

Rural Noir: The Dirty South (and Beyond) in Contemporary Fiction

by Susan Brown

Moonlight and magnolias. Dysfunctional family trees and debutantes. These are some of the hallmarks of Southern literature, from Tennessee Williams and Margaret Mitchell to Lee Smith and Pat Conroy. However, a more recent crop of Southern writers are inspired by the less romantic, less idealized aspects of the South, its people, and its places.

Meth labs and mountain men. Trailer parks and teen pregnancies. These are some of the hallmarks of rural noir, from writers like Tom Franklin, Larry Brown, and Harry Crews. Their stories capture the hardscrabble lives of working class men and women and the harsh realities of rural life, in the South and beyond. Writers like Bonnie Jo Campbell, Donald Ray Pollack, and Daniel Woodrell tell similar stories set in Indiana and Illinois, Michigan and Missouri.

Rural Noir aka Grit Lit aka Rough South -- Terms & Definitions

This type of fiction goes by many names -- rural noir, grit lit, hick lit, rough South, dirty South, country noir, and hillbilly noir. All of these terms get at the raw, gritty nature of both the writing style and the subject matter. Here are a few definitions to consider:

Grit Lit novels are kissin' cousins to Erskine Caldwell's stories of rural poverty and Flannery O'Connor's grotesque fantasies of alienation. These books, which might best be described as Southern-fried Greek tragedies, are filled with angry, deranged, and generally desperate characters who are fueled by alcohol and sex. Jane Austen fans might want to steer clear of these books.

- Book Lust: Recommended Reading for Every Mood, Moment, and Reason, by Nancy Pearl

So what's Grit Lit? It's the dirty South seen without romanticism or the false nostalgia of *Gone with the Wind* fans. People who are interested in the South as it really is, not moonlight and magnolia, but grit in your work boots...It's a man with little hope of salvation trying to salvage what he can, even if it's only beers from the side of the highway as log trucks rumble by, carrying off the forest one shivering load at a time. It's the audacity that brings this man to life on the page and makes you root for him. It's somebody up from the ground saying, 'Hold on, I ain't dead yet.' That's Grit Lit.

- Grit Lit: A Rough South Reader, edited by Tom Franklin and Brian Carpenter

Rough Characters in Remote Places -- The Appeal of Rural Noir

Whatever name they give this genre and whether or not the stories are set in the South, readers are drawn to the strong characters, the sense of place, the writing style and tone, and the stories themselves.

Character

"They ain't good, but they's good people," might best sum up many of the characters in rural noir. These are folks who work hard, party hard, had Mamas that tried to raise them right and Daddies who tried to stay sober long enough to bring home a paycheck. Their struggles are not hidden behind the family coat of arms, they are instead on display for all to see, right there in the front yard alongside the broken down, rusted-out pick-up truck. They are proud, stubborn, and loyal -- often to a fault. Whether or not readers recognize these characters as kin, they can respect them and, through reading their stories, perhaps even empathize with them. Ree Dolly in *Winter's Bone* by Daniel Woodrell and Joe Ransom in Larry Brown's *Joe* both have that effect on readers, as do many characters in this genre.

Place

From Southern settings like Dorothy Allison's *Bastard Out of Carolina* and Brian Panowich's *Bull Mountain* to farther-flung locales such as Frank Bill's *Crimes in Southern Indiana* and Donald Ray Pollack's *Knockemstiff* (Ohio), rural noir authors write of places and landscapes that may be wholly unfamiliar to many readers, although they may be geographically quite close to them. Noir often takes places on mean streets of major cities like New York, Chicago, or Boston -- rural noir takes places on the backroads and in the hollers of Alabama, Tennessee, and Missouri. Readers may have driven through these states, stopped at the rest areas off the interstates, or visited their state capitals and college towns -- but they have most likely not been down these country roads. Through grit lit, readers can also "visit" places they have never been to, and may never go to, but that are nonetheless fascinating landscapes that have shaped the people that live there. Readers that enjoy novels in which the setting itself functions as a character may find much to enjoy in these stories.

Tone & Writing Style

Part of rural noir's appeal is the tone, or the feelings and reactions that the writing evokes in the reader. The tone of much rural noir is complex, inspiring a variety of reactions and emotions. The stories are often raw and bleak, yet at the same moment they can be darkly humorous. They are less heartwarming, more heartwrenching. They can be violent, sobering, and bleak, yet also offbeat, irreverent, and emotionally nuanced. Many of these authors write with a similarly complex style -- at once raw and gritty, yet lyrical and elegiac. Many of these authors, like Ron Rash and William Gay, are themselves products of the rural places they write about, lending an air of authenticity and sense of deep connection to their style.

Story

Generally speaking, grit lit doesn't contain much magical realism or supernatural phenomena or many red herrings. It does contain stories of everyday life, everyday people, and the struggles they face -- often related to poverty, crime, sex, violence, and drugs. That makes these stories appealing to readers is that they are often elevated to something more, through seeking out the universal

truths and stories that we all share. *Winter's Bone* is the story of the hero(ine's) journey. Donald Ray Pollack's *The Devil All the Time* is a coming-of-age tale. Larry Brown's *Father and Son* is a classic story of good versus evil. Certainly readers who enjoy crime fiction and noir generally will find much to like in rural noir, but readers who enjoy great stories that are well told will as well.

If you aren't quite ready to jump into the world of Grit Lit, but want to know more, check out *Grit Lit: A Rough South Reader*, edited by Tom Franklin and Brian Carpenter. The introductory essay provides an outstanding and in-depth overview of the genre and each entry is a short (but rarely sweet) taste of what these books and authors are all about.

If you are ready to delve deeper into the world of Southern snake handlers and Midwestern meth dealers -- here's a list of essential authors, plus their one book to read (if you are only going to read one of their books). And for those you -- and your library patrons -- that are already fans of the genre, a list of additional authors and titles that may be new to you, follows.

Top Ten Essential Authors (and Their One Book to Read)

American Salvage: Stories

Bonnie Jo Campbell

In rural Michigan, the American dream, if it ever existed, lies discarded like so much rusty scrap metal. For the inhabitants of Campbell's tales, the real truth of life can be found in industrial accidents, soul-deadening labor, and the comfort of five drinks too many. But even amid the despair of meth labs and empty pocketbooks, Campbell's characters yearn for something, anything, to raise them above it all--and sometimes, impossibly, they find it.

Published: Apr 2009

Audience: Adult

Bastard Out of Carolina

Dorothy Allison

Bone, an illegitimate child in a family of social outcasts, sees her mother's happiness with her new husband and will not tell when the stepfather begins abusing her in the 1950s.

Published: Jul 1992

Audience: Adult

Crimes in Southern Indiana: Stories

Frank Bill

A debut collection set in southern Indiana features protagonists who test the boundaries of their sanity and survival skills, from a man who violently snaps and flees when his wife falls terminally ill to a former hunting dog breeder who clashes with a Salvadoran drug smuggler.

Published: Aug 2011

Audience: Adult

The Devil All the Time

Donald Ray Pollock

Presents a dark tale set in rural southern Ohio and West Virginia between World War II and the 1960s that follows the experiences of tormented and violent individuals whose respective struggles culminate in the adult patterns of an orphaned son.

Published: Jul 2011

Audience: Adult

Father and Son

Larry Brown

A Mississippi rebel and ex-con is pitted against a right-minded sheriff, with repercussions for the families of both men.

Published: Sep 1996

Audience: Adult

A Feast of Snakes

Harry Crews

A small Georgia town, filled with a curious assortment of losers, anticipates the promise of bizarre new possibilities with the upcoming rattlesnake hunt.

Published: Jan 1976

Audience: Adult

I Hate to See that Evening Sun Go Down: Collected Stories

William Gay

In his debut collection, Gay brings to life 13 stories about a diverse group of colorful characters living in the fertile Tennessee country land.

Published: Oct 2002

Audience: Adult

Poachers: Stories

Tom Franklin

A collection of stories set in the Deep South evoke a world of hunting and fishing, shotgun shacks and trailer parks, poachers and lawmen, and the sweat and tears of human relationships.

Published: Jun 1999

Audience: Adult

Winter's Bone

Daniel Woodrell

Ree Dolly's father has skipped bail on charges that he ran a crystal meth lab, and the Dollys will lose their house if he doesn't show up for his next court date. With two young brothers depending on her, 16-year-old Ree knows she has to bring her father back, dead or alive. Living in the harsh

poverty of the Ozarks, Ree learns quickly that asking questions of the rough Dolly clan can be a fatal mistake. But, as an unsettling revelation lurks, Ree discovers unforeseen depths in herself and in a family network that protects its own at any cost.

Published: Aug 2006

Audience: Adult

The World Made Straight

Ron Rash

In an Appalachian community haunted by the dark legacy of a Civil War massacre, young Travis Shelton struggles to overcome the corruption of the present and the dark influence of Carlton Toomey, a local marijuana grower.

Published: Apr 2006

Audience: Adult

Five More to Explore

Bull Mountain

Brian Panowich

"A multigenerational saga set in the mountains of north Georgia, where the Burroughs family has been running shine, pot, and meth for decades. Rogue son Clayton Burroughs has become a local sheriff to keep what peace he can, until an ATF agent who's not quite what he seems throws a wrench into the works"--.

Published: Jul 2015

Audience: Adult

Me and My Daddy Listen to Bob Marley: Novellas and Stories

Ann Pancake

A collection of novellas and stories features characters who are connected to their land experiencing brokenness, loss, redemption, and revelation amidst poverty, environmental breakdown, and social collapse.

Published: Feb 2015

Audience: Adult

Kentucky Straight

Chris Offutt

Tells the stories of the coal miners, gamblers, marijuana farmers, and backwoods medicine men living in an isolated Appalachian community.

Published: Nov 1992

Audience: Adult

The Stories of Breece D'J Pancake

Breece D'J Pancake

Twelve stories written during a promising, abruptly ended career illuminate the lives of doomed and despairing brawlers, murderers, drunkards, and demented husbands and wives in West Virginia's mountain hollows. Reprint. 15,000 first printing.

Published: Jul 2002

Audience: Adult

Where All Light Tends to Go

David Joy

This beautifully written novel juxtaposes the glory of the Appalachians against the despair of everyday life. Jacob McNeely recognizes his family's brutality, but Maggie, the love of his life, gives him hope. Achingly told, the visceral prose will stay with readers long past the conclusion. Fans of the Southern fiction of Ron Rash and Wiley Cash will fall in love with this new voice. -- Jennifer Winberry for LibraryReads.

Published: Mar 2015

Audience: Adult

Susan Brown took her first library job to earn beer money while in college. After several years in academic and government libraries, she finally found her true calling behind the reference and reader's advisory desk at a public library. She has an M.L.S. from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and has worked at libraries in Virginia, North Carolina, and Kansas. She is currently the Director at Chapel Hill Public Library in Chapel Hill NC and is passionate about readers' services, social media, and marketing and merchandising for public libraries Susan blogs about practical marketing for public libraries at 658.8 -- Practical Marketing for Public Libraries.

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