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## Book Review: After O'Connor: Stories from Contemporary Georgia

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**Hugh Ruppensburg**, (Editor)

*AFTER O'CONNOR: Stories from Contemporary Georgia*. Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2003, 375 p.

The publication of this collection ought to be an occasion to celebrate not only the quality of writing in Georgia these days but the number of writers producing it. The 30 authors represented in this new (September 2003) volume certainly reflect a proud diversity: old, young, black, white, Asian. They are seemingly an eclectic assemblage of varying styles and experiences whose diversity is their only bond. But in fact there are some uniting elements, as veteran editor Hugh Ruppensburg of the University of Georgia points out in his introduction.

The writers of the Flannery O'Connor era were defined by events in the first half of the last century, most notably World War II, he writes. Those since have emerged under very different circumstances, from a long and bitter Cold War, a startling growth of technology, and a shift from rural to urban life. And yet these contemporary writers are continuing literary traditions even as they redefine those traditions to encompass the vital, changing relationships, geography, culture and politics of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Hence the anthology offers a sampling of many tastes and styles. Moultrie native Charlie Smith's three-paragraph submission "Park Diary" may barely qualify as a short story under traditional definitions, but it has a passion for its subject – heroin and its victims – that earlier writers would have understood. Then there's Bailey White and James Kilgo, each with a firmly planted small-town Southern setting and familiar themes of family and storytelling. White, however, uses a gracious whimsy in "An Unsuitable Attachment" while Kilgo explores poignancy in memory in the graceful "The Resurrection of George T. Sutton."

There's scarcely a page here where writing fails to crackle with life, whether in the pain of Pearl Cleage's striking "Four From That Summer: Atlanta, 1981," or the powerful breaking free of tradition encapsulated in Pam Durban's powerful "Soon" or the sheer fun of Ferrol Sams' near-classic, "The Widow's Mite." Memorable stories from Mary Hood, Starkey Flythe, Alice Walker, Ha Jin, Carol Lee Lorenzo and others are here. And whether each writer is known to each reader matters not; the joy lies in the discovery no less than the reaffirmation.

Ruppensburg's story selections are admirable, and the brief author introductions add a needed touch of biography. Libraries public and academic will require a copy of *After O'Connor*, and its usefulness in high school and college literature courses is obvious.

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**Sharyn McCrumb**.

*Ghost Riders*. Dutton, 2003. 333p.

With *Ghost Riders*, Sharyn McCrumb has written a Civil War novel from the prospective of the North Carolina mountain country, from both present and past points of view. Having researched the period, the outcome is thought-provoking and educational. By moving us between the past and the present, she interweaves the lives of a number of characters: Rattler, a part Cherokee healer; Nora Bonesteel, a woman with the "sight;" Tom Gentry, bent on committing suicide; and the Civil War re-enactors from present day along with those from the past—Zebulon Vance, a Confederate general/politician and Malinda and Keith Blalock, Union sympathizers. Like most novels with a number of characters, it is hard to see how these will fit together, but they do so beautifully.

The Civil War was an era of brother against brother, neighbor against neighbor; one after which misdeeds are not easily forgotten. As Malinda puts it, "Wars are easier to start than they are to stop." In this commentary, Sharyn McCrumb illustrates the harsh conditions of war on both the soldiers and their families at home, and uses Malinda as an example of women in the service and Keith as a draft dodger.

Mountain people don't like people telling them what to do, so most rebelled against conscription. Even though they did not have an investment in the slave issue and, therefore, didn't agree with secession, these men were forced into service. It's ironic that the South did not want the North telling them what to do, but the Confederate government was doing just that to its own people. The Civil War re-enactors are stirring up the ghosts, bringing the past into the present. "They will not let loose of that war. You would have thought that losing that war once would be enough for them."

This novel works well on a number of levels—as an example of the Southern tradition of intertwining past and present, as a social commentary on the personal side of war, and as a historically accurate account of a forgotten aspect of that war. With her usual aplomb, Ms. McCrumb has written a deeply moving, hard-to-forget story of love, war, and healing, personifying Faulkner's quote, "The past is not dead. In fact, it's not even past."

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