

## *Developing a Regional Literature Collection in the South*

Abstract: Scholars rightfully expect that libraries (especially academic) will collect the literary output of their region, no matter how each institution may choose to define it. Nevertheless, it is surprising to find that there is almost nothing in library literature describing how to systematically implement this important obligation. Many authors whose work has literary significance may escape the notice of national reviewing sources, often because these works—particularly the early work of an author who may well engage a much larger audience later in his/her career—are frequently published by very small presses which lack the means to market their production on a national scale. Such publications usually go out-of-print rather quickly, and it can be a challenge to identify in a timely fashion the authors whose work should be considered for purchase, find out how to acquire the work, and develop aids to help researchers, both current and future, to identify these works within the larger collection. This paper will focus on practical guidance for developing regional literature collections focused on the South, and making them accessible to users.

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Some years ago, while attending a program offered at the ALA Annual Conference by the Literatures in English Section of the Association of College & Research Libraries, I heard a panelist say that librarians who are responsible for building literary collections—particularly in academic libraries—have an obligation to make a special effort to collect the output of their region, because scholars using their libraries would expect to find those works there. Although that idea might seem obvious, even though I am my academic library’s Liaison to the English Department, I am embarrassed to confess that I had never thought about that before— but it was a remark I couldn’t forget. A renowned librarian of the past, Lawrence Thompson of the University of Kentucky, echoed this, saying that “every general collection, from the elementary school on up, should develop collections of regional literature in proportions tailored to its own needs.”<sup>1</sup> The Wisconsin writer and poet August Derleth maintained that for younger readers, regional literature was the ideal bridge between the classics which students are forced to read—and frequently resist—and the trivial escapist fiction they *like* to read, since regional literature is often set in more familiar places, and deals with the kinds of characters with which younger people can easily identify.<sup>2</sup>

Over the years, I have thought a great deal about how to accomplish this in a systematic manner because, as important as this task seems to be, my expectation that library literature would be full of helpful information was not met: to my surprise, I found only a few articles dealing with the subject, and mostly in a very tangential way. Thus, this paper is my attempt to offer resources and techniques for developing or expanding your own library's regional literature collection.

In Charles Crow's Companion to the Regional Literatures of America, he notes that literary historians have tended to slight regional literature until fairly recently. This began to change beginning in the 1960s, as academics reevaluated the American literary canon while at the same time, readers of today are more and more finding books with a regional emphasis very appealing.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, it is likely that your regional literature collection will be well-used even if you are in a public library not often frequented by scholars.

The first challenge, of course, is identifying writers whose work you want to collect, since many of them are published by local publishers with small or nonexistent marketing budgets, and thus are not well-advertised or

promoted. Until an author or poet becomes established and well-known—which may never happen—such books rarely are reviewed in the standard sources librarians turn to, such as Choice, Publisher's Weekly, or The New York Times. However, the local media in your area is very likely to notice and write about such authors, the “big fish in a small pond” syndrome, you might call it. Therefore, scanning local newspapers, while time-consuming, can often alert you to names of people you want to know. Developing a network of volunteer informants could be useful also: if you tell enough people (especially those who work in libraries or local bookstores ) that you want to know about any emerging writers in the area, some of your contacts will get interested and take the time to tell you what they've heard or read. If you are fortunate enough to have a good local bookstore, they probably already have a fairly extensive list of local authors they would be glad to share with you. In addition to novelists, poets and the like, Thompson recommends that state literature collections also include “the work of noted scholars and critics who are natives.”<sup>4</sup>

On a somewhat larger scale, the Atlanta-Journal Constitution is a very valuable resource. In each Sunday's *Arts & Books* section, there is a column entitled “The Literary Scene,” which lists author events in the Atlanta area.

Although not all of the authors listed are from our region, it is usually easy to determine where they are from by doing a Google search on their names. Periodically for several years the AJC has also published a column, “Reading the South” which spotlights new Southern fiction, and of course the paper frequently reviews books by Southern writers—so regular perusal is a must. If your library does not subscribe to the AJC, or it is unavailable in your area, you can view the print version online for seven days once you’ve established a free account—and you have the option of emailing articles to yourself if you don’t have time to read the information during the seven day period when it is on the web free-of-charge.

Although not quite as new as one might wish, some helpful printed bibliographies are Contemporary Southern Women Fiction Writers (1994),<sup>5</sup> Contemporary Southern Men Fiction Writers (1998),<sup>6</sup> and Contemporary Fiction Writers of the South (1993).<sup>7</sup> Another good source is an annual collection of Southern short stories published by Algonquin Books entitled, New Stories From the South. It’s an inexpensive paperback which you should acquire for your library every year. Many of the previous years’ compilations are still in print if you didn’t buy them initially. Also consider buying the annual Pushcart Prize: Best of the Small Presses collection.

Although it casts a rather wide net, you can locate some materials you might be interested in through use of WorldCat's Advanced Search, which allows you to search on a state name in the Geographic Coverage field plus a genre (such as Poetry) in the Subject field. Alternatively, you could use a state name as a keyword (which would search not only the Geographic Coverage field but also notes, extended title, author keywords, etc.) and limit by Publication Type, for example, "Fiction."<sup>8</sup> Unfortunately there is no guarantee that any hits you get by putting a specific state in the Geographic Coverage field are actually going to be written by writers from that state! However, if you take the time to sort through them, you can find some interesting items you might want to track down.

I must not neglect to mention the wonderful *Georgia Center for the Book*, which is our state's affiliate of the Library of Congress' *Center for the Book*. Located at the DeKalb County Public Library in metro Atlanta, it was their publication of the "Georgia 2005 Top 25 Reading List" that made me realize most keenly how ephemeral many regional literature publications are. After checking the list against our holdings, I decided to try to acquire the ones we did not own. In several cases the titles were out of print, but I was able to

find affordable copies (one was even autographed!) from the website of *The Advanced Book Exchange*, an online outlet for bookstores all over North America. However, there was one book on the list which seemed to be virtually unobtainable, Bettie Sellers' book of poetry, Wild Ginger. It had been published in 1989 by Morning-Glory Ink, a very small publisher that no longer exists. Because it was on my mind, I mentioned it to one of my friends in the English Department, and he suggested trying to locate bookstores in Sellers' immediate area. He got a lead from a colleague at Young Harris College, who actually called Bettie Sellers on the phone to ask her where a copy might be obtained. Sellers gave her the phone number of The Book Nook in Blairsville; apparently they had bought up all the remaining copies of the work after Morning-Glory Ink went under, plus got them autographed by Sellers! We obtained a nice copy for our collection by ordering it by phone from Book Nook. Before this all worked out, I had asked the Chair of our English Department about it, hoping that because she had worked for the now-defunct Longstreet Press in Atlanta before becoming an academic, that her publishing connections might lead me to something. I was completely surprised by her novel suggestion that I should contact the then newly-formed Kennesaw University Press, to see if I could interest them in reprinting it. I tracked someone down and did that. The

happy ending is that in 2006, KSU Press re-issued the book, so it is now available again. I hope you'll forgive this digression, but I am sharing it for a reason: not only to tell you how perseverance and networking can pay off, but also as an illustration of how interesting and rewarding collecting regional literature can be!

While we are on the subject of publishers: although local publishers can and do produce the works of authors outside their region, identifying publishers in your state or region is often a good way to find out about emerging local writers, since many of them begin with a smaller publisher. You can establish a free account with [Literary Marketplace.com](http://LiteraryMarketplace.com), which allows you to search by state. Although their search engine is far from perfect, it is easy to spot the ones in Georgia (for example)—and many can then be found on the web by searching their names in Google. At worst, the free Literary Marketplace search will at least give you the name of the publisher and a mailing address. If you can find a website, many offer the opportunity to sign up to receive emails about upcoming author events, forthcoming books, etc.

There are any number of terrific websites you need to know about. For our state, don't miss the Georgia Writer's Association, The Georgia Writers Hall of Fame @ UGA, and Georgia Authors 2002: a Reference Work (part of the Digital Library of Georgia on GALILEO). Clarke County Public Library has a nice Southern writers site, and be sure to bookmark the Fellowship of Southern Writers, the Center for the Study of Southern Culture, and Documenting the American South. These and other useful sites are all included on the handout I distributed at the beginning of this program.

As you might expect, if you are working at an academic library or have one near you, it is quite likely that the English Department has one or more faculty who take a special interest in literature of the region. We have several of them at West Georgia, most notably the Department Chair I mentioned earlier. I asked her to recommend the key regional literary journals I should be reading in order to keep up with the field of Southern literature, and she was able to rattle them off immediately without even thinking: Southern Review, Five Points, Oxford American, Virginia Quarterly Review, Sewanee Review and perhaps Greensboro Review. The most expensive of these are only \$25.00 per year for individuals, and if you

are subscribing for work purposes, it's a tax-deductible expenditure—plus you could donate it to your library when you have finished reading it!

Most libraries of any size utilize the services of a book jobber, for example Blackwell or Baker & Taylor. Since our library uses Blackwell, I am aware of their *Contemporary Authors List Service*. Using that, you can set up a profile with the names of authors of your choice, and they will automatically either send you a copy or an electronic notification whenever a new work by that author appears in their database. Although this won't solve all your problems--since minor local authors will probably not be included--they do have thirty-nine pages of listings of North American novelists, poets, dramatists and authors of literary criticism to choose from. If your library is not a Blackwell customer, check with your jobber to see if they have something similar. For small press publications, don't overlook Amazon.com which, according to Dr. William C. Robinson of the University of Tennessee School of Information Sciences, "has been a major factor, along with the publication on demand shops, in making small press books much more visible and reducing some distribution barriers."<sup>9</sup>

A decision you will need to make is whether or not you want to try to collect valuable editions of regional works (such as first editions or signed copies), which might go into Special Collections rather than the circulating collection. For contemporary literature—when you live in the area where these authors are working—these can sometimes be quite easily obtained if you attend some of the book festivals which occur around the area. Again, the Atlanta Journal-Constitution's weekly *Arts & Books* section is a good place to find out about those opportunities, plus you can enjoy the thrill of actually meeting and talking with some of the authors you're collecting.

You will naturally want to make your collection of regional literature easily-accessible to library patrons. Long ago, before the Library of Congress and OCLC dominated the field of cataloging, this was very easy because librarians often added local subject headings at will. I once worked in a public library branch that had been established in 1904, and as I was weeding, I marveled at the sheer number of entry points many of the older works had, as I retrieved all of those cards from the drawers of our ancient oak catalog! Some anthologies had 50 cards or more. The librarians of that day made the most of their small collection by adding numerous access points. Without going into the long and passionate debate about subject

analysis of fiction and its implications for cataloging practice, there is really nothing stopping a library from adding non-Library of Congress Subject Headings to its catalog if it wishes to do so, in order to facilitate patron access to regional materials. As you know, current LC practice doesn't normally provide for this. For example, the infamous novel Tobacco Road, by Georgia author Erskine Caldwell, has only the typical two entry points in the catalog: author and title. Therefore, if a reader wants to find out what books a library owns which are either set in Georgia or by Georgia authors, he or she would have to use some other means, such as a bibliography, in order to learn about and then find those books: the catalog would be no help.

What I suggest is that the catalog could help, and thus eliminate the extra steps usually involved in identifying such works. One of my heroes from Library School back in the Dark Ages (the early 1970s) was the renegade cataloger out of Hennepin County, Minnesota, Sanford Berman. If you are old enough, you may remember him. (To my surprise and delight, I recently learned he is still alive). In any event, his professional mission was to extend access to materials by advocating the use of better descriptive cataloging and creating model subject headings that are not in LC, so that

users could find materials in library catalogs more easily. Using the Berman system, the record for a book like Tobacco Road might have subject headings such as “Country Life—Georgia—Fiction” and “Sharecroppers—Georgia—Fiction” Furthermore, Berman would have included tracings for small presses, another potentially useful access point. You can see subject headings like these in use in the GALILEO database, NoveList, which uses the Berman subject headings.<sup>10</sup> Unfortunately, however, NoveList only includes 135,000+ fiction titles, and so, though helpful, it cannot provide the complete access to a regional literature collection that readers would want and need, so I encourage you to explore the possibilities of moving toward a more user-friendly catalog.

And finally... I hope you will find this compilation of suggestions helpful, and that you will be motivated to either start your library’s regional literature collection or work on it more diligently. It’s hard to think of a better legacy you could leave to future users of your library.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Lawrence S. Thompson, "Applied Chauvinism: Building Collections of State Literature," Books at Iowa 45.1 (1986): 32.

<sup>2</sup> August William Derleth, American Regional Literature: a Study of the Literature of Rural Life (Madison: University of Wisconsin College of Agriculture, 1940) 1.

<sup>3</sup> Charles Crow, Companion to the Regional Literatures of America (Malden MA: Blackwell, 2003) 1.

<sup>4</sup> Thompson 35.

<sup>5</sup> Rosemary M. Canfield Reisman, Contemporary Southern Women Fiction Writers : an Annotated Bibliography (Metuchen NJ: Scarecrow, 1994).

<sup>6</sup> Rosemary M. Canfield Reisman, Contemporary Southern Men Fiction Writers : an Annotated Bibliography (Metuchen NJ: Scarecrow, 1998).

<sup>7</sup> Joseph M. Flora and Robert Bain, eds., Contemporary Fiction Writers of the South : a Bio-bibliographical Sourcebook (Westport CT: Greenwood, 1993).

<sup>8</sup> Carol L. Watwood, "Building Kentucky Collections with WorldCat," Kentucky Libraries 68.3 (2004): 20-21.

<sup>9</sup> William C. Robinson, "IS 561: Small Publishers," lecture, July 2007, 30 August 2007  
<[http://web.utk.edu/~wrobinso/561\\_lec\\_small.html](http://web.utk.edu/~wrobinso/561_lec_small.html)>

<sup>10</sup> Madeline Douglass (webmaster of Sanford Berman website), e-mail to the author, 9 July 2007.