

McKay Jenkins. *The South in Black and White: Race, Sex, and Literature in the 1940s.* Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1999. 240 pp. \$39.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8078-2491-7.



Reviewed by Marc Seals

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While reading McKay Jenkins' book examining racial and sexual identities in the South of the 1940s, one realizes that being a white Southern author struggling with sexual identity was a complex fate. Jenkins' object-the study of constructions of race through culturally relevant writing-is not new, but Jenkins' focus upon the forties, an era he contends scholars have neglected, is. Jenkins says the 1940s are "as representative of the country's racial struggles writ as large as any other time" (6).

Jenkins focuses on the lives and works of four Southern writers: W. J. Cash, William Alexander Percy, Lillian Smith, and Carson McCullers. These authors are bound by more than era and Southern heritage-they were all controversial best-selling writers who "considered themselves alienated by the cultural mainstream" (9). Jenkins posits that the sexual alienation caused by the homosexuality, bisexuality, or impotence of these white writers placed them in a unique position socially, between the white cultural mainstream and "blackness." In defining blackness, these authors were also building what it meant (and means) to

be white. Jenkins tries to further "the notion that understanding whiteness is as valid and fruitful an intellectual endeavor as understanding blackness" (9).

Jenkins begins by exploring the historical context of race and culture in the 1940s. He portrays the South as a region frozen in time, stagnant since the Civil War and trying desperately to hold on to the fading but still potent mythical cultural underpinnings. According to Jenkins, whites in the South were of two minds regarding blacks. While maintaining an attitude of disdain and superiority, whites realized that the economy of the South depended upon black labor, and that labor was increasingly migrating north. Black soldiers returning from World War II were unwilling to return to a life of servitude (29). Jenkins proposes that these factors set the stage for the civil rights movement.

Jenkins then analyzes the lives and works of the above-mentioned authors. In Cash's writing, Jenkins observes an odd contrast between cultural revulsion and fascination with blacks. Jenkins then moves on to analyzing Percy's 1941 memoir

Lanterns on the Levee. He draws a contrast between Percy's outward racially progressive attitude and his choice of words and phrases that romanticize and mythologize the old Southern aristocracy. Jenkins next addresses the writing of Smith. Smith represents much of Jenkins' thesis—she is white and thus represents the establishment, but she is also a woman and a lesbian. This makes her doubly "Other." If Cash and Percy are somewhere between whiteness and blackness, then Smith is even more so. The text takes its strangest turn when Jenkins addresses the early writings of McCullers, whose novels are also full of freak shows, carnivals, and prisons-populated by the ultimate Others. McCullers was not just isolated sexually, but also racially; when it became known that she had the temerity to allow blacks to visit her apartment, no white person would socialize with her (157).

It is in his conclusion that Jenkins makes the freshest arguments, arguing that scholars have relied too heavily on black texts to "shoulder the burden of race theory and race history" in America (185). Because of the racial construction that depends upon the use of the other race as a sort of mirror, we share a common and intertwined history. This is a thought-provoking book. Jenkins is a skilled writer, and it is difficult to put *The South in Black and White* aside for long. Its ideas are haunting. Jenkins forces the reader to look within and to examine our nation's often disturbing history.

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