



Georgia's 10 Best Novels

BY DANIEL M. ROPER

Remember the Beverly Hillbillies? Those decent, friendly, and unlearned (ignorant, in the real sense of the word) bumpkins named Clampett struck it rich, moved to California, and worked their way into America's heart through the medium of television.

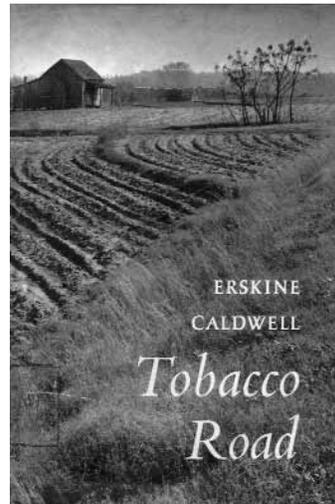
Well, imagine a much more outrageous version of the Beverly Hillbillies in which the Clampetts are depraved, stupid, and mean. In this version, Ellie Mae would be a degenerate who scoots across the lawn on her bare bottom in a bizarre effort to sneak up on and have her way with her 13-year-old sister's husband. Her parents observe her behavior with the lurid interest of peeping-toms, but do nothing to stop her. Then picture a middle-aged preacher lady visiting the Clampetts' Beverly Hills mansion, taking a shine to Jethro, and openly beginning her own mating display with him. Neither their brazenness nor the fact that this 40-year-old widow ends up marrying the 16-year-old boy fazes the family, as all they're interested in is the Preacher Lady's new car.

In the show's cataclysmic finale, Preacher Lady sleeps with every man in a run-down hotel; Jethro accidentally runs over Granny and then argues with Jed Clampett over the use of Preacher Lady's vehicle; the ignored and mortally wounded Granny, who lived only to dip snuff, succumbs to her wounds; and then Jed accidentally burns down his Beverly Hills mansion, killing himself and his wife.

Awful, right? Welcome to Erskine Caldwell's farcical, unbelievable, and cruel version of rural Georgia in the 1930s as depicted in *Tobacco Road*. This 1932 novel featured the Lesters, a family of woebegone sharecroppers. Yet Caldwell claimed his implausible vignette was typical of life in the Depression-era cotton country near Augusta.

Some defenders of *Tobacco Road* argue that Caldwell was exaggerating in order to make a point. Not so, he protested. In the preface to the 1974 edition of *Tobacco Road* published by Beehive Press, Caldwell offered: "I wrote the book about the familiar scenes and familiar people of my native Georgia. The story of *Tobacco Road* was concerned with the world as I knew it to be during that particular era for the white and black people who lived difficult lives together in the rural south."

Undoubtedly, there were poor Georgians so unbelievably degenerate that *Tobacco Road* could have been their biography, but they were a distinct and oh-so-troubled minority. From what I know about rural Georgia and its people during the first half of the 20th century, most sharecroppers and other working-class poor were honest, hard-working, and – perhaps above all – God-fearing people. Depravity, vulgarity, slothfulness, wastefulness, and meanness on a scale depicted in *Tobacco*



Not on the "10 Best" list!

Road would have been frowned upon. I get the impression that much of the acclaim for *Tobacco Road* came from snickering Yankees and snooty urbanites who reveled in the stereotyped portrayal of rural Southerners. These elitists would have been the ancestors of those who embraced the depictions of mountain people in *Deliverance* and of sharks in *Jaws*. Either that or they didn't actually read the book.

And that's a possibility. There are so many inaccurate reviews of *Tobacco Road* that I believe some commentators simply accepted the word of others about the book without doing their own research. For instance, Michael Bezold of All Movie Guide (www.answers.com) wrote: "Novelist Erskine Caldwell wrote a sensational book of Americana about a group of poor white sharecroppers in Georgia who are turned off their land by wealthy businessmen." Only, Jeeter Lester wasn't turned off his land by wealthy businessmen in *Tobacco Road*. His father and grandfather lost the land when they failed to pay taxes, but the new owner permitted Jeeter to remain there rent-free. (Bezold probably thought the novel tracked the movie version, a sloppy shortcut that would explain his mistake.)

A refutation of the stereotypes in *Tobacco Road* may be found in Arthur Raper's *Tenants of the Almighty*, an excellent and thorough study of sharecroppers in east-central Georgia during the Great Depression. While Raper witnessed ignorance, illiteracy, squalor and poverty during his time in Georgia's cotton country, he also noted the decency, kindness, and work-ethic found in most of the sharecropper-class.

That is my chief complaint with *Tobacco Road* – it stripped an entire class of people of their dignity.

After reading *Tobacco Road*, I wondered whether my impression of Georgia sharecroppers, formed in part by *Tenants of the Almighty*, was accurate. So I recently contacted Harrison Roper, the 77-year-old son of the author of *Tenants*, about his experience with sharecroppers during his time in Georgia during the early 1940s.

Harry, who later in life changed his surname from Raper to Roper (and who is no relation to the author of this article), replied, "When I read *Tobacco Road* about 1945, I did not see anything of the broadly stereotyped Lester family's improvident and ignorant behavior reflected in our Greene County neighbors' lives. Our family lived for two memorable years in the midst of the poverty of rural Georgia on the road halfway

between Siloam and Union Point. The vast majority of our neighbors were church-going, honest people trying to make a living as best they could in the worst of economic times.”

“In an almost pure agricultural economy, soil erosion and mono-cropping (cotton) and the boll weevil and racism and the depression had taken their toll,” Roper continued, “and times were very hard for everyone, even those with property and social status. Yes, there was some improvident behavior, but mostly life was hard work and little to show for it. I was never in a home with an obviously drunken person. Everybody tried to keep the interior and exterior of their house as ‘nice’ as they could, and wore their best clothes to town and to school and to church. Bibles and pictures of President Roosevelt were universal in homes. Of course, most could only afford the cheapest coveralls and cotton dresses, and ‘work clothes’ were worn to shreds.”

“I read everything in our house, including *Tobacco Road*,” Roper concluded. “I thought at the time that Caldwell’s Lester family was an overdone caricature, and I still think so. Maybe I just didn’t ‘get it’?”

We didn’t get it either, and you may wonder why I’ve dedicated so much space to a novel I found dreadful when this article is supposed to be about Georgia’s ten best novels. Well, you remember the old saying that you push a sore tooth just to know how good it feels when you stop? The same goes for reading novels. After perusing a few truly abysmal novels, you really appreciate the good ones.

I had that very experience earlier this year. Over a few short weeks, I had the misfortune of slogging my way through *Tobacco Road*, *The Color Purple*, and *Wise Blood* back-to-back-to-back. These are among the most celebrated novels written by Georgia authors, so I had anticipated hours of reading pleasure. But after finishing them I was pounding my palm against my forehead in disgust. Each of these “classics” gets right down in the mire and degradation and wallows there, seeming to love every minute of it. Literature of this sort is vastly overrated.

Then I picked up *Cold Sassy Tree*, a novel by Olive Ann Burns. I sat in my recliner, opened the book, read a few pages, and sighed audibly, “Ahhhhh!” My wife, seated on the couch with a book of her own, glanced my way, so I explained, “This author can write!” It was like giving oxygen to a gasping long-distance runner.

Oh, and another thing. Too many skilled Georgia authors have drunk from the cup of disdain for faith and sipped from the mug of enthrallment with vulgarity and sleaze. In most of the novels we reviewed, faith is portrayed negatively if portrayed at all. Since most Georgians take faith seriously and reverently, you’d think that attitude would be reflected in a matching proportion of the state’s writers. Evidently, there’s something in the psyche of those inclined to write that poisons them against faith. Eugenia Price is one of the few who bucked the trend, and perhaps that’s one reason she is so widely appreciated today.

As for vulgarity and sleaze, there are some fine books out there that are lessened by tawdriness (Joshilyn Jackson’s *Between*, Georgia comes to mind). Perhaps sex sells, but there’s something to be said for classiness. Exhibit A: *To Kill a Mockingbird*, a sleaze-free novel that may be America’s finest work of fiction.

After reading *The Color Purple*, a sleaze-infested novel, we were astounded to discover that it is included on many high school reading lists. We don’t want readers to assume that our Top Ten list implies our selections are suitable for youngsters, or for people who dislike vulgarity and sleaze, so we’ve included ratings that we hope will steer you toward books you can enjoy.

Duds and all, it is surprising how many famous authors are Georgia natives, and how many esteemed novels concern the Peach State. The real challenge comes in unearthing the gems and discarding the culls. Undoubtedly, you’ll disagree with some of our selections, but after a great deal of reading – and some suffering – we believe we’ve come up with a pretty good list. Take a look and tell us what you think.

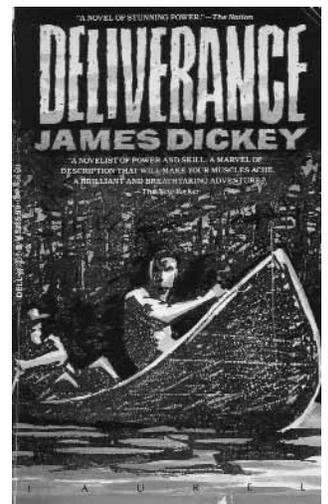
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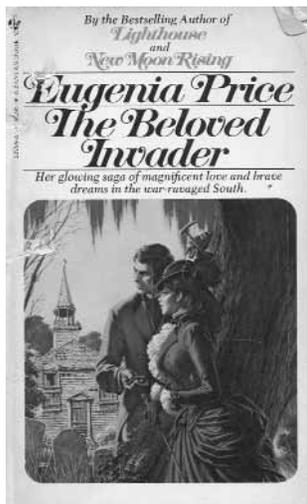
Gone with the Wind (1937), Margaret Mitchell – This Pulitzer Prize winner is a sweeping, magnificent portrayal of the fall of the South through the eyes of those who loved the Old South. Scarlett, Rhett, Melanie, Ashley, Mammy and Prissy: How many novels feature so many unforgettable characters widely known by just one name? And how many feature so many memorable lines: “Ah doan know nuthin’ ’bout bringin’ babies;” “After all, tomorrow is another day;” and, “My dear, I don’t give a damn.” (If you’re thinking these lines are slightly off, your memory is swayed by lines from the equally magnificent film version. It’s time to re-read the book!) Rating: PG

The Swan House (2001), Elizabeth Musser – A touching account of an Atlanta high school senior’s journey of introspection and discovery after her family is rocked by her mother’s death in the 1962 airliner crash at Orly Airport in Paris. Rating: PG

Deliverance (1970), James Dickey – A dark and gripping tale of four middle-aged suburban men out to enjoy a canoeing trip on a remote mountain river when circumstances suddenly immerse them in a life-or-death struggle against both man and nature. Of Georgia’s Ten Best Novels, this one best qualifies as a “page-turner.” Rating: R

Lamb in His Bosom (1934), Caroline Miller – This Pulitzer Prize winner is the story of a hard-working, close-knit family enduring life on the





Georgia frontier in the decades leading to the Civil War. Saturated with imagery of frontier living for the yeoman farmer, *Lamb* imparts a feel for Georgia flora and fauna, and the ebb and flow of her seasons, which could only be imparted by an admiring and observant Georgia native. Rating: PG-13

To Dance with the White Dog (1990), Terry Kay – The “shocking” story of an elderly widower who – gasp! – loved his wife and who – gasp!

– loves and is loved by his grown children. Though his body has become feeble with age, the widower’s mind remains sharp and his spirit unbowed as he reflects on the past and deals with life’s curves, including a mysterious white dog that shows up at his house. Warning: Even the most stoic reader will fight back tears as this chronicle concludes. Rating: PG-13

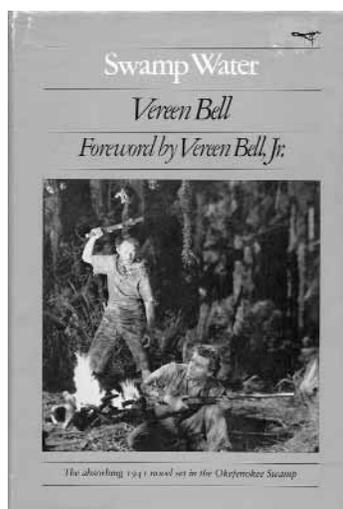
Cold Sassy Tree (1984), Olive Ann Burns – The story of a boy growing up in a town scandalized by his grandfather’s remarriage just weeks after his grandmother’s death. A rich, sweet, touching and humorous novel about life in small-town Georgia a century ago. Rating: PG-13

The Beloved Invader (1965), Eugenia Price – Perhaps the novel and novelist most beloved by Georgians today. A tale of a Yankee newcomer to St. Simons Island who grows to love – and to be loved by – the island people. Readers of this novel become intimately acquainted with the characters and the setting thanks

to Price’s unsurpassed gift for making the past and the place come alive through words. Legion is the number of readers who upon completing this book make a pilgrimage to Christ Church on St. Simons Island. *Beloved Invader*, *New Moon Rising* (1969) and *Lighthouse* (1972) make up Price’s “St. Simons Trilogy.” While each warranted consideration on its own merit, we felt that one, but not all three, should make the Ten Best list. Rating: G

Swamp Water (1941), Vereen Bell – Like *Deliverance*, this tale pits the protagonist against man and wilderness. The story follows young Ben Ragan, who risks his life and reputation by befriending Tom Keefer, a killer hiding in the Okefenokee Swamp. Rating: PG

Run with the Horsemen (1982), Ferrol Sams – Porter Osborne is a precocious boy “raised right” on a Depression-era



Georgia farm. This novel is actually a strung-together series of humorous incidents from outhouse to farm house to school house as Porter matures in an imperfect family in a Georgia segregated by race and sex and class. Also part of a trilogy, *Run with the Horsemen* was followed by *The Whisper of the River* (1984) and *When all the World was Young* (1991),

which, while entertaining, were not of equal quality. Rating: R

The Heart is a Lonely Hunter (1940), Carson McCullers – This well-named novel follows five main characters with deep yearnings for more out of life. The cast includes an impoverished young girl passionate about music, a drunken laborer fomenting revolution by the “downtrodden worker,” and an elderly black doctor who has devoted his life, unsuccessfully, to advancing the case of his family and his people. The most unforgettable character is a thoughtful and well-regarded deaf-mute who quietly struggles with his own longings and demons. *Hunter* is the best of the social commentary novels from Georgia, a group that includes *Tobacco Road* and *The Color Purple*. Rating: PG-13

Georgia’s Five Worst “Classics”

The Member of the Wedding (1946), Carson McCullers – Although the author vividly sets the scene, this novel about a bored girl is dispiriting and drab. Rating: PG

The Color Purple (1982), Alice Walker – Raw, sad, and vulgar, but for a reason. This novel switches between an abused and ignorant black woman trapped in poverty in the American South and her educated and literate sister who returns to primitive Africa in the employ of black missionaries. Rating: R+

A Circuit Rider’s Wife (1910), Corra Harris – Just as *Moby-Dick* is a documentary about whale hunting, *A Circuit Rider’s Wife* is a documentary about life for a rural Methodist preacher and his wife a century ago. While the protagonist is loyal to her husband and to his church, the reader gets the feeling she really doesn’t like either very much. Rating: G

Tobacco Road (1932), Erskine Caldwell – A cruelly inaccurate depiction of sharecroppers during the Great Depression. The book’s gross exaggerations are a shame, because the author was an unusually talented writer. Rating: R

Wise Blood (1952), Flannery O’Connor – This novel is the poorly composed product of a feverish mind. Despite unforgettable elements like Hazel Motes and his “rat colored car,” the Church Without Christ, and the outlandishly simian antics of Enoch Emery, this was a tortured and ineffective effort at literature. Rating: PG

