

### Touching the Web of Southern Novelists

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## Review

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**Madden, David** *Touching the Web of Southern Novelists*. University of Tennessee Press, \$37.00 hardcover ISBN 9781572334632

### An Interdisciplinary Perspective of the Civil War

David Madden is one of the South's most productive writers. As writer, editor, and teacher, his interests are wide-ranging, and he has published literary fiction, poetry, plays for stage and radio, film scripts, books and articles of criticism, and essays on a wide variety of subjects ranging from history to popular culture. This new book, *Touching the Web of Southern Novelists*, gathers together essays on Robert Penn Warren, William Faulkner, Katherine Anne Porter, Flannery O'Connor, Thomas Wolfe, Ernest Gaines, Jesse Hill Ford, Carson McCullers, George Garrett, Barry Hannah, Cormac McCarthy, James Agee, and Evelyn Scott--and one short story about Agee. The book includes a chronological bibliography of other essays on Southern writers and an analytical index.

As Madden says in his Introduction: What a Tangled Web We Weave When We Practice Fiction the concept behind this collection of essays is . . . a blend of fondness for the writers and their work and a complex interest in their art (3). And, he continues: Among other elements in these essays, implied even when not overtly discussed, is the effect of the Civil War upon southern witnesses (3). (Madden's use of the term Civil War embraces the antebellum, Civil War, and Reconstruction eras.) Madden's approach to the works of these thirteen writers--nearly all of whom are, he points out, among the greatest American, not just Southern, writers (3)--is the technique of the charged image (3). His introduction details the felt, personal connections he has with each of the writers whose work he discusses and provides an emotional as well as intellectual way into each of the essays that follows.

David Madden is uniquely qualified to examine the effect of that war on southern fiction. His most recently published novel is an innovative fiction about

the Civil War, *Sharpshooter* (1996), and he is the founder and former director of the United States Civil War Center at Louisiana State University. It is his opinion that no Northerner can write a true Civil War novel; that *all* southern fiction comes out of the Civil War, and that *Absalom, Absalom!* is the best Civil War novel ever written, not *even though* but *because* it is not overtly about the war. And that is one of several provocative notions for which he makes a compelling case in this collection of essays.

The charged image of the web referred to in the book's title, links these various pieces. At first glance, they seem too varied to be more than superficially connected, but by the end of the book the tangled lines of trajectory between the essays and the writers discussed intersect in ways both artful and, frequently, intuitive.

Madden takes the web as his book's unifying figure from the charged image of the spider web as described by Jack Burden in Chapter IV of *All the King's Men*. In Robert Penn Warren's *All the King's Men: The Charged Image of the Web* Madden talks about the disparate implications of Burden's metaphor and of Madden's concept of the charged image partly inspired by Ezra Pound's definition of literature: Literature is language charged with meaning; great literature is simply language charged with meaning to the utmost degree (33). That, of course, recalls Pound's notion of an image as: that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time. Which is how these essays work--through the juxtaposition of intellect and emotion. Madden's introduction and this first essay on Warren establish the tone of the whole collection. The first essay offers a fresh approach to Warren's fiction, and it establishes the charged image of *this* book: that of the web of personal and literary connections Madden feels for several important Southern writers.

In William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* Quentin! Listen! Madden says: The techniques fiction writers use are in themselves expressions of meaning and conveyors to the reader of experience (48). He asserts that there are two Faulkners in *Absalom, Absalom!*, . . . one the artist at work, the other Faulkner's alter ego, given the name Quentin (47). Madden emphasizes the importance of Faulkner's teaching the reader how to read *Absalom*, employing myriad innovative techniques to show the reader through implication what cannot be overtly expressed. Form and content really are inseparable; the medium really is the message.

The poet Wallace Stevens wonders which to prefer, the beauty of inflection or of innuendo. *Touching the Web of Southern Novelists* gives the reader a dual, bifocal view of the works discussed, because Madden risks public speculation about private feelings--as in Jesse Hill Ford: *On the Loose* which may be more about Madden than Ford. (Madden frequently points out that all first-person stories are about the narrator.) Many of these essays are about the writer's double consciousness (William Faulkner and his alter ego Quentin, Thomas Wolfe and his memory of his young self imaginatively watching his father watching Civil War soldiers pass, James Agee fresh out of Harvard lying in an Alabama sharecropper's bed and glorying in the discomfort of bed bugs). Madden probes the relationship of fact to fiction, the mysteries of what Oscar Wilde calls the telling of beautiful untrue things.

Flannery O'Connor: *Old Testament Christian Storyteller* expresses Madden's personal struggle with the works of a writer with whom he has had a love/hate relationship and also reveals aspects of Madden's personal spirituality. Cormac McCarthy's *The Orchard Keeper*: *Web Montage* offers a list of parallels between Madden and McCarthy, both raised in Knoxville, Tennessee, and confesses to a sense of rivalry with McCarthy that Madden overcomes by thoughtfully revisiting McCarthy's fiction. Barry Hannah: *Geronimo Rex's Thirty-three Years' Reign*, a retrospective look at a review Madden wrote in 1972 of Barry Hannah's first novel, adds a significant southern novelist to the web, as do essays on Ernest Gaines, Carson McCullers, and Evelyn Scott, a writer Madden believes deserves much more attention. Though he readily reveals his struggles with the works of O'Connor, Agee, Hannah, and McCarthy, all of these struggles end with Madden surrendering to the power of the work. He obviously loves much that he finds in these writers--even if it is tough love, it is clearly love.

Thomas Wolfe: *A Reed of Demonic Ecstasy* is a dramatic performance piece that vividly maintains Madden's personal voice by weaving together his essay voice, his (childhood) fictive voice, and Wolfe's fictive voice. This whimsical piece, partly truth and partly fiction, leads to a second, more serious, performance piece on Wolfe. George Garrett: *Continually Astonished by Everything* continues Madden's exploration of the writer's double consciousness, here applied to the works of one of the most innovative and influential Southern writers of the twentieth century. Madden's pursuit of the other-man theme in Garrett's army fictions (amplified by Garrett's autobiography and by some of his academic pieces) demonstrates Madden's unique critical approach. His paired, doubled, other-man image offers a new way of understanding Garrett's fiction

even as it echoes the guiding principle of the connecting web.

Katherine Anne Porter's Flowering Judas:' The Charged Image of Laura and Braggioni amplifies the motif of a web of connections. Just one example of this is the discussion of Porter's tableau technique: . . . it vibrates from within, sending its electrical charge in a radial fashion out into the other images connected to it (63). Here the web image resonates first as a technique within Flowering Judas, then, for the reader of this book, as a thread connecting this essay with the others here collected.

Because Madden's first person voice hovers over these essays, the reader is prepared for the voice of the one piece of fiction, James Agee Never Lived in This House: A Short Story, that immediately follows the essay on *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, the short story another line of trajectory in this web of novelists. The web ripples and vibrates: Quentin moves from storytelling into reality; Madden moves from reality into storytelling.

The collection concludes with the highly personal, poetic piece William Faulkner's *Sanctuary: The Photographs in the 1929 Version* in which Madden brings full circle his method of speculating in print (in public) about his private/personal feelings, the felt connections with the web of other Southern writers--the quick and the dead--alive and vibrating in his imagination.

*Touching the Web of Southern Novelists* is more than a book of literary essays—it is (like Quentin's book) a drama of consciousness. The reader feels the web's connection (a kind of assurance) when Madden's overlapping interests echo from one piece into another, and his dramatized responses--simultaneously intellectual and emotional--unify this wide-ranging and unique book. David Madden's attempt to more fully understand how the work and lives of these particular writers from the South influence his work and his life, and how the Civil War affects (overtly or subtly) all fiction by writers from the South, leads him and his reader to a richer appreciation of the Southern literary tradition.

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