



On Being a Southern Writer

Mary Hood

Because my father is a native New Yorker and my mother is from Georgia, where I have spent most of my life, I have never felt comfortable with the we/they dichotomy. Even if I could, I would prefer not to choose between these two identities: I am both. I am like Laurie Lee's fabulous two-headed sheep, which could "sing harmoniously in a double voice and cross-question itself for hours."

My parentage has given me a duty toward both no-nonsense brevity and encompassing concatenations: the Northern preference for

sifting out why in twenty-five words or less, the Southern for interminably savoring how, cherishing the chaff of irrelevancy around the essential kernel. It must have been a Northerner who invented the questionnaire. A Southerner would have been more likely to think up the essay response. (A Southerner always issues an essay response unless he or she is suffering fools.)

Suppose a man is walking across a field. To the question "Who is that?" a Southerner would reply by saying something like "Wasn't his granddaddy the one whose dog and him got struck by lightning on the steel bridge? Mama's third cousin — dead before my time — found his railroad watch in that eight-pound catfish's stomach the next summer just above the dam. Big as Eunice's arm. The way he married for that new blue Cadillac automobile, reckon how come he's walking like he has on Sunday shoes, if that's who it is, and for sure it is." A Northerner would reply

to the same question (only if directly asked, though, never volunteering), "That's Joe Smith." To which the Southerner might think (but be too polite to say aloud), "They didn't ask his name, they asked who he is!"

When I began to write fiction, I made a conscious decision to try to sound like the Southern talkers I had heard tell such wonderful things, but every word I wrote had to pass the sternest censorship from that Northern conscience in me. I imitated the actual talkers in my own daily life: kinfolk, neighbors, strangers on street corners, passengers on the bus seat behind me. I thought of myself as an American writer, blooming where planted — which happens to be with a Southern exposure. But I believe that, if I had been anywhere else I would have adapted to that climate as well and flowered in season. Because the people I was writing about were Southern, I wrote "Southern."

I had not researched the genealogy of the noble house of Southern Literature and was, then, greatly surprised to discover that I had already inherited it, was in fact a Southern Writer, without even trying! I found this out in New England, and the one who broke the news to me was a Long Island novelist who, upon hearing my accent, conferred on me the fraternity of Southern letters.

"How far are you from where Flannery O'Connor lived and worked?" she asked me.

"About thirty years," I replied. But I'm catching up.

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Mary Hood lives in Georgia. She received the Flannery O'Connor Award for Short Fiction and the Southern Review/Louisiana State University Short Fiction Award for How Far She Went, her first collection of short stories. Her latest book, And Venus Is Blue, was published by Ticknor & Fields.