The Dark Frontier of Dixie

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According to Frank D. McSherry Jr. in the ‘Introduction’ to his short story collection, *Nightmares in Dixie: 13 Horror Tales from the American South*,

‘To most of us, Dixie means the Confederacy, the romantic dream of the Lost Cause…the term conjures up a romantic picture out of the past, a white-pillared mansion candlelit at night, waltz music flowing like a river in spring, sensuous as the odor of magnolias…lovely women in ball gowns, a swirl of red and gold, dancing in the arms of gallant gentlemen.’

However as the 21st century grows into its own literary era and away from the literary genres of the previous hundred years, both readers of southern fiction and southern authors have discovered a cavernous void left by the growing literary absence of the ‘plantation saga’. In fact, the Southland grows more ripe and ready for the new buds of literary genres blossoming across Dixie daily in this new century. However, most of the changes in southern fiction began in the last quarter of the 1900s. It was then that a plethora of new southern authors stepped forth to fill the void, bringing new genres of southern writing with them. And one of the newest and in my opinion most promising genres to emerge from this recent surge of southern fiction is southern horror.

To being, towards the end of the 20th century southern literature moved more and more into prominence, as contemporarily themed southern authors like Pat Conroy, Bobbie Ann Mason and Ann Rivers Siddons published their works, and labelled them as ‘southern’. Their collective styles of modern-day southern literature helped to carry ‘the South’ out of the dated heaviness of Eudora Welty and Flannery O’Conner’s troubled
southland, or even the Faulknerian 'stream of consciousness' period that artfully illustrated a South plagued by racial indifference and class angst. These aforementioned southern authors brought their new category of southern literature into the mainstream focus of the suburbs and cities, and off of the plantations.

Furthermore, the South was well overdue for the new modernizing changes to its literature. Conroy, Mason and Siddons, as well as many of their contemporaries, succeeded in giving the South a new literary identity beyond the Confederacy and the slave quarters, which were so relentlessly central to the themes of previous southern novels. The writings of these new southern authors essentially opened up the South to new concepts and aspects of modern southern living that have never been addressed before, including dealing with exploitative or oppressive familial relationships, new parameters for male-female relationships, and, of course, romance in a more current, timely setting.

Also, many critics, past and present, write that the South was and is ‘prime literary real estate, just waiting to be developed into latter-day literary masterpieces. As early as the days of the Southern Reconstruction period, many literary critics have been praising the South as a breeding ground of the next great literature. For example, the American political activist and novelist Albion W. Tourgée wrote in his post-Civil War essay ‘The South as a Field for Fiction’ that the American South has always been a region of good quality, first-rate ‘literary production’, more so than its northern counterpart because of the south’s tyrannical love of its unity and national identity.

It is unquestionably true that almost all the noted writers of fiction have been singularly enthusiastic lovers of national life of which they have been a part. In this respect the southern novelist has a vast advantage over his northern contemporary. (409)

Moreover, Tourgée continues in his essay by saying that although he doesn’t know in what literary form the South will ‘rise again’, it will certainly reign in its literary prominence. ‘The South is destined to be the Hesperides Garden of American literature. We cannot foretell the form its product will wear or even guess its character. It may be sorrowful, exultant, aspiring, or perhaps terrible, but it will certainly be great’. (413)

One hundred years later (101 years to be exact), Greg Johnson agreed with Tourgée. In his 1989 Georgia Review article, ‘Wonderful Geographies’, Johnson wrote that the South continually is best represented of all America’s regions, in both ‘quality and quantity of fiction by its authors’. (410) Johnson speculates that the South owes its success to its unique individuality
Of all the classic American regions, the South, even in its much publicized manifestations as the 'New South', has perhaps clung most stubbornly to its identity. Its writers have enjoyed the richest imaginable literary heritage, one that can be disabling as well as inspiring, but which guarantees special attention to any 'new voice' that bears a recognizable Southern accent. (411)

Furthermore, one of the newest literary southern 'voices' currently being heard across the Earth's many hemispheres is the terrified drawl of southern horror. As Tourgée writes, 'pathos lies at the bottom of all enduring fiction. Agony is the key of immortality. The ills of fate, irreparable misfortune, untoward but unmovable destiny: these are the things that make for enduring fame. (6) In this new southern genre, the key elements of agonizing immortality, terror and ill-fated misfortune are all keenly represented. Additionally, two of the best examples of this new sub-genre of southern fiction are the novels of Charlaine Harris and Anne Rice.

In comparing the two women, one finds that both authors were born and raised in the south: Charlaine Harris in Mississippi and Anne Rice in Louisiana. Also, both women's novels are not only set in the South, but contain all the attitude and geographically unique witticisms that demonstrate the southern 'flavour' in their literature. And furthermore, both women use not only a great deal of 'localism' in their writings on the South, but they also insert their own upbringings and experiences, as well as their individual 'southernness' in order to chronicle their observations and opinions of the same state – Louisiana, and in Harris' case, other southern states as well. And lastly, the creatures of horror that both women use centrally are vampires, with a healthy dose of witches thrown into both women's literature, and even werewolves make appearances in Harris's horror stories.

In 2001, Charlaine Harris, a minor but prolific mystery writer, began writing a series of horror tales that centre about Sookie Stackhouse, a blue-collar, lower to middle-class, white waitress in her mid-20s, who lives with her grandmother and works at a truck-stop diner on the outskirts of Bon Temps (which is translated as 'Good Times'), Louisiana. Sookie also is a psychic, whose gruesome ability to foresee terrible things and read minds telepathically usually hinders her from leading a normal life successively. The account that Harris gives of her central heroine – Sookie, along with her older brother – is one of poor southern 'white trash' – a depiction that Harris not only denies but revels in and considers a part of Sookie's southern nature.

In the June 2004 issue of At the Back Fence, Harris explains in 'Q & A with Charlaine Harris' that although she purposefully portrayed Sookie
as poor southern white trash, who oftentimes ends up running for her life from the monsters and ghouls of the night, she also depicted the character as being good-natured and kind-hearted, in hopes that she would take away the sting of the ‘white trash’ label in today’s society. ‘Sookie has a very positive character. She’s always trying to count her blessings and look on the bright side, since that’s what her grandmother taught her to do. She takes interest in everything that goes on around her’. (4)

Although frightening in many parts of the story, as with most horror, the Sookie Stackhouse novels also depict realistic characters who deal with everyday issues, including death and loss; financial concerns, including bankruptcy and foreclosure, as well as unemployment; and failed relationships with family, friends, lovers and even co-workers. Sookie even deals with the issue of childhood sexual abuse. However, on the funnier, more positive side of the novel series, Sookie always has time to root for the local high school football team and occasionally rent a movie from Blockbuster with her best friend or her vampire boyfriend. ‘Emphasizing the Southernness of Sookie was a deliberate choice, there are a lot of things I’d always wanted to write about that I’m trying to use in the books – the religion of football, the connected life of a small southern town, the values of one’s upbringing,’ says Harris in the April 2004 issue of Publishers Weekly (51).

In the same Publishers Weekly article entitled ‘Mistress of the Southern Vampire Romantic Mystery’, Harris also explained that her intentions in writing what she herself coined as her ‘southern vampire romance mysteries’ was to ‘have a balance of elements’ in her Sookie Stackhouse stories, which included southerness, but also the traditional genres of horror and science fiction. ‘Fans of the three genres – science fiction, mystery, and romance – have told me they enjoy the books,’ said Harris. (48)

Further down south in Louisiana, Anne Rice, a native of New Orleans, uses that wondrous former French colonial city — past, present and future, as the setting for most of her novels. Dark and more malevolent than Harris’ comedic fair, Rice’s novels of lust and blood centre mostly around the French-born character of Lestat de Lioncourt, a vampire who ‘narrates’ most of the tales in Rice’s series of southern vampire novels. Unlike the magical, mystical creatures of the night in Harris’ novel series, Rice’s vampires and witches are much more ruthless and deadly, labelling themselves ‘killers’.

In fact, many of Rice’s characters relish in their ‘kills’, none more so than the vampire Lestat, who is down-right snobbish in his selection of prey, preferring young aristocratic men (much like himself when he was made a vampire) from good southern families or young full-blooded Creole or Cajun women. Also dissimilar to the
lower-class Stackhouse, the character of Lestat, an aristocratic vampire who was created or ‘reborn’ in the 1600s, represents the moral and religious ambiguity of Rice’s own life’s experiences.

Through Lestat, Rice makes comments on everything from homosexuality to the southern family dynamic and values. ‘We can found a code of morality on ethics,’ Rice comments in Gary Hoppenstand and Ray B. Browne’s essay, ‘Vampires, Witches, Mummies, and Other Charismatic Personalities: Exploring the Anne Rice Phenomenon,’ ‘rather than outmoded religious concepts. We can base our sexual mores on ethics rather than on religious beliefs’. (12) What’s more, Hoppenstand and Browne write that, just as Rice’s supernatural characters are not bound by mortal definitions of rationality or science, they are also not bound by mortal definitions of proscribed sexual conduct. Lestat, for example, is powerful because he is a supernatural ‘creature of the night’ and because his masculinity is not limited by conventional gender-role expectations.

In ‘An Interview with Anne Rice’, an article in the October 1988 issue of Publishers Weekly, Bob Summer writes that authors with a large fan base for their works are not always noted for literary quality, but that Rice ‘has won both critical acclaim and a readership of cult proportions’ since she began writing her southern vampire novels, known as The Vampire Chronicles. (59) Additionally, to her readers Rice is practically synonymous with New Orleans because of her use of descriptive flavorings that render the Crescent City palpable to the reader’s senses.

As Rice explained further in ‘An Interview with Anne Rice’, she specifically chose her hometown because ‘New Orleans offers the best of both worlds – old and new’, a fact which is clearly illustrated in her novels, many of which take place in the southern port city. ‘When I was a kid people associated New Orleans with local color writers, quaint writers. Now we know that Sherwood Anderson and Faulkner wrote here,’ said Rice of her hometown’s native literary roots. (59)

The Old South, land of plantations, happy Darkies singing in the fields and cotillions where women, in street-sweeping ball gowns twirling gingerly on the dance floor, are petted as pretty little misses by the men folk, is fading into the background of literary history, leaving a void to be fulfilled by new, more modern authors and genres. Furthermore, these new days of Dixie are breeding darker and more frightening literature to the delight of readers across the globe. With authors like Charlaine Harris and Anne Rice as the back bone of the new southern horror genre, this new genus of southern fiction could be the new frontier of southern literature that readers so desperately need to fill the void left behind by the departing plantation sagas.
Directed by Cliff Bole. With Kate Mulgrew, Robert Beltran, Roxann Dawson, Robert Duncan McNeill. Members of the Voyager crew train on the holodeck for a raid on a Borg ship. Should they be successful, they will steal the Borg trans-warp coil in hopes of integrating the technology into Voyager's systems. The Borg seem to be one step ahead when the Borg Queen communicates with Seven of Nine. The Dark Frontier (1936) is Eric Ambler's first novel, about whose genesis he writes: "Become press agent for film star, but soon after joined big London advertising agency as copywriter and "ideas man". During next few years wrote incessantly on variety of subjects ranging from baby food to non-ferrous alloys. Have travelled in most countries of Europe, been stranded in Marseilles and nearly drowned in the Bay of Naples. Decided, on a rainy day in Paris, to write a thriller. Result was The Dark