rendered in a kind of ramshackle, beautiful realism" (*New York Times*), it is book whose visceral imagery will not be easily forgotten. In *Tomato Red* (1998), the dreams of cranked-out burglars and con artists are as tantalizing as they are impossible. The Ozarks feature again in *The Death of Sweet Mister* (2001), a bildungsroman about a 13-year-old boy who lives with his violent stepfather and drunken mother in a graveyard. Woodrell's *Bayou Trilogy* (2011) is a collection of three early novels about Louisiana Detective Rene Shade, who is perpetually torn between his duty to the law and his family and friends who prefer to break it. Writer Dennis Lehane, no stranger to darkness himself, says of Woodrell: "He writes high Greek tragedy about low people."



TOM FRANKLIN (1963–)

Franklin, often characterized as a crime writer, was born in Dickinson, Alabama, not far from where Harper Lee grew up. *Poachers* (1999), a collection of short stories, offers honest takes on impoverished lives. The historical thriller *Hell at the Breach* (2003) features the brief Mitcham Beat War that took place in Alabama in the 1890s and pitted a small pocket of disgruntled farmers against the businessmen who set the cotton prices. *Smonk* (2006) is "a nonstop blood-orgy of brutality and destruction" (*Publishers Weekly*) that will appeal to fans of Cormac McCarthy's savage classic, *Blood Meridian* (1985). In 1911, E. O. Smonk is brought to trial for murder and rape and the general terrorizing of the town of Old Texas, Alabama, but his cold-blooded gang has other plans. In *Crooked Letter*, *Crooked Letter* (2010), Franklin moves to Mississippi. "Scary Larry" is a white man and a suspect in the disappearance of two girls, and his only hope of exoneration lies in an African American constable. The novel is "sweltering with deep Southern menace, plotted with elegance and written in a melancholy tone that calls up echoes of Tennessee Williams at his most regretful, Southern best" (*Australian*).



JULIA ELLIOTT (1972–)

Upon the release of her debut story collection, *The Wilds* (2014), the *New York Times* dubbed Julia Elliott the "Flannery O'Connor for the data-mining age." Southern Gothic meets dystopian fantasy, science fiction, and the odd fairy tale in stories that mostly focus on characters' attempts to control the natural world. In one tale, a woman at a luxury spa undergoes horrifying therapies to stay young; in another, Paleo Diet enthusiasts decide to replicate not only caveman eating habits but other aspects of the Neanderthal lifestyle, as well. Elliott's stories are "like objects in a curiosities shop: grotesque, elegant, and fascinating" (*The Rumpus*). In *The New and Improved Romie Futch* (2015), Elliott paints a humorous and rollicking portrait of antihero Romie Futch, a down-and-out taxidermist who volunteers to become a research subject for the Center for Cybernetic Neuroscience. Futch, who suddenly finds himself intelligent and possessing an enviable vocabulary, begins an Ahab-like pursuit of the elusive Hogzilla for his taxidermy business. Compared to John Kennedy Toole and Phillip K. Dick, Elliott is sure to be a resonant voice throughout her career.



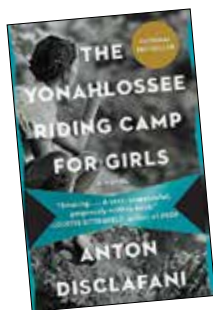
DANIEL WOODRELL (1953–)

Most of Daniel Woodrell's nine novels and one story collection are set in the Missouri Ozarks. He is best known for *Winter's Bone*, his 2006 work of "country noir"—a term he coined to describe his own work. *Winter's Bone*, and the movie of the same name, follows Ree, 16, who has a week to find her meth-cooking father before the county repos-

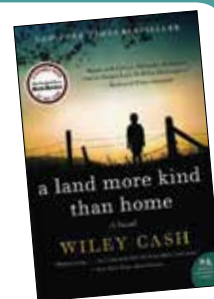
ANTON DISCLAFANI (1982–)

The Yonahlossee Riding Camp for Girls (2013) is "a painstakingly constructed ode to a young girl's sexual awakening. This is perhaps one of the classier books a young teen would hide under her covers to read with a flashlight" (NPR). Part young adult novel and part historical romance, the story

takes place in 1930 and follows Thea, 15, who has been expelled for mysterious reasons from her home in Florida and sent to a riding camp high in the Blue Ridge Mountains. DiScalfani's follow-up, *The After Party* (2016), also takes place in the past, this time in 1950s Houston, and centers on two women at the epicenter of the socialite scene and their fraught friendship. It is a stirring portrait of two women and two different modes of coping with the constraints of living in a man's world.

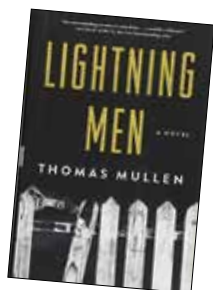


again narrate *This Dark Road to Mercy* (2014), described as a “feel-good thriller,” as it follows a young girl named Easter after her mother dies from a drug overdose. Cash's most recent book, *The Last Ballad* (2017), is the writer's first foray into historical fiction. Ella May Wiggins, a textile mill worker in 1929, became an unwitting star of the labor movement when she began singing songs she'd written at labor meetings. *The Last Ballad* tells her story and her fight to ensure African Americans were included in organized labor.



THOMAS MULLEN (1974–)

Although Thomas Mullen was not born in the South and has only lived in Atlanta for a few years, he won the distinguished Townsend Prize awarded to Georgia's greatest writers and has been claimed by the Southern canon. *The Last Town on Earth* (2006) focuses on the devastating 1918 Spanish Flu epidemic and a town in Washington State that votes to quarantine itself. *The Many Deaths of the Firefly Brothers* (2010) is set during the Depression, when bank robbers could be worshipped by the public for fighting back against a corrupt system. *The Revisionists* (2011), a science fiction thriller, features a hit man from the future tasked with stopping other time travelers from rewriting history. *Darktown* (2015)—an NPR Book of the Year—centers on the forced integration of the Atlanta Police Department in 1948, a time when an estimated one in four officers were Ku Klux Klan members. *Lightning Men* (2017), a stand-alone sequel, picks up the story in the early 1950s, when a housing shortage in Atlanta forced the integration of previously white-only neighborhoods. Mullen's writing “holds up a mirror to the vestiges of discrimination that remain alive and well today. [Reading it allows you] “to understand the past, but more importantly to understand the present” (*Huffington Post*).



T. GERONIMO JOHNSON

Born and raised in New Orleans, T. Geronimo Johnson currently lives in Berkeley, California, a change that has perhaps allowed him to see life from two perspectives. *Hold It 'Til It Hurts* (2012) gives us two brothers, Achilles and Troy, veterans whose adoptive father has recently died. Following the funeral, they are given sealed envelopes with information about their birth parents. Troy opens his envelope and immediately leaves, and Achilles vows to find his brother and bring him back. His journey takes him to pre-Katrina New Orleans and lays bare a poignant story of a veteran returning to civilian life. “[It] is a novel that defies categorization ... filled with trenchant observations and unafraid of tenderness” (*San Francisco Chronicle*). *Welcome to Braggsville* (2015) could only have been written in the current decade: a white teenager from small-town Georgia moves to Berkeley and horrifies his classmates when he casually mentions that his hometown stages Civil War reenactments that celebrate the Confederacy. Four classmates decide to travel to Georgia to right this wrong. “No main character here leaves a cross-cultural encounter caricatured. But no one leaves unscathed” (*New York Times*).



WILEY CASH (1977–)

Cash's debut novel, *A Land More Kind Than Home* (2012), seems ripped from the headlines: a mute child is killed during a shadowy, snake-handling religious ceremony in North Carolina, and a small town plunges into disarray following the investigation. Told from multiple perspectives and using a shifting timeframe, Cash draws a thoughtful portrait of Southern life and the power of belief. Several characters

Further Reading

- THE DOG OF THE SOUTH** | CHARLES PORTIS (1979)
- DIRTY WORK** | LARRY BROWN (1989)
- MIDNIGHT IN THE GARDEN OF GOOD AND EVIL** | JOHN BERENDT (1994)
- MRS. HOLLINGSWORTH'S MEN** | PADGETT POWELL (2000)
- THE LAST GIRLS** | LEE SMITH (2001)
- ONE MORE RIVER** | MARY GLICKMAN (2011)
- THE COVE** | RON RASH (2012)
- SOIL** | JAMIE KORNEGAY (2015)
- LITTLE SISTER DEATH** | WILLIAM GAY (2015)
- LISTEN TO ME** | HANNAH PITTARD (2016)
- A WIFE OF NOBLE CHARACTER** | YVONNE GEORGINA PUIG (2016)
- OVER THE PLAIN HOUSES** | JULIA FRANKS (2016) ■