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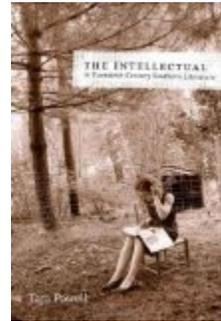


Tara Powell. *The Intellectual in Twentieth-Century Southern Literature*. Southern Literary Studies Series. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2012. xi + 266 pp. \$42.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8071-3898-4.

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## Southern Freaks and Geeks

Any scholar dedicated to studying, teaching, and writing about southern literature has likely, at some point, refuted the stereotype of southerners as anti-intellectual by name dropping his or her favorite canonical writers. During the twentieth century, the region produced some of the finest writing in America, yet it still cannot shake the reputation for being hostile to intellectual life. Tara Powell's *The Intellectual in Twentieth-Century Southern Literature* traces the southern anti-intellectual trope through the work of writers who have engaged with and, in some cases, combated representations of the South as an intellectually backward region. With her meticulous reading of some of the South's most prominent writers, she makes a convincing argument that this stereotype not only informed much of their work but also offered unique ways of inhabiting regional identity. By revealing this overlooked subject to be a dominant theme, she makes her own significant contribution to intellectual life in the South.

Powell subdivides the anti-intellectual trope into three distinct categories: the masked southern intellectual, the exiled southern intellectual, and the dysfunctional southern intellectual. Before delving into the meat of the matter, she traces the intellectual history of the Old South through Thomas Jefferson and William Byrd, men who envisioned themselves as gentlemen and planters first and viewed a life of the mind merely as a leisure activity. Celebrating their agrarian lifestyle over their intellectualism hid the fact that these men were the lead-

ing thinkers, scholars, and writers during the antebellum period. Later generations of southern intellectuals inherited the farmer mask worn by these figures, most notably, the authors of *I'll Take My Stand* (1930). Instead of wearing intellectual masks, the group that falls into the second category simply abandoned the South. Both Edgar Allan Poe and Thomas Wolfe escaped to urban centers in the North where publishing opportunities awaited them. This vein includes African American writers like Frederick Douglass and Richard Wright whose escape from oppression and subsequent education inevitably exiled them from their homeland. For prototypes of the dysfunctional southern intellectual, Powell cites a number of canonical characters: Roderick Usher from Poe, Quentin Compson from William Faulkner, and Cross Damon from Wright—all of whom prove to be ineffectual thinkers limited by overestimating the power of reason and the intellect. In their failure to become fully functioning members of society, characters of this type satirize the intellectual's tendency toward abstraction. Even though all three types exist on the margins of southern society, each deploys a version of regional identity to make sense of their displacement from the center. Inheriting this particular tradition, Powell argues, allows "contemporary southern writers' personas and creative work not only converse with the literary past of their region and nation but also describe their literary present to carve a literary future for an unmasked, at-home, functional intellectual in the South" (p. 18).

Powell selects a cross-section of post-World War II writers and regional writers to further support her argument. She begins with Flannery O'Connor's portrayal of intellectual life as an obstacle on the path toward achieving spiritual vision. The chapter illustrates O'Connor's fascination with a variety of egg-headed freaks through readings of a wide swath of stories along with her novel *The Violent Bear It Away* (1960); ultimately, the dysfunctional intellectual par excellence is Hulga Hopewell from "Good Country People" (1955). Powell's insightful interpretation shows how Hulga's brief romance with Manley Pointer tests her blind faith in human reason and exposes the spiritual emptiness in her life. Like O'Connor, Walker Percy perceived the mysteries of human existence through the lens of Catholicism. Despite the philosophical bent in much of his writing, Percy preferred to think of himself as a failed physician. Powell un-masks Percy as a reluctant novelist of ideas before diagnosing his abstracted characters in *The Last Gentleman* (1966), *Love in the Ruins* (1971), and *The Thanatos Syndrome* (1987) as symptomatic of an impoverished intellectual tradition too far removed from the experience of everyday life. Taken as a whole, Percy's work spawned a metaphysical strain within the pantheon of southern novelists that was unprecedented in its engagement with existentialism. Similar to O'Connor and Percy, Ernest Gaines explores the shortcomings of a life of the mind. For southern black intellectuals, a commitment to education coincided with a mission of racial uplift, yet this obligation could have the unintended consequence of alienating the educated classes from the black communities they served. *A Lesson before Dying* (1993) provides Pow-

ell with a poignant example. The repatriation of exiled protagonist Grant Wiggins demonstrates his inability to reconnect with the region of his birth. As a mentor responsible for helping a death row inmate named Jefferson face his execution with dignity, Wiggins questions the role of education and his career choice as a teacher. Powell concludes, "the 'black elite' as represented by Grant ultimately must look to Jefferson and the authority of experience over mere books for a workable model of how to participate in community uplift" (p. 151). In the final chapter, Powell considers the "odd women" in the fiction of Gail Godwin. Specifically, she examines the way Godwin's characters navigate the modern world in which to be southern, female, and intellectual places them at the margins of society. Nevertheless, these women, unlike most of the other characters in Powell's study, are able to reconcile a life of the mind with life in the South.

Powell admits in the preface that her project is personal. The research material she collected over the years while preparing her book reaffirmed her belief in the value of intellectual life. Her reading could easily have become an exercise in navel gazing, but instead she reveals what may have been perceived as an underlying thematic thread to be a central issue in southern literature. Considering the media's recent fascination with southern subcultures, particularly uneducated southerners depicted on television, Powell's timing could not be better. As she skillfully demonstrates, the South has always possessed a robust intellectual tradition, even if many southern writers have been conflicted about what role the intellect should play in public and personal life.

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