Down South in Children’s Books

Introduce a rich, diverse region of our country through novels featuring authentic southern settings.

By Pat Scales

As a child, the books that I read that were set in the South were *Strawberry Girl, Blue Ridge Billy*, and *Cotton in My Sack*, by Lois Lenski. After that I read Jesse Stuart’s *The Thread That Runs So True*. None of these books represented the South that I knew, but they introduced me to a region in the South that was different from where I lived.

Stuart was a southerner and wrote about what he knew, but Lenski wasn’t from the South. She relied on travel and research to capture in her stories one of the primary characteristics of the South at the time—the sense of family and a shared willingness for hard work. The South has changed as society has become more mobile, but the culture and history of the region provide a rich background and voice for literature for young readers.

The books in this bibliography reflect the traditional characteristics of the South: a strong sense of family and manners; the need to harbor secrets; a focus on appearances; a close-knit community; the importance of religion; a concern with race relations; the matters of social class and moral dilemma; attention to gender roles; and the passion for place.

**Alabama**


Thirteen-year-old Bird runs away from her Ohio home in search of her stepfather and finds herself in Acorn, Alabama, where her life becomes entwined with the lives of three lonely people who have been touched by both tragedy and triumph.


Life is a little boring in Snow Hill, Alabama, but during the summer of 1937, 11-year-old James “Brother” Longstreet Sayres, a white boy of privilege, makes a new friend when Champion Always Luckey, a black boy the same age, visits from Detroit. While Brother has never had to confront issues of race before, his new friendship results in an increasing awareness of racism in his community.

*Send Me down a Miracle.* By Han Nolan. 1996. 276p. Sandpiper, paper, $6.95 (9780152046804). Gr. 6–9.

Fourteen-year-old Charity Pittman, the daughter of a minister in Casper, Alabama, watches her town unravel when an eccentric artist claims to have seen Jesus. Also see Nolan’s *Dancing on the Edge* (1997).


In this novel set in Birmingham in the late 1940s, 12-year-old Gussie Davis, the daughter of deaf parents, is forced to do some soul searching when she misbehaves in the church for the deaf where her father serves as minister.

**Arkansas**


Twelve-year-old Richard is smitten with Rosalie, the prettiest girl in school, and his dream of buying her...
a red scarf leads him on a series of adventures involving local fauna and the eccentric townsfolk of his 1944 rural Arkansas town.


In this novel set during World War II in a small Arkansas town, 12-year-old Patty, a Jewish girl, is disowned by her father and shunned by the entire community when she befriends a German soldier from a nearby prisoner-of-war camp.

**Florida**


Sixth-grader Chip Martin sets out on a mission to save a family of displaced panthers when he learns that a new building development threatens to level the abandoned farm where they live.


A fire in the Black Vine Swamp in Florida forces students on a field trip to cut their excursion short, but two students smell “a rat” when their teacher doesn’t return with them. Also see Hiaasen’s *Hoot* (2002) and *Flush* (2005).

*Sister Spider Knows All.* By Adrian Fogelin. 2003. 224p. Peachtree, $14.95 (9781561452903); paper, $6.95 (9781561453863). Gr. 6–8.

Twelve-year-old Roxanne lives with her grandmother in a small Florida town where the two try to make ends meet by selling produce and other items at a local flea market. Though Roxanne never doubts her grandmother’s love, she is still haunted by one question: Who are her parents? For more on this book, see “The Search for a Real Family: *Sister Spider Knows All* by Adrian Fogelin” in the May 2007 issue of *Book Links*.


In this humorous tale set in 1935, 11-year-old Turtle is shipped off to Key West to live with relatives that she has never met after her mother takes a job as a housekeeper for a person who hates children.

**Georgia**


When a two-person submarine tumbles off a passing train in Carter, Georgia, Owen Jester hatches a secret plan—with the help of his two best friends and an annoying, know-it-all neighbor—to take it for a spin in the local pond.


Eleven-year-old Danny Sartain, an inexperienced hunter, accidentally kills his beloved Uncle Clay while hunting for rabbit in his family’s Georgia woods and struggles to make peace with the loss of his uncle and his role in his death.


Twelve-year-old March Anne Tanner lives with her father, brother, and grandmother Grenna on a watermelon and pumpkin farm in rural Georgia. When Grenna suffers a heart attack and later dies, March Anne is forced not only to contemplate her future but also to confront her tragic past.


In this story set in 1976 in a
small Georgia town, Gabriel, a white boy, and Frita, an African American girl, become friends and confront their fears regarding bullies and racism.


Maebelle goes to Tweedle, Georgia, to spend the summer with her grandparents and sets out to discover the truth about a mysterious ancestor.

Kentucky


Ivy June Mosley from Thunder Creek, Kentucky, and Catherine Combs of Lexington participate in a seventh-grade exchange program that requires each girl to leave home for two weeks to live with the other.


Twelve-year-old Chili Sue Mahoney longs to travel and wonders what life is like outside her small Kentucky town. When Miss Matlock, a globe-trotting substitute teacher, takes over the seventh grade, Chili makes a surprising discovery about the beauty of the hills that she calls home.

Louisiana


Tiger Ann Parker lives in a small Louisiana town with her parents, who are developmentally delayed, and her grandmother. When her grandmother dies, Tiger Ann goes to live with a worldly aunt in Baton Rouge, but she soon finds that she misses her parents.


Orphaned at birth, 12-year-old Lanesha lives in the Ninth Ward of New Orleans with her loving caregiver, Mama Ya-Ya. Lanesha’s peers avoid her because they are skeptical of her ability to see spirits, but when Hurricane Katrina hits everyone must come together to survive.


Set in bayou country, these four stories represent four generations of one Louisiana family whose members all have dreams they wish to fulfill.


Rebecca goes to New Orleans to visit an aunt and finds a city haunted by the effects of Hurricane Katrina. The 16-year-old then discovers a tragedy of another kind when she comes face-to-face with the ghost of a Louisiana slave girl.


A rare snowstorm hits Louisiana on Christmas Eve, but 10-year-old Tal can’t enjoy it because his beloved hunting dogs have disappeared and his father is snowed in away from home.

Mississippi


Ruby is still dealing with her grandfather’s death when her grandmother, Miss Eula, goes away for the summer. Ruby wonders what she will do in Halleluia, Mississippi, without her grandmother, but she is soon busy making a new friend, writing letters, and taking care of her pet chickens.


In this story set in Mississippi during the 1930s, Jeremy Simms, a 10-year-old white boy, watches a bus driver order black passengers,
including the grandmother of his friends Cassie and Stacey Logan, from a bus to make room for white passengers. Companion books include Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry (1976); Let the Circle Be Unbroken (1981); The Road to Memphis (1990); and The Well: David's Story (1995).


It’s 1963 and 12-year-old Addie Ann Pickett has hope that racial tensions might improve in Kuckachoo, Mississippi, when one man wills his land to the entire community for a joint garden. However, it’s soon evident that not everyone in town is ready to cross the racial divide.

North Carolina


Leon and Luke Curry are anticipating the things they can do at age 12 that they couldn’t do at 11, but the one thing they aren’t sure about is being baptized in the Occoneechee Neck River near their home in Jackson, North Carolina.


After an accident takes the lives of...
of her parents, Carolina hides out at Harmony Farm in North Carolina’s Blue Ridge Mountains. There the 10-year-old finds comfort in doing farm chores until something happens that forces her to run away.


In this novel set in Easton, North Carolina, during the McCarthy era, Genevieve, a high-school student from a traditional family, forms an unlikely friendship with Brenda, an ultraliberal newcomer from Hollywood.


After the death of their baby sister, 13-year-old Willa Jo and eight-year-old Little Sister are spending a few weeks with their aunt Patty while their mother deals with her grief. When the girls climb onto the roof in an effort to get “near to Baby,” the adults begin to realize that the sisters are grieving, too.

How to Steal a Dog. By Barbara O’Connor. 2007. 176p. Farrar/Frances Foster, $16 (9780374334970); Square Fish, paper, $6.99 (9780312561123). Gr. 3–7.

Georgina’s family has no place to live other than the family car. While her mother works two jobs, Georgina contemplates stealing a dog and claiming the reward money in an effort to help her mother raise enough money to find them a “real” place to live.


In the final book of Madden’s series about a family in Maggie Valley, North Carolina, it is 1963 and 12-year-old Livy Two Weems is faced with several moral dilemmas regarding both her past and her future. Also see the first titles, Gentle’s Holler (2005) and Louisiana’s Song (2007).

South Carolina


Martin is musically talented, but his daddy thinks that music is for sissies. Admiring neighbors at the trailer park called Paradise give Martin the courage to stick up for himself and do what he loves best.


In this novel set during the 1920s in Marlboro County, South Carolina, Darby Carmichael is concentrating on her ninth birthday party when she learns of an act of racism that she cannot accept. She deals with it by writing a column about civil rights for the local newspaper and comes face-to-face with acts of violence aimed at her.


Raisin Stackhouse cleans up an old church cemetery and discovers a mystery that no one in her small South Carolina town wants to talk about.


Life is boring for Popeye in Fayette, South Carolina, but that all changes when he meets Elvis Jewell, a boy who lands in Fayette when his family’s Rambler makes a wrong turn and gets stuck in mud, forcing the Jewells to stay awhile.

Tennessee


In this story set in Cades Cove, Tennessee, in the heart of the Great Smoky Mountains, Autumn Winifred Oliver is conflicted about a plan to turn nearby land into a national park, a move that will allow residents to cash in on tourism but
also puts the jobs of the town’s loggers in jeopardy.


In this story set in 1880 in the Cumberland Mountains, 16-year-old Viney is determined to stop a planned utopian settlement led by Englishman Thomas Hughes from destroying the beauty of her mountain home.


Accounts by the citizens of Dayton, Tennessee, reveal the circuslike atmosphere created by the arrest and trial of J. T. Scopes, a teacher whose only crime was teaching the theory of evolution.

Virginia


Sixth-grader Gypsy Leemaster has a fairly normal life in Coal Station, Virginia, until her first cousin Woodrow Prater comes to live with their grandparents after his mother’s mysterious disappearance. Also see the sequel, The Search for Belle Prater (2005).


In rural Virginia, Jess Aarons and Leslie Burke form an unlikely friendship and create an imaginary kingdom called Terabithia, where they rule as king and queen. It is also where a tragic accident occurs and changes Jess’ life forever.


In this book set during World War II, 12-year-old Margaret Ann finally has a room of her own in her family’s farmhouse, until she learns that her cousin, escaping the Blitz in London, will be coming to live with Margaret’s family—and sleeping in her room.


Based on incidents from White’s own life and told in the voice of her older sister, Audrey, this story set in a Virginia coal-mining camp explores the love that holds a family together despite tragedy and troubles.

West Virginia


Orphaned at age six, Summer has finally found the love that she needs when an elderly West Virginia aunt and uncle take her in. Then Aunt May dies, and Summer and Uncle Ob are desperate to find a way to deal with their grief.


Marty Preston has been taught that in his West Virginia town everyone minds his or her own business, but he is faced with an ethical dilemma when he rescues a beagle that belongs to Judd Travers, a man known for abusing his dogs. Also see the sequels, Shiloh Season (1996) and Saving Shiloh (1997).


In this novel set in 1944 in Way Down Deep, West Virginia, Ruby June, a foundling, lives with Miss Arbutus in her boardinghouse but is being reared by the entire town. When Ruby June is 12, a new family comes to town and rocks her happy life with news of her true identity.

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