

# WRITER'S DIGEST

## Putting the Southern in “Southern Literature”

Author Allen Mendenhall shares his thoughts on writing Southern literature.

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What makes Southern literature? Or, if you prefer, what makes literature Southern?

At a certain level of generality Southern literature consists of themes befitting *any* setting: family, community, race, poverty, language, cuisine, morality, religion, change, a sense of place and the burden of history. Yet Southerners discuss these with our drawling dialects and distinct idioms.

[\(Why Readers Love a Southern Setting in Fiction.\)](#)

And, of course, specifics differ within generalities. Consider cuisine and race. You don't eat grits in Canada, and the racial dynamics in Alabama or Mississippi differ from those of other regions.

To explain the uniqueness of Southerners and their literature would require an ethnographic or anthropological study that is beyond my competence. I can, however, talk with authority about my own craft: how I signaled the Southern genre in *A Gloomig Peace This Morning*, a morally ambiguous bildungsroman fixated on a deteriorating town.

The first choice was obvious: Situate the story in the South, namely the fictional Magnolia County in the fictional Andalusia. If I had a penny for every time someone said, “But Andalusia is a *real* city”—well, I wouldn't be rich, but I'd have the extra cash to cover a Waffle House breakfast.

Nor would I be surprised if every Southern state had an Andalusia. The one in Georgia is Flannery O'Connor's farm in Milledgeville, and in selecting that name I was hoping to draw associations with her. The book, after all, is Southern Gothic.

My narrator, Cephas, never reveals in which state the plot unfolds. I wanted to leave that to the imagination. Yet certain references—to General Sherman's decision not to burn the courthouse, for instance—narrow the range of possibilities. The courthouse, by the way, suffers that very fate, but at the hands of an improbable arsonist.

Having picked my location, I needed familiar signs and symbols to construct the genre, i.e., coded imagery and referencing to evidence Southernism. So, I chose football fields, fishing poles, Magnolia trees, the contraction *y'all*, Truman Capote, Confederate statuary, tulips, chrysanthemums, azaleas, and more I can't recall. Taken together, and a few in isolation, these both create and fulfill expectations about Southern literature.

Then there's phraseology.

Certain characters, for example, employ the pejorative "Yankee." Such diction is problematic, to be sure, but it's historically fitting for schoolboys in the early 1970s to speak that way. Cephas's father refers to the War Between the States rather than the Civil War, and words like "folks" and "yonder" stick out like a sore thumb.

Andalusia is my oversimplified Yoknapatawpha. The townsfolk there operate as a communal unit with homogenous purpose, at least according to Cephas, who isn't necessarily a reliable storyteller. This portrayal of the town reinforces negative stereotypes about close-minded collectivism and herd mentality in the rural South.

Stereotypes, however harmful, are recognizable because they convey uncomfortable truths about their subjects. Honest authors admit to dealing in them. Mine aren't controversial; they're about Southerners, after all, a group for whom derogation is, by most standards, acceptable. Of course, I'm a Southerner myself, born and raised, and under the tacitly understood rules governing our country's discourse, I enjoy the license to demean my own people.

Which isn't what I've done, but I'll excuse readers for presuming otherwise. The last thing I want is to invite condescension towards my homeland. My novel's sometimes difficult rhetoric and syntax should dispel the usual (I almost said "inevitable") Northern presumptions of superiority over Southerners.

**Check out Allen Mendenhall's *A Gloomig Peace This Morning* here:**

[Bookshop](#) | [Amazon](#)

(WD uses affiliate links)

You don't need the text proper doing all the work. The cover art, endorsements, and publisher construct genre as well. I told my graphic designer, Ed Noriega, a dear colleague, that I wanted a retro, mustard-yellow cover resembling Quentin Tarantino's film posters. Nothing particularly Southern about that. However, I snapped a photo of the historic Opelika courthouse (in Lee County, Alabama) and emailed it to him, explaining that this image was what I envisioned for the courthouse in *A Gloomig Peace This Morning*.

Now *that* architecture is Southern.

My reviewers—God bless them—are all Southern female authors. Susan Cushman likened *A Gloomig Peace This Morning* to Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*. (Thanks, Susan.) Julie Cantrell praised it as "Southern literature at its best." (Aw, shucks.) Such blurbs establish audience expectations. In my case, they screamed *Southern!*

Of course, the fact that the University of West Alabama Press published the book (through its imprint, Livingston Press) says much without saying anything.

Pardon me for skirting the question I posed in my opening lines, or for answering it only in part. I can't explicate Southern literature in short order without trivializing. The daunting task of defining a genre is beset by difficulties better left to experts.

In talking about myself, however, and about *A Gloomer Peace This Morning*, I must have described something characteristic about Southern literature. I'm not all hat and no cattle.

U.S. Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart famously said, in a case about obscenity, that he couldn't define pornography, but he knew it when he saw it. I concur, but in the context of Southern literature: I know it when I see it, and in trying to *write* it, instincts and hunches were as sure a guide as rumination. I went with what I felt, mostly.

And what I felt, apparently, was Southern. Take from that what you will.

## Product Recommendations

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