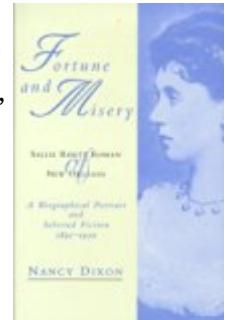


Nancy Dixon. *Fortune and Misery: Sallie Rhett Roman of New Orleans, A Biographical Portrait and Selected Fiction, 1891-1920.* Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1999. xviii + 218 pp. \$26.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8071-2296-9.



Reviewed by Patricia Brady

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A Southern Lady Seeks Her Fortune Through Writing

Besides reading pleasure (often doubtful at best), popular nineteenth-century fiction offers scholars another angle from which to view the past. The blockbuster novels of the last century and a half are very unlikely to appear on today's English-department reading lists. Today's students read Kate Chopin's rediscovered *Awakening* (1899), which swiftly sank after publication, rather than Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), perhaps the first of the modern best sellers.

Certainly the latter is not the work of an accomplished novelist, but for all its contrived melodrama and wooden characters, it touched the American psyche. With its humanization of enslaved African Americans, Stowe's book became emblematic of abolitionists' hopes and slave owners' fears, attaining a moral stature that influenced thousands of readers who were unaware of Chopin's far better-written novel. *The Awakening*, *Moby Dick* (1851), *The Red Badge of Courage* (1894), and other major nineteenth-century liter-

ary works exerted virtually no influence in their day because so few people read them. To get a sense of the beliefs and sentiments of past generations, it is often necessary to seek out less accomplished works of literature.

In the twentieth century, one might argue that Grace Metalious's sexually explicit best seller, *Peyton Place* (1956) (the closest we came to pornography in my small-town high school), was the 1950s early warning of the sexual revolution to come in the '60s. And it is thus of far more importance to historians concerned with changes in social conventions than, for example, Eudora Welty's wonderful *Ponder Heart* (1954).

Louisiana State University Press has a well-deserved reputation as a publisher of literary studies; its backlist of volumes in print is remarkable in its quality and breadth. *Fortune and Misery*, part of the Southern Literary Studies series edited by Fred Hobson, joins such LSU publications as the two volumes of *Literary New Orleans*; *Domestic Novelists in the Old South: Defenders of Southern Culture*; *Gender, Race, and Region in the Writings of Grace King*, *Ruth McEnery Stuart*, and

Kate Chopin; Louisiana Women Writers: New Essays and a Comprehensive Bibliography; and *Tomorrow Is Another Day: The Woman Writer in the South, 1859-1936*.^[1]

Fortune and Misery is introduced by a long biographical and critical essay, enlivened by well-chosen photographs of people and places. The volume includes eight short stories and a novella, selected by the author from among Sarah Rhett Roman's extensive published fictional work; editorials and other nonfiction are not included. A complete bibliography of the author's writings, almost all published in the New Orleans *Times-Democrat*, rounds out this useful book.

Sarah "Sallie" Rhett was a member of a prestigious South Carolina family, her father the notoriously fire-eating secessionist Robert Barnwell Rhett. White supremacy and southern nationalism were the tenets of her childhood, and she never wavered from the faith. Although she enjoyed a privileged girlhood, she had only reached her late teens when the Civil War began. Rhett married in the midst of the conflict, and her choice of a husband brought dramatic changes in her life. Colonel Alfred Roman, a widowed attorney from a wealthy planter family, was twenty years older than she -- not especially unusual, but he was also a Creole Catholic from faraway Louisiana. Given the general Protestant antagonism toward Catholics (Rhett's mother was of Huguenot stock), it seems remarkable that her Episcopalian father supported the marriage, advising her about communion and confirmation.

The dreary details of the Roman family's postwar downward economic spiral were repeated in planter families throughout the South. Crops failed, plantations were sold, her husband went into legal practice with clients as poor as he, and the children could not be comfortably established in life. Sallie Roman's life during these years was also typical: she was generally pregnant, giving birth every two years or so, until middle age brought relief. The Romans had eleven children,

ten of whom lived to adulthood. Poverty ultimately led Roman to turn her hand to writing editorials, then fiction. Like many novice writers of her day, she found the primary outlet for her work in a metropolitan newspaper with a strong literary cast--in her case, the New Orleans *Times-Democrat*. She published regularly with a certain modest success for nearly twenty years. In her later years, she moved from New Orleans to live with one or another of her children, giving up writing while remaining active in community affairs.

Nancy Dixon provides an interesting portrait of a southern belle turned professional writer by hard times, thoroughly analyzing the themes and ideas in Roman's works. Roman began publishing editorials in 1891, the year before her husband died. Her themes were true to her father's and husband's ideas of white power, conservative taxation, and states' rights. When she turned to fiction, she wrote of "women's right to vote, the hypocrisy of high society, marriage and women's roles outside of marriage, women's independence, the role of the artist in society, the need for Christianity and spiritual fortification, and the importance of bloodlines, ancestry, and white supremacy" (p. 23). Roman is representative of the many southern writers who continued to espouse antebellum attitudes and ideals in defeat; this volume of her selected works adds to our understanding of the postwar South.

The introduction to *Fortune and Misery*, however, would have been more valuable if the author had a deeper understanding of the nineteenth-century New Orleans milieu in which Roman wrote. The city provided a richly sustaining environment for "lady writers." Of course as a member of the antebellum elite, Roman feared a loss of status by working to support her family. But she was one of many New Orleans women -- and far from the first -- to face that dilemma.

When Roman began writing professionally in the 1890s, New Orleans was an important regional literary center. Many southern women writers

were becoming successful both regionally and nationally. Southerners viewed writing as one of the few acceptable ways for middle- and upper-class women to make money and maintain their position within a social caste. Because writing was done at home without (theoretically) interfering with domestic responsibilities, it perfectly answered an impoverished lady's problems. Need and acceptability combined with demand: a large audience existed in the Gilded Age for "women's stories," that is, works focused on emotional complications and domestic relationships, particularly when set against an exotic background such as Creole Louisiana.

Dixon cites important works of Louisiana literary history but doesn't fully employ the information found there to evaluate Roman's place among women writers in New Orleans; she ignores relevant articles in historical journals. Roman was not alone in her chosen profession. She belonged to a group that included Mary Ashley Townsend, Eliza Jane Nicholson, Mollie Moore Davis, Julia Wetherill Baker, Ruth McEnery Stuart, Elizabeth Bisland, Grace King, Martha Smallwood Field (who wrote as Catherine Cole), and others, all of whom developed their careers in the city during the same general period.

Baker served as the literary editor at the *Times-Democrat*, which published most of Roman's work, when the paper was becoming a literary powerhouse in competition with Nicholson's *Daily Picayune*. Bisland and Field worked for the *Times-Democrat*, and both Townsend and King contributed pieces to the paper. Although Dixon mentions Roman's membership in the Quarante Club, an early literary club limited to forty (hence its name) prominent women, she does not explore the club's integral role in the female literary support system. Roman's membership indicates not only a secure social position despite relative poverty, but also the network of writers and contacts available to her. Mary Ashley Townsend, the poet "Xariffa," was one of the

founders of the club and served as president from 1888 until 1894. Other writers of note who were members included Davis, Stuart, and King.

Dixon also mentions Mollie Moore Davis's French Quarter literary salon but misunderstands its essence. She interprets Roman's "conspicuous" absence from the salon, while her daughters were present, as a probable indication of the social neglect of the fifty-nine-year-old writer (pp. 37-8). Actually, invitations were never sent; all of literary and social New Orleans attended when they liked. Roman's daughters were among the young ladies who enjoyed serving at these affairs. Davis would certainly never have invited the young Romans, while excluding their mother -- such a blatant insult would have been unthinkable in polite society of the day.

Davis's salon was not just a social event but a place where writers met other writers and editors of national significance, who could and did give a boost to their careers. Roman was never a solitary woman writer in New Orleans but a member (although one of the lesser talents) of a very important cultural movement in the city.

When scholars cross into other disciplines, as Dixon has in this book, it is incumbent upon editors to provide useful advice and a careful eye for errors. Besides encouraging the author to learn more of the city's literary history and to take advantage of the latest scholarship in Louisiana history generally, the editors ought to have caught errors of fact, such as naming Alfred Roman's father the first Creole governor of Louisiana (p. 8) when Jacques Philippe Villere attained that honor in 1816.

It is also incumbent upon reviewers not to be overly critical, concentrating on the book one wishes had been written rather than the present volume. This is a work of value to literary scholars and a welcome addition to a well-stocked Louisiana library.

Notes:

[1]. Richard S. Kennedy, ed., *Literary New Orleans: Essays and Meditations* (1992); Kennedy, ed., *Literary New Orleans in the Modern World* (1998); Elizabeth Moss, *Domestic Novelists in the Old South: Defenders of Southern Culture* (1992); Helen Taylor, *Gender, Race and Region in the Writings of Grace King, Ruth McEnery Stuart, and Kate Chopin* (1989); Dorothy H. Brown and Barbara C. Ewell, eds., *Louisiana Women Writers: New Essays and a Comprehensive Bibliography* (1992); Anne Goodwyn Jones, *Tomorrow is Another Day: The Woman Writer in the South, 1859-1936* (1981).

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