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Review of Clabough's "Inhabiting Contemporary Southern and Appalachian Literature"

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**Inhabiting Contemporary Southern and
Appalachian Literature: Region and Place in the
Twenty-First Century**

By Casey Clabough (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2012)
\$74.95, cloth. ISBN 9780813041735, 202 pp.

"Why Read for Place?" is the question raised in the introduction to Casey Clabough's *Inhabiting Contemporary Southern and Appalachian Literature*. This book, as the title suggests, is an apologia for the practice of doing so. "What I am proposing, in a literary context," he writes, "is a New Regionalism: an idea of place which recognizes the individual and community as

stewards of land and culture in attempting to realize a sustainable future for one's immediate environment and—if enough others choose a similar path—the planet” (12). “It is the communal local,” he argues, “that has assumed practical and moral responsibility for human life as it proceeds deeper into the twenty-first century.” Clabough’s is an engaged criticism, to say the least.

In addition to charting the book’s political purpose, Clabough’s cogent introductory essay accomplishes a second task of establishing the theoretical foundation for his individual author studies, grounding his work with phenomenological critics and philosophers. While the book never loses sight of this broader purpose, it is less thesis-driven than one might suspect: it’s a monograph, yes, but a collection of essays, too. For its commentary on individual writers as well as for its greater rhetorical arc, it makes a worthwhile contribution to the scholarship of the region.

One particularly engaging aspect of *Inhabiting*, not only in the introduction but throughout, is that, true to his own phenomenological grounding, Clabough does not divorce his life story from his critical voice. In fact, chapters which demand serious consideration as critical essays occasionally maneuver far enough into the critic’s own experience to read as something akin to literary non-fiction; Clabough exercises his freedom to integrate material from his “non-textual” life. Far from being distractions or asides, these strains demonstrate the holistic nature of his approach. They make his work all the more engaging and—in a critical climate that sometimes confuses erudition with difficulty—readable.

Most likely to be cited, I’ll guess, are the substantial readings of James Dickey’s *The White Sea* and Fred Chappell’s *The Gaudy Place*. Clabough’s phenomenological approach is particularly suited to Dickey’s strangely disturbing final novel. The critic uses his extensive knowledge of Dickey’s sources (Darvis Fisher’s novels *Mountain Man* and *Dark Bidwell*, Xenophon’s *Anabasis*, the accounts of serial killer Ted Bundy, and, most helpfully, Barry Lopez’s *Arctic Dreams*) to clarify and explicate the intentionality behind this troubling narrative; and simultaneously, Clabough’s realizations carve a place of their own in this study that deftly interweaves source/literary work/critical exegesis. His spot-on reading of Muldrow, Dickey’s amoral protagonist, demonstrates clearly why readers find the character at once repulsive and compelling, as he “seduces the reader into his world view” (26). Muldrow’s complete merger into place, its topography, even its fauna, along with his relentless drive to *stay alive* (*alive* itself no easy-to-define concept in the context of this novel) comes to a terrifying clarity in Clabough’s treatment. One single line from the essay might serve as a helpful gloss for those who, for good or ill, choose to read the novel: “Dickey constructs a provocative scenario in which a human being’s subsistence hinges on the strength and effectiveness of his apparent inhumanity” (30). Exactly.

Clabough offers another perfectly telling gloss in “Representing Urban Appalachia: Fred Chappell’s *The Gaudy Place*” when he argues that the novel is

"essentially a meditation on place" and that "the book's setting ... serves as its dominant character" (67). This single insight potentially earns more respect for Chappell's novel, particularly from readers put off by the narrative's not always successful structural play. After an introductory section covering the book's less than positive critical reception, Clabough lays out his understanding of the sense of place in Southern Appalachian literature, then the sense of place in urban literature; and in the process, he demonstrates how Chappell is using his place differently here than in his earlier work. It seems to me that a good move might have been to acknowledge the greater difficulty of establishing place in urban settings more generally, as the sense of *urban* can overpower the sense of *Appalachian*.

Having described the challenge or situation Chappell has assigned himself in *The Gaudy Place* (by attempting possibly the first urban novel of the New South), Clabough presents his engaging discussion of what is, for me, the novel's most obvious strength: the deftly drawn characters, particularly those of the urban underclass, Arkie and Oxie. In doing so, Clabough manages to integrate and demonstrate the degree to which Chappell's characterizations are fundamentally tied to the place, Braceboro. His best critical insight demonstrates convincingly how the characters are defined by their interaction with and adaptation to their environment.

While the essays on Dickey and Chappell may earn the most citations, *Inhabiting Contemporary Southern and Appalachian Literature* may ultimately prove to make its greatest contribution in the essays that serve as introductions to lesser known authors, writers familiar to students of Appalachian literature but relatively obscure in broader circles. "One Writer's Place: The South of George Garrett" is an appreciation of the full compass of Garrett's contribution, primarily as a novelist but also as poet and critic. Clabough posits that Garrett has contributed to redefining not only Southern literature but the very nature of regional forms. He demonstrates Garrett's aggressive manipulation of issues that confront the contemporary Southern artist, from the overwhelming shadow of Faulkner to the quixotic siege of a literary establishment that has preconceived notions of Southern literature and expects them to be fulfilled.

"The Truths of William Hoffman's Southern Appalachian Places: The Critics' and His Own" is, on the one hand, an argument for Hoffman as one of the finest writers of his generation; on the other hand, it's a lament that such a writer is now largely out of print, a critical neglect that is "mysterious and unfortunate" (94). The only reason offered is that Hoffman seems so self-evidently good that there is little else to say about him. That's a pretty fair tease, I think, if one of Clabough's goals for this book is to stimulate scholarly interest in writers whose works deserve broader attention. This coverage of Hoffman's work is engaging but too brief, and the chapter's second half is Clabough's 2001 interview with the writer, who died in 2009.

"'Out of Space, Out of Time': The Virginia Novels of Julien Green" is another of Clabough's enticing overviews of an under-appreciated writer. The essay

provides extensive introductory material to Green and his novels, necessarily including a good bit of plot summary due to the relative obscurity of Green's work. Yet it is a worthwhile critical inclusion, too, as it presents the perspective of a "Southern" writer who was reared and spent most of his life in France. This chapter is a cogent and engaging preface to his life and works. Its greatest critical usefulness is in demonstrating Green's historical and artistic progression.

The most successful introduction to an under-appreciated writer in the collection is "Here, There, Where: David Huddle's Appalachian Virginia." Stylistically, this essay seems to me an intriguing confluence: Clabough incorporates the region's history and his personal history into the essay, and both become components in his critical appraisal of Huddle's work. Clabough deals seamlessly with Huddle's fiction and poetry, deftly demonstrating the appropriateness of his phenomenological approach. Significantly, Clabough observes that the tension in Huddle's work is one that characterizes the work of Appalachian writers more generally: "to portray the value of their places and/or cultures in the face of national and/or global ignorance and hostility without coming across as sentimental, nostalgic, or polemical" (174).

The book's final chapter would seem out of place in most critical works, but given the nature of Clabough's topic and method, "Epilogue: Writing for a Place—A Writer's Workshop for McDowell County, West Virginia" seems a fitting conclusion. The essay, which recounts a community writing project Clabough led in McDowell County is compelling, moving, and possibly the strangest epilogue to a book of literary criticism I've read. Along with reflections about the project, it includes selections from the writing group manual he and his partner created for the project, interspersed with economic and historical information about McDowell County. That it stands as the final word in a volume that has been a complex critique of "high" literary art, may serve as a reminder of the author's over-arching thesis about regionalism in the South and Appalachia. The clear implication is that a literary artist's challenge is, in coming to terms with one's place, not so different from that of a new writer risking his or her first words in the basement of a local church.

Inhabiting Contemporary Southern and Appalachian Literature makes a significant contribution to understanding the role of place in the minds and work of writers, offers insightful interpretive work on some well-known authors, and serves as an intelligent introduction to several deserving figures. An engaging and sophisticated examination, it displays a range and depth of reading in primary and secondary materials that proves Clabough a worthy guide.

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