

## 過渡期の中の南部諸州ボビー・アン・メースンの 短編小説におけるポップカルチャーの熟考

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### The South In Transition : Reflections On The "Throw-Away" Culture In The Short Stories Of Bobbie Ann Mason

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The American South has always held at its core a sense of mystery and inviolability that has both attracted and repelled outsiders. More than any other geographical area of the United States it evokes vivid images in the mind, which are inseparable from its tortured history of racism and the Civil War, while at the same time incorporating the glossy myth of the old South depicted in novels such as *Gone With The Wind*. This collusion of the tragic, the mysterious, and the magical is the irresistible cocktail that drew me in early on and led me to Atlanta and New Orleans in my students days, yearning for a glimpse of this enigmatic land where so many cultures collide. Of course the South is a wide area, and its images are often far removed from reality, but they persist in our collective consciousness, perhaps fueled by contemporary windows into this cultural milieu, such as John Berendt's *Midnight In the Garden of Good and Evil*, a gothic tale of life in present day Savannah. The book's smash success is a testament to the public's ongoing fascination with the elusive South.

Southern literature has always been a pretty accurate barometer of the Southern psyche, especially from the 1920's onward, when the genre came into its own for the first time. This Southern Renaissance which lasted until the 1950's, produced writers who harnessed the Southern sense of the tragic, and developed a body of literature that embraced their collective pain, and gave

the world some of the finest writing of the twentieth century, as Fred Hobson points out in his book on the postmodern tradition in Southern writing:

During the years of the Renaissance it was assumed--and accepted by all, friend and foe--that the South was the defeated, failed, poor, unprogressive part of the United States. But an irony of southern literary history, to go along with all the other southern ironies, is that this legacy of defeat and failure served well the writer in the South. Like Quentin Compson at Harvard, the southern writer wore his heritage of failure---and often guilt---as his badge of honor. It provided him or her something that no other American writer, or at least American novelist, of the twentieth century had in any abundance--that is, a tragic sense. The Southerner alone among Americans, as C. Vann Woodward has pointed out, had known defeat, had known what it was not to succeed, not to prosper.<sup>1</sup>

Thus during the decades of the southern literary renaissance, the South's tragic past was commemorated in the superb and timeless works of Faulkner, Wolfe, O'Connor, Styron and many others, which today comprise an integral part of the world's literary heritage.

Yet in recent decades this obsession with history and place, and the southern writers' love/hate relationship with it, that in fact took so many of them away from their birthplaces, and left them wrestling with this issue throughout their

careers, in novels such as Wolfe's *You Can't Go Home Again* and *Look Homeward Angel*, has been largely left behind for a less tortured relationship with home, family, and the vestiges of the past. Southern sensibilities still play an important part, but without the heavy emotional and psychological baggage of the modernists, as Hobson discusses:

I do not believe that this is the case with most southern writers who have begun to publish in the past fifteen or twenty years. Those writers--again broadly speaking--seem hardly to have the need to join the battle, to wrestle with racial sin and guilt. What one finds in more recent novelists such as Bobbie Ann Mason and Anne Tyler is a relative lack of southern self-consciousness.<sup>2</sup>

This lack of self-consciousness that Hobson describes with regard to the southern writers from the seventies onward has released them from invisible chains to an overwhelming past, and given them the freedom to write about family, place and community in a new light without having to pass everything through the sieve of history.

In other words, they can go home again and even stay there. Among contemporary southern writers, Bobbie Ann Mason is one for whom this is especially true. Her focus is on the present, in particular, western Kentucky, which is in the throes of transition from encroaching industrialization, resulting in the economic displacement of large numbers of people already living on the edge, whose desperate embrace of popular or "throw away" culture she depicts with honesty and a total lack of condescension:

...we are struck not so much by economic poverty in her characters--economics is really of little importance to her--but rather emotional and spiritual poverty. One finds a nearly complete absence of nurturing family, community and religion, those staples of traditional southern life and literature; some of the inhabitants of the small

town in Mason's western Kentucky give up; others just absorb disappointment and carry on with gritty determination, finding some temporary pleasure in the in the mass culture around them.<sup>3</sup>

Mason's focus on popular culture along with contemporaries such as Ann Tyler and Jayne Ann Phillips among others, is reminiscent of the same tradition in nineteenth century literature with the appearance of novels such as *Tom Sawyer*, in which mass culture first played a role in southern writing. Yet despite this new embrace of "low culture" in the postmodern tradition, it has been shunned by many members of the literary establishment who are put off by scholarly explorations into it. William Ferris, who created The Center For The Study Of Southern Culture at the University of Mississippi, was most unpopular for his establishment of seminars on Elvis as part of his exploration of popular southern history. However, Mason is in Ferris' camp, and her spotlight on the place that television, radio DJ's, fast food, and strip malls hold in the lives of people without a strong sense of family, community, and direction, offers a sensitive and moving portrait of a community in transition.

In this paper I'll examine the ramifications of popular culture in the postmodern southern tradition through the short stories of Bobbie Ann Mason. The three stories I'll discuss are *Midnight Magic*, *Sorghum*, and *Memphis*, all from her 1998 collection, *Midnight Magic*, a new release of some of her best short stories. It was followed by the publication this year of her memoir, *Clear Springs*, which is rich in the Kentucky lore that she recreates so well in her work.

The alienation and confusion that Mason depicts so astutely in her images of the modern South in transition is starkly evident in Steve, the protagonist of *Midnight Magic*. He's a lost soul, and the only family he seems to have is a father doing a long prison sentence for robbery whose advice to his son was, "cover your tracks and

accentuate the positive".<sup>5</sup> With nothing but this advice in his pocket, it's no wonder that Steve spends his off time from his job at a mattress factory racing around town in his hot rod, "Midnight Magic", with the radio on and a six pack of beer at his side. He seems to intuit that there's more to life than his narrow path, but is incapable of moving beyond his circle game.

His girlfriend Karen deals with her desperation by maintaining a list of projects such as painting her apartment, altering her dresses and cleaning her house with a vengeance. In addition, she has regular consultations with Sardo, a fourteen year old girl, who's supposedly the incarnation of an ancient Indian sage: "Sardo says the answers are in yourself not God"<sup>6</sup>, she quips in an aside to Steve, rebuking the fundamentalism of the evangelical ministries pervading the airwaves in this small Kentucky town.

The world that Steve, Karen, Steve's best friend Doran, and his new wife, Nancy, inhabit is one in which McDonald's, television, the mall, and pop music are family. Form masquerades as substance, and attempts at getting out of their suffocating world usually end in resignation and defeat. Steve views Karen's stabs at improving her lot and reaching for a world that won't disappear when the new TV season begins, as a rejection of his world, in which paper plates are more expedient, drunken nights offer a brief release from rage and fear, and a trashed out apartment with terminal clutter keeps emptiness at bay. He's totally enamored of Doran's wife, Nancy, who, while not to his mind as attractive as Karen, dresses in bright, trendy, outfits and practices witty responses to hypothetical "Newlywed Game" questions in case she and Doran are selected as contestants.

Yet as we observe these young southerners, adrift in a dead end universe which most of them seem to embrace, Mason lets us know that there's no condescension in her attitude toward this disenfranchised group--that the pop icons furnish-

ing their world are a legitimate way to cope if nothing else is available. Furthermore, as we listen to Steve's silent musing as he sits in his kitchen one night with a Big Mac, a double order of fries and a beer, his angst and emptiness could belong to anyone: "The Cardinals game is just beginning. He feels at loose ends. Sometimes he has sudden feelings of desperation he can't explain".<sup>6</sup>

Steve's aimlessness as he careens from the laudromat to the gas station to McDonald's in his jalopy, *Midnight Magic*, is a reflection of his speedy, disposable world in which take-out coffee beats figuring out how to make it, and an attention span beyond one's favorite tunes or TV sitcom is unreachable. His fractured existence is representative of the directionless lives of many Southerners in the "New New" South as it's sometimes called, who have watched family farms swallowed up by industry, leaving large numbers of people with nothing but minimum wage jobs as factory workers and store clerks to sustain them. While Mason's focus doesn't rest solely on this underclass in the American South, it's definitely a concern in much of her writing. She has genuine empathy for the large number of people who live on the edge, victims of circumstance as well as their own paralysis in the face of change.

Steve, Karen and their friends are doing their best to decode their existences and find some meaning in daily life, even if it falls within the limited parameters of the strip mall, a teenage channeler's babblings, and the Bluebird cocktail lounge in Paducah, the "big town" nearest their small suburban enclave. Their resources are limited as in turn are their solutions, but none of them is essentially any different than their more comfortably middleclass compatriots in their search for recognition and love as Doran attests to when he confides in Steve about his marriage to Nancy, whom he'd met six weeks before: "It was like winning the sweepstakes. She really makes me feel like somebody. Isn't that all

anybody wants in the world--just to feel like somebody?"<sup>7</sup>

For this crowd the formula for ecstasy is winning the lottery, and instant riches or love is not just a comforting fantasy, but actually, they seem to believe, within their grasp--even when the following day--or week offers them a starkly different close up of reality. The relationship that had filled Steve with such envy a few weeks earlier is already sounding peculiarly familiar when Doran calls him for a ride home from the Nashville airport on his way back from his honeymoon: "Well, hurry. Nancy's real tired. She had insomnia last night."<sup>8</sup> So much for Nancy's spiffy image in sports tights, and her pretentious fawning over Doran!

Yet despite the transparency of it all Steve remains a true believer in his gulp and gallop world and is only briefly shaken into sobriety as he bombs down the highway to the Nashville airport and nearly runs over a dead body lying in the middle of the road. His conscience forces him to stop and call for help, but when the police operator answers the phone he remembers the beers he's had, and has second thoughts about being a good Samaritan:

"Sir?" she says. "Are you there, sir? ...His head buzzes from the beer. On his knuckle is a blood blister he doesn't know where he got. Steve studies his car through the door of the phone booth. His muffler has been growing throatier, making an impressive drag-race rumble. It's the power of Midnight Magic, the sound of his heart."<sup>9</sup>

We leave Steve with his trusty companion, Midnight Magic, revving up by the side of the road, luring him back to the oblivion of his makeshift universe.

In Sorghum, Mason introduces us to another slice of life in rural western Kentucky, only this time the cast of characters are a couple in their thirties with two-children. Yet that is where the differences end, for the script is the same in its

echoes of desperation and hopelessness. This time we see the world through the eyes of Liz, a disaffected spouse who works at a discount store. Her husband Danny works the night shift at a tire plant after which he roars around their subdivision drunk, trying to burn off the rage and boredom of his circumscribed life. Liz has long felt estranged from Danny, whose insensitive love-making and general obtuseness have resulted in her retreat from any attempts at intimacy.

Weekends were shocking when they saw each other awake and older. They had something like a commuter marriage she thought, with none of the advantages. Liz didn't love Danny in the same way anymore. When he was drunk he made love as though he were plowing corn, and she did not enjoy it.<sup>10</sup>

To combat her stress and loneliness Liz tunes in to a radio psychic who gives readings based on the sound of people's voices. Word of mouth in Liz's circle has it that this woman, Sue Ann Grooms, has made so many accurate predictions, she's become the de facto town sage. Thus when Liz gets the notion that Danny is having an affair she calls Grooms for a reading, and is told that, yes, her husband is fooling around. At this news, despite its spurious source, Liz's wheels start spinning, contemplating anything and everything that will vault her into a new dimension: "She felt a burning desire for no one in particular, nothing she knew, but she expected it would make sense sooner or later."<sup>11</sup>

Despite her new found "knowledge", she still hopes to find this elusive something in her own world and takes a stab at renewing her intimacy with Danny by suggesting dinner at a fancy restaurant. Her gesture is met with a sarcastic and cynical response: "You're always wanting something we can't afford. ....The more you get, the more you want."<sup>12</sup> Danny is threatened and lumps Liz's romantic gesture in with all of her other attempts at change, including her desire to finish college. He recounts the story of a friend's wife,

who after attending college, changed her hairstyle and her cooking---proof for Danny that the status quo, however stagnant, is preferable to the risk involved in trying something new. Liz's frustrated reply that there's more to life than just getting by leaves him nonplused---he's clueless and without the scope to see beyond the present.

Liz's wish for stimulation and positive energy in her life is granted in the person of Ed Summer, whose father owns the sorghum farm where Liz stopped by one day for a taste of days gone by. Ed is an educated man with his own business in Memphis, who's in town to help his father out with the sorghum production. Yet as Liz falls under his spell and gets a glimpse of his world, she realizes that only his veneer is different, but underneath Ed is stuck in the same emotional black hole she's struggling to escape from. He's been married three times, not being one for long-term commitments, and even married one woman because he fell in love with her child first, and had an image of himself playing baseball and going fishing with the boy:

"Once I saw this great little kid who played little league. He was a perfect little guy--blond hair and blue eyes and smart as a whip. He had a good grip on that bat, and he could run. You know what I did? I found his mother and married her and had an instant great kid."<sup>13</sup>

Of course when Liz inquires as to what happened to the boy and his mother, Ed unabashedly replies that the kid grew up and got into trouble, but that he was gone long before that!

Liz is looking for something more than the constricting noose of her spiritually empty marriage, and her brief respites from tedium through Kate and Allie, her favorite TV show, Chevy Chase movies, and listening to the radio psychic aren't getting her through the day anymore. She'd also like more security than her minimum wage existence provides, but what Ed is offering differs only in his financial status--otherwise he's

as much a paragon of the vacuousness that Liz is desperate to eschew with his multiple marriages and his throw-away kid as Danny. Her husband left the marriage emotionally, and treats Liz like a commodity to be used up as desired along with beer and gasoline, thus neither man is capable of the intimacy she's seeking. Nevertheless her affair with Ed gradually evolves until one day she contrives a way to join him for a weekend at a lake where there will be an annual "game" banquet with several of his hunting buddies.

The dinner at Ed's friend's house is a bizarre yearly event among his cronies and their wives, who don't need telephone psychics to get them through the day as the hunting world is their refuge of choice. The dinner table is decorated with a duck decoy centerpiece and plastic goose place card holders, and the host is wearing a suit jacket made of camouflage material. This cozy scene is set against a backdrop of duck decoys lined up on shelf after shelf around the room.

Mason's lack of condescension toward Liz and Danny's grim and colorless workaday world is confirmed by the pathetic, yet comical picture she paints of Ed's well-to-do friends who've filled their emptiness with expensive objects and a distorted theme park mentality. The high point of their social life each year is a grotesque feast of several "critters" as they are referred to, from the past year's hunting season, including to Liz's horror, possum. All the meat had been frozen months before and saved for this yearly ritual. Mason seems to be pointing the same finger here at the distortions that rural life has undergone in all of Kentucky's economic strata as industry has crept in and eroded the old ways.

Liz ends up in her host's baroque bathroom sick to her stomach on all levels from this absurd circus of a dinner party, perhaps seeing Ed against his true backdrop for the first time. She knows her old life with Danny is over, but neither is the thought of becoming Ed's newest decoration her answer either. As usual Mason leaves us on

our own as to how Liz fares, although we get a hint of her willingness to recreate herself as she sneaks out of the dinner party and into the hot tub, bubbling outside: "She touched her toe in the hot water. It seemed too hot to bear, but she decided she would bear it--like a punishment, or an acquired taste that would turn delicious when she was used to it."<sup>14</sup> Just as the changing economic landscape in the South has forced people to reinvent themselves in the workplace--so must they retune their psyches to prepare the ground for new ways of being.

The final story I'd like to discuss is Memphis, which offers another window into the changing face of southern life. Beverly and Joe, like Steve and Karen of *Midnight Magic*, and Liz and Danny of *Sorghum*, are a couple that can't find their way together or apart. Since their divorce Beverly's been dating and trying to discover what she wants, but all she feels is either numbness or overwhelm:

"She didn't trust her intelligence anymore. She couldn't repeat the simplest thing she heard on the news and have it make sense to anyone. ....She felt she had strong ideas and meaningful thoughts, but often when she tried to reach for one she couldn't find it. It was terrifying."<sup>15</sup>

Their Kentucky subdivision is full of couples just like Beverly and Joe, whose income improved with the influx of new plants, enabling them more purchasing power which translated for so many families into three-wheelers and motorcycles galore piling up in their driveways, and ironically a downturn in their quality of life; drinking and arguing increased with this new greed that permeated their lives and every other couple in their social circle was either divorced or on the way there. Beverly thinks that life offers too many options these days and often lapses into reveries about the past when her father farmed tobacco and led a boringly predictable life; yet now that life seems so deliciously simple, choiceless, and close to the natural world---so much more real:

She remembered him burning the tobacco beds--the pungent smell, the threat of wind. She used to think his life was dull, but now she had started thinking about those routines as beliefs. She compared them to the routines in her life with Joe: her CNN news fix, telephoning customers at work and entering orders on the computer, the couple of sixpacks she and Joe used to drink every evening.<sup>16</sup>

Beverly is at a turning point in her life and her ambiguity over Joe is symbolic of her conundrum. When he announces that he's being transferred to South Carolina her crisis is brought to the surface. She escapes town for a weekend by accompanying a friend on a business trip to Memphis, which provides a temporary retreat from the intensity of her confusion, and a chance for an inner sounding on how she really feels about Joe: "Sometimes she felt they were both stalled at a crossroads, each thinking the other had the right-of-way. But now his foot was on the gas."<sup>17</sup>

The changes she observes in the landscape on the way to Memphis only further serve to accentuate her feelings of uprootedness---as if these outer transformations and her inner displacement are one and the same. Interspersed with what remains of farmland are K-Marts and Walmarts and lots of small, dilapidated houses that seemed to reflect the run-down condition of those living inside them, and served as a reminder that the injection of new capital into the local economy did not fall into everyone's lap. Route 51 which took them right into Memphis is a kaleidoscope of cultural icons of the new South :

"They passed a display of black-velvet paintings beside a van, a ceramic glassware place, a fireworks stand, motels, package stores, autobody shops, car dealers that sold trampolines and satellite dishes. A stretch of faded old wooden buildings--grim and gray and ramshackle--followed, then factories, scrap---metal places, junkyards, ancient grills and poolrooms, small

houses so old the wood looked rotten. Then came the housing projects.<sup>18</sup>

Their time in Memphis with her friend Jolene did afford Beverly some breathing room or as Joe put it, "you said you had to have your own space and find yourself--you know all that crap on TV."<sup>19</sup> As they shopped and bar-hopped Beverly reminisced about her past and trying to understand who altered the script and didn't send her the changes. Memphis's tall buildings only further served as a reminder of how removed she was from her childhood days on the farm, and even the early days in her subdivision when Joe planted the still sad-looking oak in their yard. She returned home in the same equivocal state of mind, almost longing for the claustrophobic days her mother lived through when there were no options:

"It ought to be easy to work out what she really wanted. Beverly's parents had stayed married like two dogs locked together in passion, except it wasn't passion....Times had changed. Who knew what might happen or what anybody would decide to do on any given weekend or at any stage of life?"<sup>20</sup>

Yet again we are left wondering how this person will fare--whether or not she'll find a way to make friends with ambiguity and come to an acceptance of the "new rules" without forsaking her own values.

Bobbie Ann Mason's writing has been praised for its sensitive and intimate portrait of the changing South, which as I've discussed above is in great part a result of the industrialization of large areas, which in the not too distant past, were sustained by small family farms and businesses. Yet change is inevitable, and individuals will probably always have to scramble at one time or another to understand the new prerogatives in the marketplace to keep their livelihoods going. As Spencer Johnson says in his latest book, *Who Moved My Cheese*, a parable about a mouse which offers advice on how to prepare for

economic and societal shifts, "Change happens, so anticipate change---Get ready for the cheese to move"<sup>21</sup>. Despite its wisdom, this advice won't fill the spiritual vacuum that haunts these characters, caught in the crosscurrents between the old and the new. Perhaps the words of their creator, describing the inner journey that provided her inspiration for these stories, offers a better clue:

I was venturing along roads that looked familiar, but which I found myself seeing in a new way. ... It's as though a cornucopia has been stoppered and needs to be uncorked by the muse--to divulge its extravagant contents.<sup>22</sup>

Perhaps Steve, Liz, Beverly and the others have the tools they need to effect changes in their lives within themselves, and it's only a matter of having the courage to invoke the muse and have a look.

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