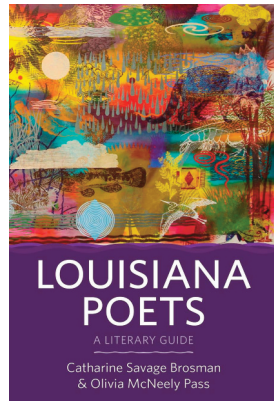


# Reviews

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***Louisiana Poets: A Literary Guide.***  
By Catharine Savage Brosman and  
Olivia McNeely Pass. (Jackson:  
University Press of Mississippi,  
2019. Pp. xiii + 256, preface, ac-  
knowledgments, appendix: addi-  
tional poets, selected bibliography,  
index. \$28.00, hardback)

Through stylized, oneiric images of bayou flora and fauna, an embellished spectrum of morning light, and abounding representations of water to suggest the state's élan vital, Francis X. Pavy's cover illustration, *Third Coast Sunrise*, foreshadows frequent subject matter of writers treated in *Louisiana Poets*. To outsiders and natives alike, the state may seem more an enclave than a state within the union; thus in their introduction to the volume, authors Catharine Savage Brosman and Olivia McNeely Pass state: "Similarities with distant peoples and their products cannot disguise local peculiarities of land, behavior, and achievements. In the twenty-first century, thoughtful observers, including poets examined in this study, continue to identify the determinative effects of place" (p. 7). While emphases on the state's singularity of culture and landscape may be a remarkable thread uniting the forty-one writers discussed in *Louisiana Poets*, such particulars are not listed among criteria for inclusion. According to the book's preface, "scope, abundance, and excellence of a poet's work, its critical recep-



tion, and the local and national standing of writer and work" were determining factors during selection (p. ix), which are theoretically commendable guidelines, especially when compared with cliquish policies for bestowing literary attention nowadays. However, Brosman and Pass offer the noteworthy caveat that "all assessments derive ultimately from aesthetic preferences" (p. x).

*Louisiana Poets'* introduction intends to substantiate poetry's importance to society, in part by mentioning the art form's mass, even if currently aberrant appeal, evidenced by the confounding choice of Bob Dylan as the 2016 Nobel laureate in literature—perhaps as a sign that the times for poetry are indeed a-changin'. But Brosman and Pass follow a more traversed route for both their scholarly approach and selection process. That is to say, all of the writers discussed in the book have traditionally published collections. None of them is primarily a graffitist, rapper, or performance poet, although two beat-influenced writers, Andrei Codrescu and Bob Kaufman, are treated in the study. Frequently, Brosman and Pass present Louisiana poets in the context of a global pantheon by referencing among others, Aristotle, Marcel Proust, and poets such as George Byron, and Li Po, hence identifying a cosmopolitan presence which the book's jacket art does not relate. Whether or not one chooses to invoke the *Holy Sonnets*, E. E. Cummings's "anyone lived in a pretty how town," or other such masterly poems to dispute Dave Smith's claim that "good poetry is inevitably regional" (p. 8), *Louisiana Poets'* assertion that "minds are shaped by surroundings" (p. 7) is relatively defensible, given the writers being examined. Additionally, the introduction's designation, history, and characteristics of three literary centers within the state are a useful resource for considering the guiding aesthetic of each poet.

While an alphabetical arrangement of a century's worth of writers may dissuade one from supposing poets' importance according to their placement, the book's order, at times, may also feel jolting in such direct jumps as those from the elegant examples of wordsmithery by Darrell Bourque and Brosman, herself one of the poets reportedly examined by Pass, to the "bold irreverence" of Codrescu (p. 43). The articles usually begin by providing an introduction to the poet being discussed via birthdate, educational background, and some relevant connection to Louisiana. Although space allocated for discussions may range from slightly more than two pages in the case of Sybil Kein to nearly ten pages for Yusef Komunyakaa, the length of most of the essays is in the median of these extremes. And even though its preface says the book's "emphasis is generally on achievement, not failings" (p. x), the text does not read like a lovefest of cronyism. "Readers may be uneasy with metaphors that shift, or are stretched too far without reward, or appear arbitrary," we are told in reference to Ralph Adamo, the first poet discussed (p. 17). To not come on as arbitrary themselves, as a rule, Brosman and Pass buttress their judgments by citing representative lines from a poet's oeuvre. As evidence of "rhythm" and "cultivated metaphors" not being among Adamo's strengths, a passage from his "Hanoi Rose" I is offered: "That clear note gone. / . . . / They wanting to curl up dead"; "Eyes and organs salt" (p. 17).

Whereas *Louisiana Poets* is not meant to be a treatise on form, poets' techniques, whether successful or flawed, are commonly addressed. For example, regarding Alvin Aubert, his audience is forewarned, "run-on sentences or fragments in poems entirely without punctuation invite misunderstandings or require multiple readings" (p. 21). Yet enticements to become familiar with poets included in the volume are plentiful. From Bourque's extraordinary lines, "whatever mystery or mysteries / might fall like fire flowers / from the heavens tomorrow" (p. 31), excerpted from his "Buying a *Botte* of

Roses in Antibes on the Day before Pentecost," to the delightfully humorous epitaph in Albert Belisle Davis's "Autry Cemetery," admonishing us, "Drop your hats to the grass / and dance, sing over me: / Down to the last, she soaped her own ass! / For the little strengths, sing: Glory Be!" (p. 63), to the curiously grotesque catharses of Ava Leavell Haymon, there is a fruitful introduction for varied poetic tastes.

Aside from oftentimes divergent aesthetics, aspects of community are obvious throughout Brosman and Pass's *Guide*—shown as personal bonds between fellow bayou writers and peculiar preoccupations with Katrina, voodoo, and Catholicism. Writers such as Robert Penn Warren and Tennessee Williams, who have comparatively tenuous ties to the Pelican State, are viewed with respect to significant literary influences upon them during their sojourns. On the whole, analyses in *Louisiana Poets* seems evenhanded. However, the text is not without its share of subtly stated yet contentious opinions, and neither is it timorous about opposing sacred cows of criticism, evidenced by the implication that Harold Bloom's effusive praise for Martha Serpas, one of the poets discussed, is disingenuous. Sometimes poets' perception of their own work is contended by Brosman or Pass, as when Dave Smith says, "I want every poem to be clear, sonically charged, immediate . . . and resonant, with some meaning available to the interested reader," the counter response is, "yet his verse, somewhat notational, resists quick grasp, and images are frequently cryptic or incongruous" (p. 186).

Even in this age of quick electronic access, accompanying photographs of each poet included would have been welcomed, though the volume's production no doubt more costly. Noticeably missing from the study are John Wood, director of the creative writing program at McNeese State University for more than two decades, and a two-time recipient of the Iowa Poetry Prize, and also Reggie Scott Young, a widely published poet and prose writer who taught at the University of Louisiana at

Lafayette for fourteen years. Brosman and Pass do, however, include a useful appendix with notes about additional poets affiliated with the state but not recognized in the principal text. Tinged throughout with the eloquent style and rich sensibilities of scholarship from eras past, to be sure, *Louisiana Poets* is not light reading, but well worth following its many interesting paths.

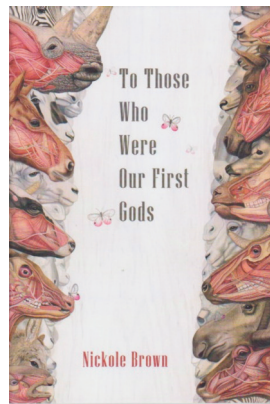
--Claude Wilkinson



***To Those Who Were Our First Gods.* Nickole Brown. (Studio City, California: Rattle Foundation, 2018. Pp. 46, acknowledgments. \$6.00, paper)**

More than any collection since Maxine Kumin's *Nurture*, Nickole Brown's *To Those Who Were Our First Gods* offers intimate and loving portrayals of the fauna, both wild and domestic, that inhabit our daily lives and yet often elude our attention. Her idiom is at once reverent and playful, sacred and profane, as she vividly depicts the existence of creatures familiar to those raised in the Mississippi Delta as well as those who people the Serengeti Plain of Africa.

Brown's first poem, "A Prayer to Talk to Animals," echoes in an ostensibly iconoclastic tone Walt Whitman's "I Think I Could Turn and Live with the Animals." She opens with a frolicsome jab at male stereotypes from popular culture: "Lord, I ain't asking to be the Beastmaster, / gym-ripped in a jungle loincloth" (p. 9).



Her speaker invokes the deity in colloquial terms, and disavows any aspirations to become a brute whose physique is painstakingly sculpted or "gym-ripped," albeit girded with a leopard-skin breechclout. But neither does the poet spare women with pretensions all their own, citing "the expensive vet / down the street, that stethoscoped red-head, / her diamond ring big as a Cracker Jack toy" (9). The veterinarian's precious stone is no dilute amethyst, but a diamond of the first water, although so outsized and tacky as to make wearer ridiculous. Brown yearns to engage the ring-tailed scrapper that lurks in starlit creek-beds and cracks the brittle carapaces of crawfish, but also forages from the leftovers of her kitchen table: "If you will, Lord, make me the teeth / hot in the mouth of a raccoon scraping / the junk I scraped from last night's plates" (9). She desires nothing less than a primal and pre-articulate communion that humankind forsook millennia ago: "I want to open / my mouth and sound a language / that calls all language home" (9).

Brown's title poem is vituperative and scorns the Biblical archetype of the male who possesses superhuman strength: "Sampson, I admit it: I flirted with you / in Sunday School, crayoned tan your He-Man pecs" (p. 16). She rails at the rock-ribbed hero with bulging biceps who literally brought down the house in Dagon's temple and deplores the cunning that tied firebrands to the tails of "300 fox[es]" and unkenneled them "screaming to burn / grain fields and olive groves, to / burn alive" (p. 17). She discovered in her youth a similar wanton cruelty, remembering how neighborhood boys inserted firecrackers into the anus of a poodle and her aunt's lame apologia on their behalf: "*Don't mind them boys; they're just / proving themselves*" (p. 17). Brown takes solace in her recollection of a friendless boy "with nothing to prove," who kept in the sleeve of his denim jacket, "a foundling / squirrel, nursed it pan-warm milk / with a syringe" (p. 17). Moreover, the poet recalls the shameful opprobrium he had to endure: "That little boy's name was Pete,

/ but everyone called him / *faggot*" (p. 17).

In the third section of "To Those Who Were Our First Gods: An Offering," Brown continues to interrogate her dubious protagonist in terms of his remorseless exploits: "is it really a miracle / to pry open the proud mouth of a lion and rip / apart his face?" (p. 18). She sees Samson as a vainglorious lout who returns to the lion's carcass merely "to toy with the trophy / of his corpse" and having discovered that the chest cavity of the great cat is charged with sweetness he casually partakes of the godhead: "the crust of dead / bees and their honey in your beard" (p. 18). She indicts the "action-figure lackey" as one who has come to slay "those beasts who were our first / gods—those forms we used to paint / on cave walls" (p. 18). The poet's allusion to the Lascaux caves in the Dordogne region of France that were set blazing with rich pigment by a prehistoric shaman is unmistakable. Moreover, she revels in the prospect of seeing Samson's abundant locks falling in soft ringlets from his conniving "girl-friend's shears" only to become "a spun-gold currency / flown among crows," a fleece "lining every hollow, warming / a throne of owls" (p. 19). Lest we forget, the owl is Athena's totem spirit that sits hooded against the frost and picks the bones of careless rodents.

In "Mercy" Brown's every passage amounts to an earnest imploration that various animals vocalize our collective lot in age when we all hover on the brink of extinction. Unlike the Old Testament Adam, she does not arrogate to herself the nominative properties of language, but in her most compelling stanzas describes the distinctive physical attributes of various species and leaves it to her auditor give each a name. It is a brilliant rhetorical strategy that begs reader participation in the most emphatic way. The poet's mode is one of direct address when she describes a giraffe: "Yes, you: spotted neck stretched / towards what's left of your acacia leaves, neck as long as / a man's grave is deep" (40). She invariably follows with a one syllable refrain: "Speak." Brown's describes another in-

habitant of the African savanna in more somber terms: "Oh, and you. You with your thick skull blown apart / with a high caliber swagger" (p. 41). She deplores in an agonizing tableau the casual slaughter of the elephant by poachers who traffic in ivory:

once shot how you just stood there  
confused, already dead but refusing to fall  
until your knees buckled, and the rest of  
you slumped,  
and the great pillars of your tusks were  
chain-sawed from your face (p. 41).

Not even W. S. Merwin's "For a Coming Extinction" so vividly urges the fate of an endangered species as a warning.

But Brown also includes creatures that dwell in the heart of the Mississippi Delta—"you birds and cicadas, all you flying, leaping, vine-grabbing / canopy beings, all you furred and quilled things too"—nor does she exempt women from company of those feckless souls who kill indiscriminately (42). She relates how a harmless blacksnake, sun-drugged on asphalt and dreaming of voles, has its life crushed out by an act feminine caprice: "a memory gone when the woman / runs over you—then twice again, just to be sure. I need you / to speak. Speak."

However, *To Those Who Were Our First Gods* does contain poems in a lighter vein such as "The Scat of It" that mimics the New Orleans-born Louis Armstrong's syntax of scat: "The shit of it, the slick of it, the beetle's tumbling joy, / the bear's berry slush of it, the coyote's ghost-white / dry of it—undigested fur, nothing more" (p. 37). Similar lyric runs occur throughout "No Ark," dedicated to memory of the late Mary Oliver: "a street robin bopping its dingy breast among the crush / of lip-sticked filters and Coke cans" (p. 21). In short, it is virtually impossible in a review of this length to do justice to Nickole Brown's splendid new collection of poetry.

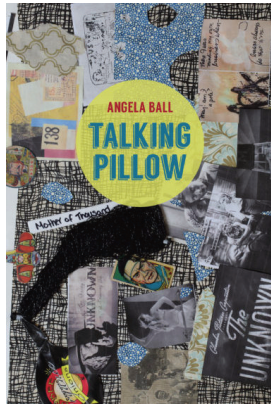
--Floyd Collins





***Talking Pillow.* By Angela Ball.  
(Pittsburgh: University of Pitts-  
burgh Press, November 2017. Pp.  
60. \$15.95, paper)**

*Talking Pillow*, by poet and University of Southern Mississippi professor Angela Ball, weaves deep mourning about the death of the poet's long-time partner into the themes of love, loss, death, and passion. It is a collection as intimate as a pillow talk or "as intimate as a dream," said David Lehman. Even the cover art, a collage made up of pieces of fabric, posters, cartoons, and photos by the poet may look like a pillowcase that seamlessly matches the book title.



*Talking Pillow* has three subtitled sections, "The Lady of the House," "FBI Story," and "Bicycle Story," each composed of fourteen poems. "The Last Toast," Ball's poem dedicated to Anna Akhmatova, functions like a poetic introduction. The first-person speaker, overlapped with the shadow of Akhmatova, invites the reader to "drink to the narrow window a face peers through at four a.m." This is the last toast to the self, the dead, the unknown, the poetic pillow talk that unlatches the gate of each section to read the intimate dream of the persona.

Section one looks into the self to reveal the persona's mindscape. Like Akhmatova, Ball presents an intensely personal voice that commemorates love, loss and agony and that sounds like her requiem for the dead or her painful remembrance of the moment of dying, as recounted through the use of flashbacks in "Elegy": "I was watching the movie Michael

chose for me, / *Scandal Sheet*, 1952, with Broderick Crawford and Donna Reed. / Michael was in the bathroom, place of danger. Was, / in fact, dying." At the end of the poem when the speaker realizes that she has to travel alone without Michael, her voice tells that she has to accept the fact of the death: "I travel, searching the perfect vacancy. / I have sent memories out ahead. They gleam. I have sent a knee." The inseparable oneness of the two persons in deep love makes the speaker imagine that she has sent both her memories and a knee. The knee, as a metonymy, vivifies the meaning implied in the word, so it becomes an inseparable part of the other person. Further, words effectively afford us an imaginative pleasure and allow our minds a sudden leap from one meaning to the other. The cabin named "Golden Memories" affords us a chance to leap for the double meaning indicated in the words: the sudden loss of the longtime partner and the happy moments spent together. Memories of Michael gleam again in "Spontaneous Autobiographical Revelation," which reveals a touching love of being "able to share with a man, a Michael, / the upstart mystery the messenger / placed in my hands."

The poet's voice very often carries a comical tone that subdues agonies, so in the title poem "Talking Pillow." The personified pillow acts like a counselor, saying: "Your last love was best. / He is gone. We bear / no responsibility / nor will we bear any / in future." Then it says again as if in a matter-of-fact tone: "This is a matter of fate." Life has to go on, to remain silent with the loss of love, to learn to cope with grief and leave it behind by conforming to what it is of life. There is loneliness in the poem, but there is also loneliness behind the words after the speaker tries to free herself from griefs and memories.

While the first section focuses on the inner feelings of the first-person speaker, the second section presents an observation of people and objects, and this observation is woven with a tone both humorous and sad, as in "Status":

A black enameled Singer

guarded the spinster's room.

Its painted garlands hinted  
the distant beauty of pianos.

Through threads of rain,  
a hearse passed, bearing its slanted S.

The spinsters lived in a row. We were not  
pretty. Our work was close,  
the day, a thread  
knotted at one end.

The poem presents an observation of a spinster, but this private person changes to spinsters and first-person plural ("we") to suggest the universality of a personal feeling. The status of the sewing machine juxtaposes with that of the spinsters, and the associative thinking of the image of the sewing machine with its guarding the spinster's room immediately brings to our mind a double meaning of a woman who spins and a woman who remains unmarried. Moreover, the color and garlands of the sewing machine associate "the distant beauty of pianos," and the word "Singer" itself evokes in the reader's mind both the brand name and the person who sings a sad song so that, in the mind's eye or in memories, the spinster's thread becomes threads of rain with a hearse passing through. The sudden leap from one image to the other through imagination makes sadness concrete and visual. On further examination, the interplay of double meaning and the function of associative thinking provoke an aesthetic appreciation of the poem, which concludes in an ironical voice that the work can be close, but the day is still a thread knotted at one end.

In addition, the connotation of "Status" becomes effective in view of other traits of the poem such as light humor, controlled emotion, and laconic expression through imagery, which demonstrate Ball's deftness in using simple words to convey not only the double meaning but the double feeling as well. Such deftness challenges a reader to play with imagination or

associative thinking in order to gain the deeper meaning. The poet's imaginative observation of small things and her bringing richness out of plainness do show that reading a good poem is a way to gain an aesthetic experience and appreciate the capacity of language. There is no doubt that "Status" heightens what is seen in the outer world to reveal what is seen in imagination. This process of beyondness shows a psychological or mental association. In other words, any art expression resorts to associative thinking for intelligent creativity, metaphysical impression beyond physical impression, and image beyond image or meaning beyond words.

"An Attempt" in section two is another poem as terse as "Status," characterized by a serious and ironic attitude toward life and relationship. It is like a piece of abstract art that attempts for deliberate obscurity and for creative thinking. Ball seems to obscure the meaning intentionally, but her purpose of obfuscation is a pre-warning or an admonition to a relationship between the two. This relationship, symbolized by an image in the first stanza, is like a dried bee that "tilted / onto one wing." The fate of the bee, described in the second stanza, suggests love in jeopardy: "Not long ago, a bloom / fastened its tongue, while its belly / tried unsuccessfully / to tip it backwards." So, the bee in dire straits serves symbolically as a lesson to learn by the two lovers whose relationship may not continue: "We mustn't touch— / anything without water / is without give." Therefore, the bee that dies and dries from feeding on pollen and nectar suggests that the two lovers should "not be closer."

Another stylistic trait used by Ball is her fresh metaphorical comparisons that multiply the sense appeal of poetry and her witty expressions that add emotional intensity to the ordinary statements to produce moments of surprise, exemplified by "The Woman on Mexico Street" in section three: hurricanes blow down "dogwoods full length / on the ground, blooming their funeral." Death and beauty are visualized in coexistence in an ironic but hu-

morous way, reinforcing what else is seen in the deathlike street deserted in the hurricane season, as described in the following two stanzas—

The street owns more dogs  
than people. The dogs and I don't recognize  
each another. They run, dragging  
invisible chains. I sit tight

with supplies of food  
and thoughts that come back  
like dogs. The bowl of dog food  
empties by morning. The bowl of thoughts,  
never.

—which symbolize both the physical and psychological landscapes that affect and reflect the woman's emotions. The image of the unchained dogs acts as a supporting role to offset the situation of the speaker. While dogs run about, the woman's thoughts come back to her. They are back for food; they are food for thought as well.

*Talking Pillow* is a collection of poems for thoughtful, creative, and empathic reading. It celebrates love, mourns death, and balances life and mind; it is a voice with human emotions; a voice crisscrossed with mysteries and stories; a voice enriched with comical, ironic, and humorous tones, a voice of reincarnation of the self through revelation and catharsis.

--John Zheng



***Come Again.* By Nate Powell.  
(Marietta, Georgia: Top Shelf  
Productions, 2018. Pp. 280, dedi-  
cation, thank you, about the  
author. \$24.99, hardcover)**

Nate Powell's newest solo project begins in darkness: a pitch-black page with a small illustration of a wooden gate leading into a cave, and a question scrawled in tiny hand-writing, "can you keep a secret?" After several more

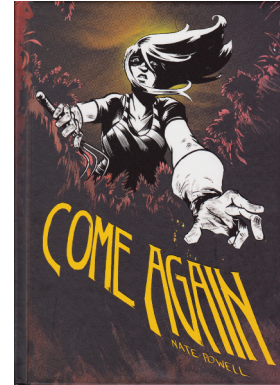
shadowy pages contemplate the fleeting life of a secret, the book launches into the narrative proper as the color scheme switches to various hues of salmon and brown, allowing light into the pages.

Before flashing back and forth, time-wise, the story opens in 1979 in the Arkansas Ozarks with the buzzing of electric clippers as a young boy attempts to remove lice from his mother's scalp, managing only to buzz-cut her left temple. The mother, Haluska, does not try to repair the damage, but calmly accepts the absurd new hairdo in true hippie spirit. Later, her son carves a reverse-mohawk into his own mane in an act of solidarity. But out in the remote community in which they live, no one gives their new appearances a second thought, except perhaps for a young girl at the market who thinks it's a new trend.

As anyone from Arkansas knows, the Ozarks of the '70s was a place where misfits could hide from society: to grow weed, to be openly racist, to work the magic of crystals and jewelry, to be left alone in one's own weirdness or paranoia, with the nearest fictional town, Hallelujah Springs, miles away. Powell taps into this world convincingly with characters and settings that remind us of that dark hillbilly world we all knew existed.

Gradually, the story moves into the central conflict: an illicit affair between Haluska and her married friend, Adrian, which they conduct in a cave. They attempt to hide the entrance with dirt and branches each time they depart, but there are young boys in the vicinity and a secret cave draws them in like a magnet.

The affair itself manages to last a number of years despite the odds. Haluska has a son, Jacob, but is not married to the father, Gus. Adrian and his wife have a son named Shane.



While they occasionally touch hands in public when they think no one is looking, Haluska and Adrian primarily rendezvous in the cave which is large and gives way into further unexplored tunnels. The cave becomes the extended metaphor of the book: a place where secrets can thrive, but also the place that unexpectedly swallows up Shane, along with the collective memory of the community. For when Shane goes missing, his memory seems to fade rapidly in the minds of nearly everyone except Haluska who understands that her own secret has brought all of this on, like a curse.

Powell gained a national reputation as a collaborator of historical non-fiction. He won a National Book Award for illustrating Congressman John Lewis's (written with Andrew Aydin) powerful trilogy about the Civil Rights movement, *March*. And his most recent foray into Little Rock-based true crime, *Two Dead*, with journalist Van Jensen, is also receiving much well-earned attention.

However, he is quite good on his own. 2008's *Swallow Me Whole* won a coveted Eisner Award for Best Graphic Novel, and *Come Again* was nominated in the categories of Best Writer/Artist and Best Graphic Album—New.

One admirable trait of Powell's writing is his confidence in letting the story unfold without explanation. The reader is free to interpret a story that is neither tidy nor predictable in any way: words are carried off into the air, both visually and audibly, characters are often inarticulate and clumsy, much of the book has a dreamy cave-like feel to it.

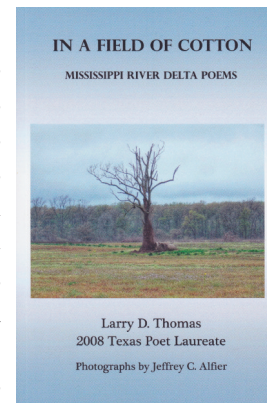
For the novice, this might prove to be a difficult first graphic novel to explore, but for the seasoned reader, every page is a delight as the words and shadings swirl around the pages to create a highly imaginative work grounded in basic human emotions and interactions. It is about as close to watching a movie in the dark as a book can get.

--Marck L. Beggs



***In A Field Of Cotton.* Larry D. Thomas. Photographs by Jeffrey C. Alfier (Redondo Beach, California: Blue Horse Press, 2019. Pp. 64, preface, acknowledgments, appendix, about the author, about the photographer. \$14.00, paper)**

Larry D. Thomas is a former Texas Poet Laureate with family ties to the Mississippi River Delta. In the introduction to this collection, he describes his grandparents' lives as sharecroppers and his parents' experiences picking cotton and struggling for economic stability. The Delta has fascinated Thomas from his early days, and he explores it richly in this chapbook of poems, accompanied by beautiful photos of Delta life by Jeffrey C. Alfier.



The book begins with "Chilly in the Silvery Fog," in which the title serves as a first line, drawing the reader into the narrative immediately. Thomas introduces some of the themes that intrigue him—such as the African cultural roots of voodoo, and of course the Mississippi river itself, which he describes as, "the giant brown python . . . sluicing toward the Gulf" (lines 20-21 p. 1).

Delta imagery litters the pages of these poems, from abandoned antebellum houses to rich Delta blues, and the familiar animal life. In "Boar," Thomas describes a wild beast's tusks as "the hooks / of Satan's grapnel" (lines 10-11 p. 4). But even this seemingly fearsome thing reveals beauty upon further examination, as Thomas points out that it's a mother suckling



its young. In “Sow” he contrasts this maternal image with a swaggering sow who inadvertently—and nonchalantly—crushes piglets, and when a boar tries to mate with her, “She dined on his carcass / for days, grunting in the shade.” (lines 11-12 p. 6).

Many of these poems are character studies of people with hard-scrabble lives. In “Hard Wine,” Thomas describes day-laborers living hard lives; “Life drinks them / like hard wines,” he says (lines 7-8 p. 9). In “The Plowman,” Thomas contrasts this with a farmer who, “To endure the coming harvest . . . reads his Bible” (lines 6-7 p. 16) and his daughter who “clutches for dear life / her cotton-stuffed doll” (lines 4-5 p. 16). Both of them find comfort in these talismans.

Most of the photographs in the book are of decrepit buildings, abandoned-seeming remnants of an (at least slightly) more prosperous past. Similarly, Thomas’s poems often focus on the past, mule tanners and archaic farmers whose mules drag plows through thick soil, outside crumbling shotgun shacks. Some of the characters he describes are elderly—nursing home residents looking back on their youth, older people focused on surviving as they continue working. There is an implication that they were working towards and waiting for better times that didn’t really come, or came only incrementally. Of course, this is also Thomas’s view of the Delta—the older times he heard about from his parents.

The last third of the book focuses on Delta blues, juke joints, and singers. “Juke Joint” begins with a description of the building, “Fashioned from a shotgun shack / flanking a huge field of cotton / and lit with Christmas lights” (lines 1-3 p. 29). It’s a familiar sight to anyone who’s visited a juke joint. In “Lifting Her Voice to God,” Thomas describes a gospel singer, clad in a beautiful robe, whose “gloves [are] the artifacts of hands / arthritic from decades of domestic labor.” (lines 3-4 p. 33). He says she’s “Eighty if a day,” but “every Sunday morning / she ascends the steps to the choir loft, / and assumes

her place on the makeshift bleachers.” (lines 5-7 p. 33). Even though she’s potentially 80 years old, she’s still got her spark, “Fixing bright, bespectacled eyes on the baton / she waits for its first, sparrow-quick dip” (lines 8-9 p. 33). Thomas describes her singing as she “belts out a note of flawless tremolo, / a note of such powerful purity / it all but shatters the panes of stained glass / radiant as the raspberry sun” (lines 11-14 p. 33). Her singing rings out, symbolically reaching all the way to “the branches of an ancient live oak” (line 16 p. 33) from which, a century before hanged “the pendulous / soul-freed body of her grandfather” (lines 17-18 p. 33) where he was lynched. It’s a chilling reminder of the suffering the poor and disenfranchised have endured—and continue to endure.

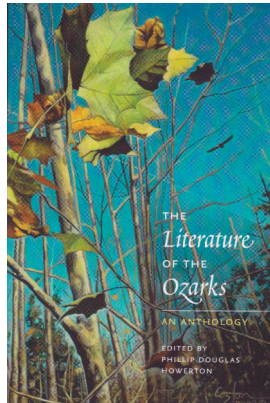
Again and again Thomas returns to cotton—as a source of income, a geographical feature, and finally, as a source of comfort. For Thomas, more than anything, cotton IS the Delta. Women pick cotton and dream of dresses they’d like to make from it. An old man in a nursing home thinks back to his youth of picking cotton during the day and picking guitar strings in the evenings, drawn to reminisce by his cotton blanket. Thomas ends his collection with the appropriately titled poem, “Cotton.” He describes how cotton “blanketed Mother / in the pale blue / softness of a nightgown” (lines 1-3 p. 39) and made up his father’s white shirts; “even their caskets/were fashioned of it” (lines 7-8 p. 39), he adds. The cemetery is surrounded by miles of “red fields” (line 13 p. 39) which “lay fallow” (line 14 p. 39). They used to pick cotton in these fields, “sunup to sundown . . . a hundred pounds a day . . . till their fingers bled” (lines 16, 18, 20 p. 39). Something meaningful has been lost, but Thomas is trying to hold onto it by remembering it, and these poems are those memories.

-- CL Bledsoe



***The Literature of the Ozarks: An Anthology.* Edited by Phillip Douglas Howerton. (Fayetteville: The University of Arkansas Press, 2019. Pp. 322, acknowledgments, introduction, contributors, notes. \$22.46, paper)**

There have been other collections of Ozark literature, but none with the in-depth, historical consciousness offered by *The Literature of the Ozarks*. The geographical region ranges from Missouri into Arkansas and a corner of Oklahoma, and editor Phillip Howerton has done an impressive job archiving the cultural evolutions of a diverse literary corpus rarely recognized for its contributions to the literary arts.



Starting in 1821, the book is split into four parts which focus on specific eras in order to place Ozark writers and writing into perspective. The book includes poetry and prose by both male and female writers from Native American and African American backgrounds, as well as those from settler stock who were born or raised in the Ozarks, or who lived in the Ozarks, or who focused on the Ozarks from the outside. But what's the criteria for qualifying a work as representative of the hills and hollers that constitute the Ozarks? As Howerton explains in the introduction, "a text's potential to contribute to the social construction of the region is the critical measure qualifying a text as Ozark literature" (p. xxvi).

"Potential" being the key word here, it comes as no surprise that the most formative

works in this collection were included for their historical context more than their stylistic genius. This is not a criticism, however, of the earliest chronicled content; this is an observation that the foundational works of Ozark literature are like the juvenilia of an artist who toiled and failed at a craft for decades before actually realizing an extraordinary vision. In autobiographical works, there is always value in tracking the development of an aesthetic, which is exactly what this anthology does. The biased reflections of Henry Schoolcraft and the syntactically awkward storytelling of Alphonso Wetmore invite stereotyping, but are not without their *potential* to inform an audience while establishing a baseline for the genesis of a place-based literature. George William Featherstone reports on the demographics of the Ozarks and judges the "agriculturists" as "hardworking enterprising men, always busy, fencing, ploughing, chopping timber, setting traps for the wolves, [and] hunting the panthers that destroy their calves" (p. 42), but then the chronology moves on to the regional construction before World War I. Stilted rhymers like John Rollins Ridge and Albert Pike, whose poetry is beholden to a passé poetics, provide illustrations of a natural beauty that has become central to a literary identity forged in rough, wild isolation.

I could comment on the hillfolk herein who went to Harvard or New York then returned to write about the Ozarks, or the outsiders who found their way in, or some of the pretentious yet entertaining voices that also had *potential*, but let's bypass the pioneer journalists and parson scribes and jump forward to where things really start to get interesting. Between 1918 and 1945, that's when the celebrated folklorist Vance Randolph, like many other Ozark authors of that era, "began placing less emphasis upon their characters' social and moral flaws and more emphasis upon how these people were challenged by . . . the culture in which they lived" (p. 105). With this switch from observing a culture popularly depicted as inferior to focusing on the psychology of trying

to survive in backwoods communities, the literature begins to come into its own. Randolph, of course, brings an acute sense of humor at a time when writers like MacKinlay Kantor were beginning to successfully translate a compassion hardly rendered in Ozark literature prior to the 1900s. Weldon Stone's play *Devil Take a Whittler* incorporates magical realism, and this is important because it marks a general turning point.

In Part Four of this anthology, 1945–Current, we begin to see the character of Ozark literature branching out and claiming its own identity. In this accelerated era of modernization, Robert Heinlein's science fiction reaches for the stars, Wilson Rawls creates an extremely connectable protagonist in *Where the Red Fern Grows*, and legendary epic poet Frank Stanford innovates a colorful new mythology. By the time we enter the next century, Katie Estell, Michael Mahoney, and C.D. Albin have mastered an unusually strong character development which stings from vestiges of violence and tragedy this region still can't shake.

Ultimately, it's hard not to observe that whereas other parts of this country made the leap from realism to postmodernism in the twentieth century, this transition hasn't taken place so visibly in the Ozarks. Basically, the chapters in this anthology reflect the real-life, hardscrabble challenges of industrious people in conflict with the wilderness and themselves, and there's not much playing around with form beyond the extremely original narrative techniques of Donald Harington in his novels (but not in this collection, which showcases a lost gem of a linguistic essay instead). The result being a distinctively unique redneck noir depicted in works like Daniel Woodrell's *Winter's Bone*, which has infused itself throughout the body of this literature.

Again, this is not a criticism. It's a fact. At heart, the Ozark literary tradition is a bastard child born from the union of Civil War chaos and a back-breaking work ethic—an impoverished spirit rich in grit that just can't be ex-

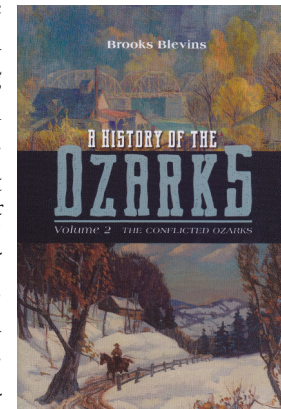
tracted from the blood of the mountains it sprung from. In other words, the literature of the Ozarks comes from such a real and lethal place that its history and heritage naturally developed one of the most vibrant, powerful, and remarkable traditions in American realism, which it still practiced to this day. At least, that's the feel this comprehensive collection gives, and until the next anthology has its say, that's the way Ozark lit is.

--Mark Spitzer



***A History of the Ozarks Volume 2: The Conflicted Ozarks.* Brooks Blevins. (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2019. Pp. 320, acknowledgments, introduction, epilogue, notes, index. \$34.95, hardback**

Brooks Blevins is a renowned Ozark Mountains historian who holds the position of Noel Boyd Professor of Ozarks Studies at Missouri State University. He has written seven books, mostly dealing with the history and culture of the Ozark region. His most recent work is a series of books titled *The History of the Ozarks*, available to readers in three volumes; the latest of the series is *Volume II: The Conflicted Ozarks* which deals with the Civil War era in the Arkansas and Missouri Ozarks beginning in the antebellum years and moving through the Civil War through Reconstruction. In the work, Blevins covers the brutality of slavery in



the Ozark region, the horrors of the Civil War for soldiers and civilians on both sides of the conflict in the region, and the Reconstruction following the war as continuing the violence of the war. He further shows how this period began the stereotypical version of the Ozarks in news media and literature that can still be seen in contemporary media and popular culture now.

Blevins begins by explaining the parameters of slavery in the Ozark region. He does this through statistics and numbers, showing that the economy in the Ozarks wasn't fully reliant on slavery, though the institution was prevalent in the region, with 29% of slave holders in the region only holding one enslaved person in custody on average (p. 22). Blevins takes time to note that the long refrain of a more caring relationship between bondspeople and their owners in upland south regions is mostly myth (p. 12). The reality was that slavery in the region was incredibly violent, and the fact that smallholder farms were more common to the region only added to the brutality. This occurred through punishment and sexual violence and through isolation from a larger slave community (pp. 12; 19-21). The region's white inhabitants mostly held the opinion that slavery was a typical part of southern society.

Once Blevins explains the prevalence of slavery in the region, he moves on to how the war affected the region. Although the region was mostly ignored by both the Union and the Confederates, fighting still happened there, especially on the border of Missouri and Arkansas and within the White River Valley. Blevins states, "the border region ultimately devolved into a no-man's land plagued by the breakdown of civil law, by the inability of either side to establish effective marshal law, and by a vicious cycle of murders and revenge killings. Thus the Ozarks became the ideal theater for unrestrained guerilla warfare" which would continue into the Reconstruction years (p. 39). The use of guerilla warfare was furthered by the passing of the Partisan Ranger Act by the Confederate

Congress in 1862 which set up independent militias, and even though this Act was later repealed, the fighting between the militias didn't cease in the region (p. 85). *The Conflicted Ozarks* includes the details of many battles and fighting between various factions during the war years, including the Battles of Pea Ridge, Cane Ridge, Shiloh, and Fayetteville among others.

Once the war ended, not until July of 1865 in the Ozark Mountains, Reconstruction could begin. Both Unionists and former Confederates were brutal during this time, each harassing and committing acts of violence against the other, especially as soldiers began returning home. Because there were so few enslaved people in the region, the violence of Reconstruction was focused mainly between "whites representing different Civil War loyalties" (p. 142). During the Reconstruction era the Ku Klux Klan became prevalent in Arkansas while at the same time Republicans split between the more radical Republicans and the Liberal Republicans, a more conservative sect. By 1871, Democratic leaders were pushing their way back into government positions (pp. 192, 168, 178). This era also led to the Bald Knobbers, a violent vigilante group that added plenty of evidence to the hillbilly stereotypes that were beginning to become increasingly popular. All these opposing groups and the continued fighting in the region led to what Blevins calls "a heritage of vigilantism and regulation" in the Ozarks (p. 173). Blevins also details the ways that the region began to recover economically from the war by rebuilding infrastructure such as homes, churches, and schools as well as bringing in new means of growth through the construction of railroads, the use of steamboats, and through the timber industry.

Blevins ends this volume by showing readers the ways that this period lead to a lasting image of the Ozark region in the popular culture lexicon. It had begun with letters home from soldiers both commenting on the backwards people and isolated landscape as well as the pas-



toral beauty of the Ozark Mountains (p. 73). Once the Bald Knobbers began getting attention for their brand of vigilantism, the media was quick to grasp to the backwoods, hillbilly refrain that plagued the region well into the twentieth century. Although this image certainly had staying power; ultimately, Blevins notes that the enduring legacy of the Civil War era on the Ozark Mountain region was the range of political divisions between communities and community members.

Blevins's work provides much insight into the institution of slavery in the region, something that has been little covered. That said, he spends quite a bit of time wrestling with the distinction between a slave society and society with slaves, ultimately not drawing much of a final conclusion; though he continues to call the Ozarks a "society with slaves" throughout the book (pp. 13-14; 39). This distinction deals with whether the system of slavery has a large economic impact on a particular region, a society with slaves being one in which the economy does not mostly rely on slavery. Blevins's batting back and forth with this issue seems to be in service to Ozark readers, a mostly conservative and homogenous group, to save them discomfort at the way this book shows the savagery of slavery in the region. However, this discussion does not add much merit to the book overall; especially when one considers that the whole of the Southern economy was based upon slavery, this distinction is unwarranted. Blevins also highlights the extreme nature of sexual abuse within the institution of slavery in the region, but he qualifies this by saying some of these sexual encounters may have been "consensual" and resulted in a large number of people of mixed ethnicity in the region (pp. 20-21). Sexual encounters cannot be consensual if performed under this type of power dynamic. The imbalance of power in the relationship between a slave owner and an enslaved person does not permit consent of any type. Despite these problems, Blevins's work is an important addition to the scholarship on the region and a much

needed detailed look at the antebellum years, the Civil War, and Radical Reconstruction in the Ozark Mountain region of Missouri and Arkansas.

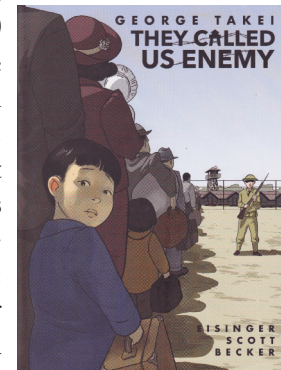
--Lauren Willette



*They Called Us Enemy.* George Takei, Justin Eisinger, Steven Scott. Art by Harmony Becker. (Marietta, Georgia: Top Shelf Productions, 2019. Pp. 208, about the creators, acknowledgments. \$19.99, paper)

This graphic novel tells an important story in an engaging way, moving between the adult George Takei of *Star Trek* and internet fame and the child who was one of about 120,000 Americans of Japanese descent incarcerated during World War II. A traumatic scene that the adult Takei says is burned into his memory opens the book: George and his brother Henry are asleep in bed, harshly woken by their panicked father, who has to get the family, which includes the boys' mother and baby sister, ready to leave their home. Soldiers with bayonets are at the door saying that the family has to evacuate their home under Executive Order 9006, which was issued less than three months after the Empire of Japan bombed Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941.

The book then shows Takei on a TED Talk stage, taking a trip back in time to the beginning of his family's story, with his parents meeting in Los Angeles in 1935 and establishing a



life there together. A cozy living room scene of decorating for Christmas is interrupted by news on the radio of the bombing of Pearl Harbor. Soon, the nation is at war and anyone who looks like the enemy becomes the target of suspicion. “No Japs” signs appear, and eventually the US government issues its own version of those signs, with an executive order “excluding” those of Japanese descent from the “military area” of the West Coast of the United States, to be held one of ten incarceration camps throughout the country—two of which were in southeastern Arkansas: Rohwer and Jerome. Before they left, Japanese Americans had to part with their homes, their possessions, their cars—anything they couldn’t carry with them; many former neighbors took advantage of the situation by offering tiny amounts for valuable goods and seizing property and farms.

The Takei family first is taken to the horse stables at the Santa Anita Racetrack to be held temporarily; this is exciting for George and Henry but humiliating for their parents. Then, a train to Arkansas, for what George’s father said was a vacation, trying to make the best of the situation for his “lively boys,” who were excited to be on the train despite the crowding and illness all around them. The adult Takei struggles with the darker side of his “bright, sharp” memories of this “joyful time of games, play, and discoveries” (p. 50), saying, “I know that I will always be haunted by the larger, vaguely remembered reality of the circumstances surrounding my childhood” (p. 51). They soon arrive at Rohwer, which would hold close to 8,500 people at its peak. They settle into their barebones barracks, helped a bit by their mother’s smuggled-in sewing machine, which she uses to make curtains and rugs. Life is hard in Rohwer, with muddy ground, unfamiliar food in the large dining hall, and group bathrooms. And the kids have their own stressors, with older boys telling them that dinosaurs are outside the barbed-wire fences and starting games of “war” in which the Takei boys have to be the Japanese enemy of the older boys, who

declare themselves “the Americans.” They also trick George into shouting what turns out to sound like a curse word to the guards in the tower, who respond by throwing rocks at him.

In the winter, the children see snow for the first time and celebrate their first Christmas at Rohwer, complete with a Santa, although George knows it isn’t the “real Santa” because this Santa is Japanese. But he keeps that knowledge to himself for his siblings’ sake. Winter also brings new hardships as George’s parents have to decide how they will answer the impossible and loaded questions on the loyalty questionnaire issued by the US government. Because of his parents’ “no-no” answers to these questions, the family is sent in May 1944 to a higher-security facility in Tule Lake, California. Conditions were terrible and the unrest among the incarcerated people was traumatic for George’s parents, but there was one upside: George, the future actor, discovers the magic of film during the movie nights in the camp mess hall.

New challenges emerge as the war was ending: heartbreak over the fates of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, where many in the camp had family members and friends, including George’s mother, whose parents lived in Nagasaki; confusion about whether it was best to remain in America or renounce American citizenship (what was there to be loyal to in the United States, anyway?); joy in the idea of returning “home” to Los Angeles coupled with apprehension about what they would be returning to.

As George grows into a teenager and studies history and civics, he is dismayed to find that the story of his past is not there: “I couldn’t reconcile what I read in these books about the shining ideals of our democracy with what I knew to be my childhood imprisonment” (p. 173). He begins asking his father questions about the family’s incarceration, filling in the details and gaps in his childhood memories. Enrolling at UCLA, George begins studying theater and performs in *Fly Blackbird*, a musical that “shined a light on the political and social

injustices of the time” (p. 175). Meeting Dr. Martin Luther King backstage helps solidify Takei’s call to social activism in the face of injustice. Getting the coveted role of Lieutenant Sulu on the *Star Trek* TV series was a dream come true for Takei, but, as he says, “most importantly, my unexpected notoriety has allowed me a platform from which to address many social causes that need attention” (p. 189)—including LGBTQ rights. And he has used his fame to teach the American public about the troubling history of locking up perceived enemies and denying their rights as humans and Americans—a history that has repeated itself several times since George spent his childhood behind barbed wire. The book ends with an illustration of George Takei and his husband Brad Takei standing together in the cemetery at Rohwer, with its monument to Japanese American soldiers who fought for, not against, America.

The lively and engaging graphic renderings by Harmony Becker bring the reader inside the story and allow the back-and-forth timeline to show the breadth of the author’s experience without being confusing. I knew a lot of Takei’s story already, but I enjoyed the journey presented this way; both of my kids, who didn’t know a lot about Takei, gobbled it up and emerged wiser.

--Ali Welky



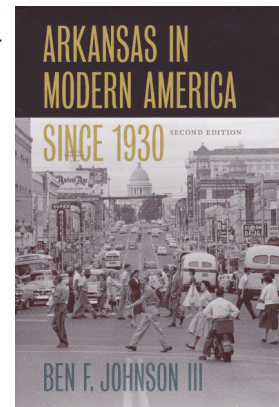
***Arkansas in Modern America Since 1930.* By Ben F. Johnson III. (Fayetteville: The University of Arkansas Press, 2019, Pp. x + 364, acknowledgments, selected sources, index. \$24.95, paper)**

In 2000, Ben Johnson’s *Arkansas in Modern America* was released to wide acclaim. The

work pulled together the disparate threads of Arkansas’s history from the Great Depression up to the time of the book’s publication all presented in a lucid and accessible narrative. At the time, the work filled a considerable void in the historiography focusing on modern Arkansas.

Its success prompted the publication of a second edition in 2019. Regarding the new edition, Johnson asserts, “I set out to rewrite the volume rather than merely update the material.” (p. 4). Readers familiar with the original edition will find the new version considerably changed, especially the final chapter which includes a detailed analysis of what transpired in the decade following the initial publication. Fans of the first edition will happily discover that the fluid story and crisp prose that typified the original incarnation of the book remains unchanged. Throughout, Johnson effectively sheds light on an array of topics that shaped the state’s development into the twenty-first century. From politics to culture to a myriad of subjects in between, *Arkansas in Modern America* has a little bit of something for everyone.

Johnson starts with the Great Depression which brought economic misfortune to the nation and sparked a fundamental political shift in the relationship between the people and the government. Arkansas, which was overwhelmingly rural at the time and far from prosperous, found the dilemma of excessive rainfall and plummeting commodity prices a devastating dual blow that turned catastrophic as the nation’s economy sputtered. New Deal programs that brought the influence of the federal government into the isolated state initiated a sequence of events which, according to Johnson, would propel Arkansas into the modern age. Arkansas’s shift to modernity unfolded at a slow



pace. Early in the twentieth century, power in Arkansas politics rested primarily in the hands of local officials and proved remarkably decentralized when compared to other locales. In addition, the state's business elites, spearheaded by the Arkansas Power and Light Company, played a disproportionate role in changing the face of Arkansas life while remaining wedded to the state's long-standing traditions. If New Deal programs initiated the trend toward change, then World War II hastened the process of modernization by spurring industrialization, expanding factory employment, and promoting a shift from rural to urban living as witnessed by the phenomenal growth of Little Rock. Local communities, which often operated independently of their neighbors, were pulled together by the efforts of the State's Chamber of Commerce and Governor Carl Bailey in order to attract lucrative government contracts and, in the process, enhance the power and influence of state government. By mid-century the signs of change were everywhere apparent. Power was being siphoned away from local jurisdictions, hunting and fishing were fast becoming a major tourist draw, and pressure for racial change was reaching a crescendo. The latter concern more than any other reshaped the direction of the state. Johnson devotes considerable attention to the impact of the civil rights fight and underscores the importance of social reform in making Arkansas agreeable to outside investors—a requisite development in bringing the state into the twentieth century. His treatment of the volatile political world of the 1950s and 1960s gives way to a nuanced analysis of the final steps in Arkansas's emergence in the modern world in the 1970s as state leaders transformed the election system by funneling power away from the county level and revitalizing the state bureaucracy so it could genuinely meet the needs of constituents. Along the way, Johnson introduces readers to an array of colorful figures who helped shape the state's identity including Orval Faubus, Dale Bumpers, and Bill Clinton.

Despite the changes, Johnson notes that Arkansans focused on doing things their own way by promoting modern business and industry while making a conscious effort not to destroy the state's rural roots. Johnson's final chapter, aptly titled "An American State," follows the development of Arkansas in the current age where the state's northwest corner, which serves as the headquarters of economic giants such as Tyson Chicken and Walmart, finds itself politically at odds with other areas that lack the same robust economic forecast. The economic fault lines that define electoral politics in Arkansas today are thus adeptly revealed by the conclusion of the work.

*Arkansas in Modern America* provides a sweeping synthesis of the many changes that visited the state in the decades following the Great Depression. In his thorough synthesis, Johnson pulls together the disparate threads of the state's history into a single cohesive narrative. Although scholars might find the lack of footnotes or endnotes disconcerting, Johnson intentionally crafted the work to reach a broad audience—a fact that accounts for the absence of customary academic trappings. One look at the impressive array of primary and secondary resources provided in the selected sources appendage at the end of the book, however, demonstrates the solid foundation for the interpretations that Johnson provides. In short, *Arkansas in Modern America* will remain the definitive account of recent Arkansas history for the foreseeable future. The University of Arkansas Press is to be commended for its continued support of this project and other studies dedicated to shedding light on Arkansas's rich history.

--Keith M. Finley



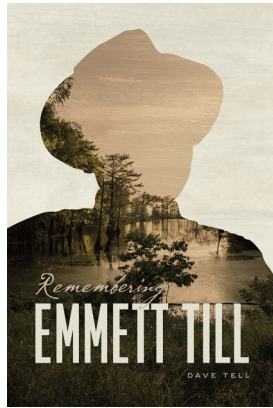
***Remembering Emmett Till.* By Dave Tell. (Chicago: University of**



Chicago Press, 2019. Pp. xi–xiv + 308, acknowledgments, notes, bibliography, index. \$25, cloth)

The commemoration of Confederate “heritage” has become increasingly controversial in recent years, and for good reasons. Outbreaks of violence connected to Confederate imagery and ideology—most notably in Charleston, South Carolina, and Charlottesville, Virginia—have forced a re-examination of how and why such imagery came to be imposed upon the public square, leading to a broader understanding of the white supremacist motivations that underlay the urge to celebrate the deeds of secessionists and slaveholders. Commemoration, in other words, is an inherently political project undertaken not only to mark certain people and events as worthy of remembrance but also to create narratives going forward, to shape the political, cultural, and economic realities of the future.

This dynamic applies even to the commemoration of our “good history,” such as civil rights struggles, which can also be prone to distortions of the historical record. There is no better example of this than the various efforts to commemorate the murder of Emmett Till in Mississippi. As Dave Tell observes in *Remembering Emmett Till*, efforts at remembrance have largely been driven by economic concerns, and “the desperate pursuit of revenue in the Delta has fueled an even more desperate creativity with Till’s story, with the result that the imperative of economic development has unsettled the plotline of a murder that was ambiguous from the very start” (p. 5). For example, many commemorative efforts still follow the



narrative laid out in William Bradford Huie’s article in *Look* magazine, in which J. W. Milam and Roy Bryant confessed to murdering Till. However, the narrative Huie helped them to put forward was deliberately crafted in order to avoid implicating several others now known to have taken part in the murder, and this necessitated distorting the geography of their narrative, leaving out any mention of the Sturdivant Plantation, where Till was most likely tortured and killed. Today, Sunflower County, the location of that plantation, has no markers relating to Till, which fact means that fellow perpetrators Leslie Milam and Elmer Kimbell remain posthumously shielded from justice, at least in so far as justice is actually represented on the simplified landscape of commemoration.

Perhaps nowhere is the fact that economy is driving commemoration more observable than in the Tallahatchie County Courthouse, site of the Till murder trial and one of two courthouses in the county, and one threatened with redundancy once a new bridge over the Tallahatchie River meant that travel to nearby Charleston was no longer impeded by occasional flooding. Faced with the potential loss of their crumbling courthouse, local residents embraced their connection to the Till murder for purposes of development: “While there was no tax money to repair the courthouse, the memory of Emmett Till could provide grant money to restore the courthouse to its 1955 condition” (p. 99). To justify this restoration, as well as further heritage investment in the area, local and state authorities began pitching the murder trial as the catalyst for the civil rights movement, the reason that Rosa Parks sat down and Martin Luther King Jr. stood up, as many like to say. However, such a claim (including faked quotations from Parks), as proposed by various grant writers, “did not so much recall the story of Tallahatchie County as it did create a new, fundable history for Tallahatchie County” (p. 135). Meanwhile, the disintegration of Bryant’s Grocery, where the alleged incident of “wolf whistling” occurred, combined with the per-

ceived need to have some structure in the town of Money available for potential visitors, made funding available for the restoration of Ben Roy's Service Station, a building that had no connection to the Till narrative whatsoever, and whose owners use the structure to sell an idealized picture of the 1950s to visitors. Lastly, Tell examines the efforts of commemoration in the impoverished community of Glendora, which has the highest density of Till-related commemoration of anywhere in the Delta, despite a tenuous, at best, connection to the murder. In Glendora's case, local leaders have not used historical commemoration in order to fund services, as did Sumner, but have instead used funding designated for poverty-fighting measures to carry out commemorative efforts in hopes that this can drive tourism and help build the economy. As Tell puts it, "The development of infrastructure led to the development of memory" (p. 238).

The desperation that anchors ongoing efforts at commemorating the darker history of the Delta persists—and continues to distort the record. The year 2019, for example, witnessed dueling efforts at commemorating the Elaine Massacre in Arkansas. Funded by private philanthropy, one group of citizens constructed the Elaine Massacre Memorial in downtown Helena, the seat of Phillips County, arguing that 1) Helena played a role in the affair, as it was where black defendants were put on trial and swiftly condemned following the violence; 2) more people would see the monument, and thus become aware of the history, were it placed in Helena compared to the struggling community of Elaine; and 3) the name "Elaine Massacre" constituted a bit of a misnomer, since the violence was spread throughout Phillips County. However, many in Elaine, led by the Elaine Legacy Center, not only demanded the primacy of their community in commemorative efforts but also insisted, in the face of much historical evidence to the contrary, that the Elaine Massacre was not the violent suppression of a farmers' union but, instead, a massive land grab;

consequently, they demanded financial reparations to the descendants to compensate for this stolen land, including specific community-development initiatives.

Thus is Dave Tell's *Remembering Emmett Till* applicable beyond the immediate context of rural Mississippi—indeed, anyone involved in historical commemoration or rural economic development should read this book. As much as other writers have engaged in a forensic analysis of every moment of the Till murder, so does Tell uncover the motives, means, and opportunities behind the public remembrance of that terrible event, demonstrating with absolute clarity just how much we risk our history, memory, and economy when we let them become intertwined. When we let memory or economy drive the narrative of our shared past, we risk losing the nuanced and detailed reality that real history can provide. When we attempt to base economies off either history or memory, we give false hope of restoration to communities whose problems are deeper than the lack of historical markers on the town square. There are no easy answers to the issues that beset the Delta, and attempting to solve a social or economic problem with a historical solution will only continue to disappoint.

--Guy Lancaster

