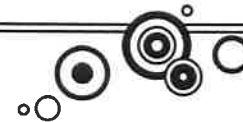


Let's Talk About It

LIBRARY DISCUSSION SERIES

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Discovering the Literary South: The Louis D. Rubin, Jr., Series



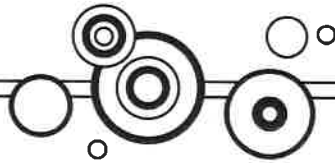
AS NOVELIST, ESSAYIST, TEACHER, EDITOR, AND PUBLISHER, NO SINGLE FIGURE HAS DONE MORE TO DISCOVER THE LITERARY SOUTH THAN LOUIS RUBIN, so to name this series in his honor is singularly appropriate. Rubin was born in Charleston, South Carolina, on November 19, 1923, and the South has been his home ever since. He has been a newspaper editor in Richmond, Virginia, Professor of English at Hollins College in Roanoke and at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and with Shannon Ravenel, founder of Algonquin Books, the publishers of all the award-winning books in this series. He is himself the author of three novels and over fifty other books, most of them on the South's literary culture, but some on subjects as diverse as southern seaports, trains, baseball, and the newspaper business. Perhaps most remarkably, as his student Jill McCorkle (now a published author in her own right) has observed, Rubin is "a great man of letters who has not only produced his own incomparable body of work, but has inspired and encouraged the works of hundred of others."

Rubin began his study of southern literature in the 1950s, and while the South has changed dramatically in the ensuing years, the books in this series retain distinctive qualities of the "southern-ness" that he noted then. Since Mark Twain's time, he tells us, the best southern novels present the remembered life of a small community existing within the rich context of time and change.

Gap Creek: The Story of a Marriage, A Virtuous Woman, The Jew Store, Clover, and The Coal Tattoo: A Novel were all published within the last twenty years by writers who have

moved beyond the hometowns of their youth, yet these novels take a long look back, not for nostalgia's sake but in order to bear witness to the full panoply of time's interactions with place, memory, and family. The eyes and voices that show and tell these stories are generally those of the young, as well, so they ask us to remember those indelible sites of our own first lessons.

"The Southerner always thinks of himself as being from somewhere, as belonging to some spot of earth," author Eudora Welty noted, and the writers of this series acknowledge a "spot of earth" at their narratives' core. However, belonging does not keep their characters from experiencing loss and disruption or from longing to escape. Change is inevitable — and the changes here are universal ones: in each novel, it is a marriage ceremony that starts the old patterns crumbling. Each novel also demonstrates the diversity of southern people. The region these books travel is home to coal miners, African American peach growers, white tenant farmers, Jewish storekeepers, Pentecostal preachers, and Rockabilly crooners. Nowhere to be seen are the outworn stereotypes of belle and mammy, poor white trash, and cotton baron. The stories we hear, in distinctive accents, build a South that is both traditional and contemporary, in its problems and its resolutions. In the South these books depict, distrustful neighbors, insiders and outsiders, learn how to share recipes, raise children, make a living, and even bury their dead. In each novel there is a porch, and we're invited to come on up, sit down, listen, and ask all the questions we dare.



Gap Creek: The Story of a Marriage

by Robert Morgan

A mountain girl's halting voice, a trail of calamities, a move across mountains and back, the smell of harness leather, coffee, and woodsmoke — this is the story of *Gap Creek*. As its subtitle says, it is moreover "the story of a marriage": of Julie and Hank, their first year as man and wife, and the Herculean tests that life hurls at them. Here is the rural, mountain-ringed South a century ago, but it is also a land basically timeless and even biblical, universal but also as southern as the North and South Carolina border country across which Julie and Hank travel to begin life together. Everything about the valley where they settle is "simple and hard" and stripped down to two forces — "love and work."

Robert Morgan, a native of the North Carolina mountains, fashioned Julie's life out of his maternal grandmother's labors, creating a young woman for whom grueling work becomes a form of eloquent self-expression. Her labors run the gamut, from killing to giving life — Julie slaughters and dresses a hog, gathers chestnuts, searches for cressie greens, clears red silt from the house after a flood, and gives birth to a tiny daughter. In every small detail the monumental proportions of Julie's capacity for love and work are realized.

Julie knows little beyond a woman's cycles of birth, work, and death, while Hank knows only a man's dogged, narrow path of duty from one job to the next, but both dream of compensations in a shared home. After fire, flood, and ice storm, after endless rounds of planting, harvesting, and storing, after tentative friendships and cruel betrayals, all that Hank and Julie seem to be allowed to learn is how to start over. What is amazing about their experience, told in a stunningly spare, poetic language, is that this knowledge is all they need.



A Virtuous Woman

by Kaye Gibbons

In just four months, Blinking Jack Stokes has eaten all the dinners that his wife Ruby fixed and stored in deep freeze for him in the weeks before her death. That lung cancer takes Ruby's life when she is only forty-five is a given. Still, it is not the end but just the beginning of Kaye Gibbons' second novel, a story that takes its title from the verses honoring a loving wife in Proverbs 31:10-25.

A Virtuous Woman is the story of a mismatched couple who keep their life-sustaining conversations going, balancing their different perspectives in an often funny, always poignant duet. In alternating chapters Jack and Ruby take turns talking across the fact of Ruby's impending death. Like everything else — their backgrounds, education, and expectations — their stories come from different places. Her vantage point is the few weeks she has left, while his is the time beyond her burial. Yet both head straight for the past, tracing their ordinary lives in an ordinary South, with extraordinary results.

In Jack and Ruby's South, owning land gives people their only edge. Ruby starts with this advantage, as daughter of a fine man with a big farm. When Ruby needs change, she leaps into marriage with her father's opposite, the migrant worker and brutal drunk John Woodrow. As Ruby's rural South measures status, John counts just a little less than poor Jack Stokes, the hard-working tenant farmer who reaches out to Ruby after John's violent death. Pretty twenty-year-old Ruby and "dried up skinny" Jack, twenty years her senior, manage to see beyond the surfaces that typically divide their community. This wisdom constitutes their virtue and their victory: they know what truth is worth and always find it in each other. Neither the South's nor death's dividing lines will keep them from loving or grieving together.



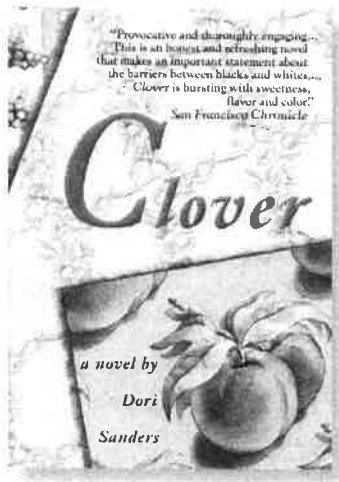
The Jew Store

by Stella Suberman

The Jew Store is the true story of Stella Suberman's girlhood in the small Tennessee town of Concordia. More essentially, it is the story of her parents' struggle to transform — either themselves or the place that marks them as impossibly "alien" by virtue of religion, ethnicity, language, and birthplace. Stella's father, Avram Plotchnikoff, a Russian Jewish immigrant, learns the trading business and how to speak southern in Savannah, Georgia. He marries, begins a family with a good Jewish girl from New York, then follows his heart to Concordia to establish his own dry goods store, only to be greeted

by "Danged if I ever heard tell of a Jew storekeeper afore." In ***The Jew Store***, American dream meets southern reality, which, among its beauty includes anti-Semitism and the KKK. Even with a new Americanized last name (Bronson), Stella and Avram face hard choices: to fight, to accommodate, to dare, to give in.

Suberman's Concordia of the 1920s is a quintessentially southern town facing the monumental changes out of which so much great southern drama springs. The community ruled by white power, Protestant tradition, and an agrarian economy must accept or turn away factories essential to their livelihood, automobiles that challenge their dirt roads, African Americans seeking jobs and equal pay, and the Bronsons themselves, harbingers of a new kind of American moving ever closer.

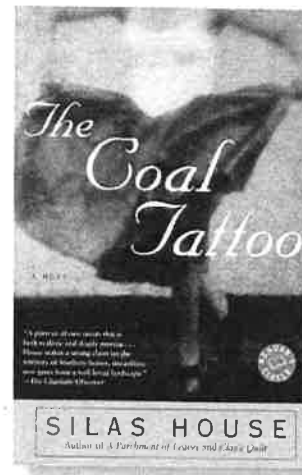


Clover

by Dori Sanders

Clover, the title character of Dori Sanders' first novel, is a precocious ten-year-old black girl who tells the story of her changing relationship with her white stepmother following her father's terrible death only hours after the wedding. Clover and Sara Kate, the white widow whom no one in Clover's family wants around, must negotiate every inch of emotional and physical ground they share, in the house that was Clover's granddaddy's, in the middle of southern, segregated peach country.

With *Clover*, Sanders, who was raised on her family's peach farm in upstate South Carolina, tackles racism from the inside, within a black family that has no idea how to treat a white woman whose every action speaks of her difference. The genius of the narrative is that it comes through Clover's eyes and voice, unfiltered by the grown-ups' attempts to hide their rejection of the woman their brother, Gaten Hill, insisted on loving and marrying in spite of taboos from both sides of the color line. Clover shows us the shallowness of supposed race-based differences through her daily interactions with her stepmother. She begins to see through Sara Kate's strange way of fixing food, her use of lace doilies, and her insistence on grieving in private and to acknowledge that her new mother's stubborn loyalty to her is what really counts.



The Coal Tattoo: A Novel

by Silas House

Workers who survive accidents in the mines can be scarred by a "coal tattoo," a kind of permanent stain left on skin that has been broken by the coal. When Silas House leads us into the Altamont, Kentucky, mine and up on the hills above, we find that all the families who live here bear scars, some physical, some emotional, some spiritual. As House explains, the people who make their living in coal country are marked by the land: "In a place of roughness and beauty, both the land and the people get under your skin one way or another."

The Coal Tattoo is the last novel in a trilogy that draws on the House family history. The three works follow several generations living within the same closely held space in southern Appalachia. *The Coal Tattoo* mines the lives of sisters who are as different as summer and winter up on Free Creek holler, but never whole without each other. Easter stays home while Anneth roams and returns, but events from beyond their sheltered lives penetrate them both like the wind, especially in the decade of the sixties, with its wild music, tragic war, and trampling of tradition.

House weaves together memory and experience through the cadences of Appalachian speech and introduces readers to a full cast of grandparents, husbands, cousins, and strangers. From their grandmothers especially, Easter and Anneth learn how to grow the food, sing the songs, and preserve the bonds that make happiness possible. Up on Free Creek, birth and death, love and hate, pride and shame are bound terribly close, as life is stripped to its bare essentials. Only what matters most remains: family, music, faith in God, and most of all, love for the land that brutally or tenderly holds everything together.

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