

Undead Souths: The Gothic and Beyond in Southern Literature and Culture

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Review

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Anderson, Eric Gary and Hagood, Taylor and Turner, Daniel Cross.
Undead Souths: The Gothic and Beyond in Southern Literature and Culture.
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Rumbling through the Attics, Backyards and Cemeteries of the Old South in Search of Memories, Heroes, and Some Zombies

Close your eyes and think of the Old South – Rhett Butler, the muddy Mississippi, riverboat gamblers, Robert E. Lee, the paddle wheel steamboats, Atticus Finch, verandas, magnolias, the Kentucky Derby, football teams, heralded universities, famous authors, lots of Miss Americas andZombies.

They are just about all there in *Undead Souths*, edited by Eric Gary Anderson, Taylor Hagood and Daniel Cross Turner. The trio of editors has, with numerous skilled writers, put together an intriguing collection of essays about the culture of the Old South and how, time and again, no matter what the decade, the “undead” of their book pop out of closets, graveyards, and lots of stretched memories to give anyone’s contemporary look at the Old South new life (and new death, too).

The essays start out with “Confederates of Undead Imagination: Gong South through Wastelands to Jonestown,” “What Remains Where: Civil War Poetry and Photography across 150 Years” and “Gray Ghosts: Remediating the Confederate Undead” and then move on through the years to contemporary times. There are some fine chapters about the works of William Faulkner, that great old champion of southerners: “Faulkner’s Doom: the Undead Inhabitants of Yoknapatawpha (no one in America can spell that) and “Faulkner’s Deathways: The Race and Space of Mourning.” There is a chapter on the novel “White Zombie,” the works of Leanne Howe, Shani Mootoo’s “Cereus Blooms at Night,” and the writings of Robert Frost.

The essayists in the book did meticulous research and really thought through their themes. In the process, they produced deep and dark portraits of the South and the undead, to be sure, but also of life in the South over 150 years. Collectively, too, they paint a wonderful, if jolting, portrait of the Old South and New South and how it was and is treated by writers and Hollywood.

Of course, you could add a chapter on the undead, and very dead, of *Gone with the Wind* and a dozen other southern novels, add dozens of movies and television mini-series about the Old South, right up to recent series on Netflix. There is a chapter in here on slain Emmet Till, but you could add more chapters on the dead and undead connected to race and violence. The chosen subjects, though, when put together, are more than adequate to add a lot of nuance to an intriguing and inviting theme.

The book is a fine read, but has two minor problems. First, there really should be a lot more about the Civil War era and Reconstruction. There are a few chapters, and good ones, but the work needs more. The chapters in it jump around from era to era and do form a nice historic portrait of the tales of the undead by prominent authors, but more essays on the War Between the States is needed to anchor the work. Second, the editors tackle a really wild and crazy subject and touch on numerous zany episodes of Old South culture and legend, including the HBO television series *True Blood* and the AMC series *The Walking Dead*, but instead of being electric, the writing in the work is very academic, sometimes too academic. Late in the book there is a wonderful essay on the novel *White Zombie* and the idea of plantation horror in fiction and a marvelous reference to someone who was ‘zombified.’ The book needs more of that kind of writing. More sizzle in the writing would make the book more attractive to the general reader (and to zombies, too).

Some chapters seem out of place or unneeded. As an example, a chapter on the works of Herman Melville seems unnecessary, but perhaps that is to add some North to the book’s South. Overall, the work is a very comprehensive study of hundreds of novels, movies, short stories, television series and poems about Gothic horror, the dead, the undead, and thousands of ghosts, all south of the Mason-Dixon line. It is a very, very detailed and highly researched study of a new and fascinating wrinkle in not just southern culture, but American culture. It just needs more zombified pizzazz, though, less Faulkner and more Dracula.

Bruce Chadwick, a professor at New Jersey City University and the author of The Reel Civil War and several works on the Civil War and the American Revolution.