

Reconnecting with Southern Gothic Literature: It Can Save Your Life



by Barb Howe

Southern Gothic authors write about topics most of us don't like to think about, much less talk about.

Flannery O'Connor shows us the danger in making assumptions about "good country people" in her story of the same title, in which a woman with a missing leg decides to seduce a young traveling Bible salesman. Instead, he plies her with liquor and steals her prosthesis. Shirley Jackson, in her short story "The Lottery" and her novels, "The Haunting of Hill House" and "We Have Always Lived in the Castle," reveals how the most terrifying horror tales are within our own psyches, and Carson McCullers in "The Heart is a Lonely Hunter," explores all the ways lonely humans miss the opportunity to connect even as they are surrounded by others.

Southern Gothic literature is not just literature about the South; it's about reckoning with a shared history that is often grotesque, painful and unjust; most notably, our history of enslaving, brutalizing and murdering people from Africa. By that definition, anything that addresses the aftermath of slavery can be considered Southern Gothic.

Take Toni Morrison's "Beloved," for example. With the ghost of a dead baby at the center of the tale, it is clearly within the Southern Gothic tradition, even if the setting is Ohio. In the past, the authors mentioned above—all white women—and white men such as William Faulkner were the definitive examples of the genre, but as we exclude fewer people from the canon of Great Western Literature, we are seeing more Southern Gothic literature written by those most affected by the legacy of slavery: black women and men, past and present.

Zora Neale Hurston's "Their Eyes Were Watching God" is set in Florida, and is about two lovers literally blown apart by racism and hurricanes in the 1920s. Jessmyn Ward, a young African American novelist from Mississippi, traces the legacy of racial injustice up to the present day. She won the National Book Award in 2011 for her novel, "Salvage the Bones," about hurricane Katrina and the devastating effects it has on a family already suffering multiple traumas. Colson Whitehead's novels "Underground Railroad" and "The Nickel Boys" (based on the true story of the notorious boys reform school in

Marianna, Florida) are other excellent recent examples.

Southern Gothic literature revels in peeling back the genteel facade of polite society to reveal the pain and ugliness that lies below the surface. Yes, there is a lot to be proud of being Southern, but this, too, is part of who we are.

Why does it matter to be truthful about our past? Besides truth being inherently good in and of itself, it also helps us get what we all most want: connection. Connection with the world, connection with the divine, and most especially connection with other humans. Humans are, after all, primarily social animals and at some level, most of the pain we experience in life is born from times when we have severed that sacred connection with our fellow humans. We often talk with others about what we are reading. These conversations are where connections happen.

For example, in "The Heart is a Lonely Hunter," Carson McCullers tells the story of a deaf-mute named John Singer living in a small southern town in the 1940s. Because he never speaks, he becomes a sounding board for different members of the community: an African-American doctor who comes face to face with the lethality of racism, a white teenage girl who loves music, a bigoted restaurant owner, and an alcoholic labor activist. All these characters long for connection—but not with Mr. Singer. Mr. Singer is silent and the other characters don't really see him. They are able to dehumanize him because of his disability, thinking he is less-than; the possibility of human connection is thus severed.

Today, as we increasingly live our lives online, the threat of social isolation and the lack of human connection is greater than ever. Over the past few years there have been a number of studies on the lethality of "social isolation." The toll on one's physical, as well as emotional health, is remarkable; the AARP says it can be the equivalent of smoking 15 cigarettes a day. Persistent loneliness can raise stress hormones which can cause a variety of ailments from depression and anxiety to Type 2 diabetes and heart disease. It's not just in your head. Loneliness can kill.

How convenient then that Southern Gothic literature

exists to help save us in the present. It's important to understand who we are as a people; where we come from and also the mistakes we have made that have resulted in severing us from part of humanity, amplifying our existential loneliness.

Injustice is part of the story of the South and it is injustice that alienates us from others. If we want the future to be brighter, happier and more connected, we have to be brave and face the pain of the past in all its uncomfortable complicated-ness. We can no longer ignore it, sweep it under the rug, and pretend the ugly parts didn't happen. If we do, the legacy of racism and injustice will continue to play out again and again. As William Faulkner said, "the past is never dead. It's not even past."

With That Moon Language

by Hafiz
(a 14th-century Persian poet)

Admit something:
Everyone you see, you say to them,
"Love me."
Of course you do not do this out loud;
Otherwise
Someone would call the cops.
Still, though, think about this,
This great pull in us to connect.
Why not become the one
Who lives with a full moon in each eye
That is always saying
With that sweet moon
Language
What every other eye in this world is dying to
Hear?

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