

Collecting North Carolina's Creative Writing: One Librarian's Guide

by Eileen McGrath

When I moved to North Carolina in 1984, I was familiar with twentieth-century North Carolina history and, while I had read some twentieth-century Southern literature, I had only the slightest acquaintance with North Carolina authors. That changed when I accepted a position as a cataloger in the North Carolina Collection at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. These novels, children's books, science fiction, romances, poetry, short story collections, and multi-genre, multi-author collections rolled into the cataloging work room week after week. I began to notice announcements in the local newspapers and periodicals about author readings, and I started to read reviews of North Carolina books in local and national publications. Before long, much of my professional and leisure time was absorbed by North Carolina literature. My interest must have been obvious because in 1994, I was given formal responsibility for collection development for the state's premier collection of North Caroliniana, the North Carolina Collection in Wilson Library. Because there is an enthusiasm for North Carolina creative writing among the staff of the collection, I get lots of help. Co-workers leave me articles from newspapers, pages from publishers' catalogs, printouts from Web sites, and notes about new or forthcoming books. I need

(and have) a special in-box on my desk just for acquisitions ideas.

The Contemporary Literary Landscape

Tony Abbott, Alice Adams, Lavonne Adams, Sheila Kay Adams, Betty Adcock, Alex Albright, Annette Allen, Schandra Alston, A. R. Ammons, Maya Angelou, James Applewhite, Daphne Athas, Laura Argiri, Ellyn Bache, Margaret Booth Baddour, Robert Bain, Sharlene Baker, Mignon Ballard, Nigel Barnes, Wilton Barnhardt, Gerald Barrax, Robert Bateman, Joseph Bathani, Ronald Bayes, Jeffery Beam, Maudy Benz, Doris Betts, Helen Bevington, Will Blythe, Elizabeth Bolton, Earl S. Braggs, Lilian Jackson Braun, Sue Ellen Bridgers, Bill Brittain, Grey Brown, Linda Beatrice Brown, Dixie Browning, Elizabeth Brownrigg, Sally Buckner, Betsy Byars, Kathryn Stripling Byer. The North Carolina literary scene is a mighty crowded place. The list of creative writers in or from the Tar Heel State doesn't peter out as one goes through the alphabet: John York, Marly Youmans, Barbara Younger, Ila Yount, John Young, Lee Zacharias, Hugh Zachary, Robert Zimmerman, Isabel Zuber. It seems to me that North Carolina has more creative writers than any other state, except New York. This is, of course, difficult to prove.

In a recent article in the *Spectator*, Sally Buckner (herself a poet and anthologist) wrote that she could think of

sixty fiction writers, twenty-eight poets, six dramatists, and eighteen authors of books for children and young adults in the Triangle area.¹ That's over one hundred published authors in just one part of the state. Nor does this number include the many writers whose works have yet to see print, or whose works have appeared only in periodicals. For the state as a whole, one approximation might be based on the membership (1,800) of the North Carolina Writers' Network. Each issue of its newsletter, *The Writers' Network News*, lists the names and residences of new members. If those listed in the November/December 1998 and January/February 1999 issues reflect the membership as a whole, then 90% (approximately 1,600) of their members are North Carolina residents. Even though some members may be librarians, nonfiction writers, editors, and publishing industry workers, I think that number is impressive. How does this compare to other states? In population North Carolina now ranks eleventh among the states; Georgia is the tenth most populous state, Virginia is the twelfth. The geographical index in *Who's Who in Writers, Editors & Poets: United States & Canada*, 1995-1996 edition lists 120 writers with Georgia residences, 177 with North Carolina, and 207 with Virginia.² This would imply that our numbers are not extraordinary for our size, but I think that the case can be made that the Washington, D.C. sub-

urbs skew the numbers for Virginia.

Another way to measure the magnitude of the literary scene is to look at publications. Each year the *North Carolina Historical Review* prints a bibliography of published, book-length North Caroliniana, arranged by general categories.³ According to the bibliographies appearing from 1988-1997, Tar Heel authors published 374 books of poetry during those ten years. Eight hundred forty-nine works of fiction with a North Carolina setting or by a North Carolina author were published in that same period. Moreover the average annual number of North Carolina fiction works has been increasing, from 67 (1988-1992) to 102 (1993-1997). Here is numerical confirmation of what many of us have thought: more North Carolina fiction writers are getting published, and writers elsewhere are finding North Carolina to be an interesting setting.

Within this crowded literary scene, all ages are represented. Writers who began their careers in the 1950s and 1960s are still publishing. They have been joined by at least two newer generations of writers, many of whom learned their craft in courses taught by members of the older generation. The productive senior generation includes such writers as Doris Betts, Fred Chappell, and Reynolds Price. Betts published two well-received novels in the 1990s. In the same decade, Chappell, now the state's poet laureate, published nine books and chapbooks, and Price published an astounding sixteen volumes of poetry, fiction, drama, and religious meditations.

These individuals may be among the state's best known writers, but they are not exceptional in their ability to remain productive through a long career. Each year four literary competitions are sponsored by the North Carolina Literary and Historical Association in cooperation with several other cultural groups.⁴ The nominees for those awards are listed in the September issue of *Carolina Comments*.⁵ The list of nominees for the Sir Walter Raleigh Award, given for the best work of fiction, and the Roanoke-Chowan Award, given for poetry, includes familiar names: Fred Chappell, Charles Edward Eaton, Elizabeth Daniels Squire (Sir Walter Raleigh Award, 1990); James Applewhite, Ronald Bayes, Fred Chappell, Lenard D. Moore (Roanoke-Chowan Award, 1993); Maya Angelou, Charles Edward Eaton, Marie Gilbert, Peter Makuck, Robert Watson (Roanoke-Chowan Award, 1995); Kathryn Stripling Byer, Michael

Chitwood, Tim McLaurin, Shelby Stephenson (Roanoke-Chowan Award, 1998). These well-established and mid-career authors are joined by new writers. Competing for the 1990 Sir Walter Raleigh Award against the luminaries mentioned above was Allan Gurganus's first novel, *Oldest Living Confederate Widow Tells All*. The newcomer won.

Reading the list of literary award nominees in back issues of *Carolina Comments* is one of the best ways to gain an appreciation for the wealth of writing talent in this state. Through these lists one can see the emergence and development of new talents such as Clyde Edgerton and Kaye Gibbons. Clyde Edgerton's first novel, *Raney*, was nominated for the Sir Walter Raleigh Award in 1985. Later books by Edgerton were nominated in 1987, 1989, 1991, 1993, and 1998; he received the 1998 award for his novel *Where Trouble Sleeps*. Kaye Gibbons's first book, *Ellen Foster*, was nominated in 1987; subsequent books were nominated in 1989, 1991, and 1998. This year Gibbons received the state's highest civilian honor, the North Carolina Award, for her contributions to literature.

Another phenomenon that one can see by reading the "North Carolina Bibliography" in the *North Carolina Historical Review* or the list of nominees in *Carolina Comments* is that many North Carolina writers are not limited to one genre. The state's poet laureate, Fred Chappell, has published nine books of fiction. Jim Grimsley came to wide public view with his novels *Dream Boy*, *My Drowning*, and *Winter Birds*; but play writing has been his primary focus for much of his career. It is hard to say whether Reynolds Price is better known as a poet or a novelist, or whether Maya Angelou is better known for her poetry or her autobiographical works. Several other poets have produced affecting memoirs, including Alan Shapiro whose *The Last Happy Occasion* and *Vigil* were published a few years ago, and Michael Chitwood whose autobiographical commentaries often can be heard on WUNC-FM.

Collection Development Decisions

When such a rich and diverse literary field meets the reality of the library budget, librarians have to make choices. Each library must define for itself the term "North Carolina literature." Is it solely the literary creation of North Carolinians, or can it include works set

in North Carolina, but written by residents of other places? In the North Carolina Collection, we collect both types of materials. We have done this so that our collection will reflect the literary genius of the state as well as what others have thought or imagined about this place.

So, who is a Tar Heel? Is birth the determining factor? Is having grown up in the state or having lived in the state for a certain number of years sufficient? Is any item published while its author resides in the state a work of North Carolina literature?

This state has given birth to many writers who now live elsewhere: e.g., A.R. Ammons, Shirley Cochrane, Tony Earley, Michael Malone, Armistead Maupin, Jill McCorkle, Howard Owen, Tom Robbins, and Tom Wicker. Others, such as Alice Adams, Anne Tyler, Randall Kenan, and David Sedaris, were born elsewhere but raised in North Carolina. In some cases, the decision is easy — while Jill McCorkle has lived for some years in Massachusetts, her work clearly draws on her North Carolina experiences. Anne Tyler was born in Minnesota but grew up in Raleigh. She has lived in Baltimore for three decades and much of her work has been set in

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the mid-Atlantic states. Yet her enormous popularity insures that virtually every public and college library in the state will buy her next novel. More difficult are the decisions about someone like Alice Adams or David Sedaris. Both were reared in North Carolina after being born elsewhere. Few, if any, of their works have North Carolina content, and neither has achieved as wide an audience as Anne Tyler.

Librarians also have to decide about people born elsewhere who moved into the state. Maya Angelou and Elizabeth Spencer are two writers who had well-established careers before settling in at Wake Forest University, and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, respectively. Both continued to write and publish after they moved to the state. Collecting their new books seems to me appropriate, given the quality of their works (each has received the

North Carolina Award for literature); but should a library attempt to acquire the works they published before moving to North Carolina?

Then there is the question of genre. Can the library collect in all genres, or should it limit itself to just one or two, such as poetry and mainstream fiction? The interests of patrons and the library budget are probably the chief considerations. For example, since most poetry appears in periodicals, meeting local interest will mean acquiring periodicals that regularly publish poetry. Is the library prepared to maintain subscriptions to a large number of literary magazines or to buy single issues containing pieces by one or more North Carolina authors?

Regardless of the genre, will the library collect all or just some editions (hardback, paperback, large print, translations, foreign imprints, etc.)? What about ephemeral materials such as chapbooks and poems published in programs and keepsakes? Nonprint formats such as audiobooks and adaptations for television or the movies also might be considered for addition to the collection. Is the library so committed to its North Carolina literature collection that it will buy manuscript materials or other pre-publication forms such as proof copies or advanced reading copies?²⁶ Finally, what will the library save? Public and school libraries, and many college libraries, regularly weed their collections. Will the library's collection be one of current North Carolina literature, or will North Carolina literary materials be retained without regard to their age or circulation history so that the collection reveals the full literary heritage of the state? Each library must make its own decisions.

Identifying Authors and Their Publications

Identifying new North Caroliniana is one of the major parts of my job, and it is work that I relish. To track North Carolina writers and their work, I employ the standard print and online sources useful to any librarian building a collection of contemporary American literature. I regularly read *Publishers Weekly*. It includes news of specific forthcoming books, reprints, and adaptations. The reviews in each issue and the announcements in the seasonal preview issues are required reading, but other parts of the magazine can be helpful and interesting. Advertisements often include works that are not reviewed and usually include price and ISBN

numbers. Through a business story in one issue, I learned that Warner Books had purchased the right to republish one of my favorite books of 1997, Susan Kelly's *How Close We Come*.⁷ By regularly scanning the business briefs, I followed the phenomenal sales of Charles Frazier's *Cold Mountain* and the growing popularity of Jan Karon's Mitford series. The news in *Publishers Weekly* also gives me a sense of which North Carolina writers are being energetically promoted by their publishers.

In addition to *Publishers Weekly*, I also regularly read *Library Journal* and the *New York Times Book Review*. *Library Journal* is useful because it reviews such a large number of books, and because its reviewers usually mention the setting of works of fiction. Through the reviews in the *New York Times Book Review* I occasionally uncover a writer's hitherto unknown connection to North Carolina; the *Times*'s reviews also provide a national, professional perspective on the work of North Carolina authors. I also try to scan the book reviews in the magazines and journals to which I subscribe and those I acquire when I am traveling. Through book review magazines from other parts of the country such as the *Hungry Mind Review* from Minnesota, I sometimes discover a Tar Heel living and writing in some other part of the country. I also read as many publisher catalogs as I can. Of course, I look at the catalogs and publication lists of in-state presses, but I also look at the catalogs of such large commercial publishers as Random House and Simon & Schuster, university presses, genre-identified publishers, and a number of small presses that often publish the works of North Carolina writers. Some of the publishers that have been surprisingly deep in North Caroliniana include the following: (for poetry) Copper Canyon Press, Gnomon Press, Louisiana State University Press, Nightshade Press, Papier-Mache Press, and (for science-fiction) Tom Doherty Associates.

Friends and colleagues often leave me suggestions for purchases, though seldom with a full bibliographic citation. *Books in Print*, now available both in print and online through OCLC's FirstSearch service, is invaluable for finding the complete ordering information. Publishers' Web sites are also good sources of information. Other online sources that I use regularly are the OCLC database and CARL Corporation's *NoveList*, both available through NC LIVE. I use these to check for other works by an author who has just come

to my attention. OCLC also helps me sort out a title that has appeared in multiple forms or editions.

As good as these sources are, if I relied upon them exclusively, I would miss a large amount of what is being published by North Carolina authors. Attention to in-state sources of information is essential if you hope to develop an extensive collection of North Carolina creative writing. The local newspaper is a good place to start. A number of newspapers in the state, particularly the *Charlotte Observer*, the *Herald-Sun* (Durham), the *Fayetteville Observer-Times*, the *News & Observer* (Raleigh), and *The Pilot* (Southern Pines), have long supported the state's literary scene with good book pages that include book reviews, feature articles, author interviews, and calendar listings of upcoming readings. A town does not have to be large for the local paper to cover the local literary scene. Small town papers may not run many book reviews, but they frequently interview local authors and print a calendar of local literary events.

Statewide or regional cultural publications are also a source of information of books and writers. Some publications, like *Brightleaf* and the *North Carolina Review of Books*, focus on literature. In these you will get long reviews, essays, interviews, and advertisements that can alert you to new publications and new writers. For periodicals such as *Creative Loafing*, the *Independent Weekly*, and the *Spectator*, literature is but one of the subjects they cover, yet these publications include literary events in their community calendars and often contain book reviews, interviews, advertisements for books and bookstores, and essays on literary topics. The space given to literary matters in these publications is, to me, an indicator of the vitality of the state's literary community.

The book review pages in local papers often contain advertisements from local bookstores. North Carolina is blessed with a good number of local, independently owned bookstores, extending not quite from Manteo to Murphy, but from at least Manteo (with Manteo Booksellers) to Asheville (with Malaprop's Bookstore/Cafe and other book sellers). Despite the recent loss of Wellington's Books and The Intimate, the Triangle is still home to some of the finest bookstores in the country: the Regulator Bookshop and the Know Book Store and Cultural Center, both in Durham, McIntyre's Fine Books & Bookends at Farrington, and Quail Ridge

Books, the Reader's Corner, and Books at Stonehenge in Raleigh. These local bookstores are in touch with the state's writers. Local stores tend to be most successful at tracking down local books that are hard to get through normal acquisitions channels. Although large, chain bookstores host readings by name authors on national book tours, it is at the local, independent bookstore that users are treated to a large number of readings by local authors. The newsletters, e-mail bulletin boards, and Web sites that many of the stores have are gold mines of information about books and writers. Getting on the mailing list at local bookstores is a good idea; an even better idea is to get to know the owner.

Many independent bookstores have sections or displays on local writers. Browsing these areas is one way to learn about the many publishers operating in the state. By my informal count, about 15 commercial entities in the state publish creative literature.⁸ Included in this number are established firms publishing both nonfiction and creative writing such as Algonquin Books, John F. Blair, and Down Home Press; presses associated with colleges in the state such as St. Andrews College Press, North Carolina Wesleyan College Press, and Mount Olive College Press; and a healthy number of small, independent presses including Banks Channel Books, Briarpatch Press, Carolina Wren Press, Horse and Buggy Press, Hummingbird Press, The Jargon Society, Lorien House, Persephone Press, Sandstone Publishing, and Scots Plaid Press. Few of these presses produce catalogs, but it is worth writing to each in-state publishing firm and asking to be placed on its mailing list.

A good bit of literature, especially poetry, is found in periodicals rather than books. Subscriptions to statewide and local literary journals expose patrons to a wide range of authors, many of whom will never publish a book-length work. Librarians who scan these journals as part of their collection development routine will learn about new writers and see writers develop material that may later appear in book form. Deciding what in-state literary journals to subscribe to is not easy. The *North Carolina Literary Review* is a good selection for a statewide, multi-genre source, but it should be supplemented with journals from your town or region, if such exist. Librarians should not overlook the literary journals published at many of the colleges around the state — it's likely that the famous Tar Heel authors of the

twenty-first century are publishing in their college literary magazines today.

In addition to subscribing to a range of literary magazines, librarians may want to write some of the literary associations in the state and ask to receive their newsletters and to be placed on their mailing lists. The newsletter of the North Carolina Writers' Network is a great source for information on writers, as are publications of other, more specialized, groups such as the Carolina African American Writers Collective, the Carolina Romance Writers, North Carolina Haiku Society, the North Carolina Poetry Society, and the Writers Group of the Triad. Carefully watching the community calendar in the local newspaper or entertainment tabloid enables librarians to learn about local groups, when they meet, and the name and phone number of a contact person.

Another way to build knowledge and make contacts is by attending individual author readings and book signings, and by participating in the many literary festivals around the state. Recurring events include the North Carolina Writers Conference, the North Carolina Writers' Network Fall Conference, the North Carolina Poetry Society conventions, the Asheville Poetry Festival, the Spring Literary Festival in Charlotte, the Festival for the Eno, and an annual book festival in Cary. These are complemented by one-time or irregularly scheduled events such as readings at restaurants, art galleries, and community centers such as the Hayti Heritage Center in Durham.⁹ Finally, librarians should not overlook the people they know as they build their knowledge of North Carolina authors and their library's collection of creative writing. I find that my friends and colleagues have interests that are not the same as mine, that they read different things than I do, and that they turn up information on books and authors that I would not find on my own.

It is pleasant to devote personal and professional time to following North Carolina literature. Unfortunately, I have other claims on my time, and so does every other librarian in the state. Each year, as a way to judge how well I am doing in collecting the work of the state's writers, I check my order and received files against the list of nominees for the Sir Walter Raleigh Award for fiction, the Roanoke-Chowan Award for poetry, and the Association of American University Women Award for juvenile literature. Despite my best efforts, every year at least twenty percent of the

nominated books are unknown to me. This gives me pause. I tell myself that this is a measure of the vitality and diversity of North Carolina's literary scene rather than a measure of my inadequacy, and then I immediately order those overlooked titles. So many books, so little time

References

¹ Sally Buckner, "Fertile Soil," *Spectator*, 1030 (November 4, 1998): 11-12.

² Curt Johnson, ed. *Who's Who in Writers, Editors & Poets: United States & Canada*. 1995-1996 ed. Highland Park, IL: Decem-ber Press, 1996.

³ The first of these bibliographies, covering the years 1931-1933, and composed by Mary Lindsay Thornton, appeared in the April 1934 issue of the *North Carolina Historical Review* (NCHR). Later bibliographies, compiled by the curators of the North Carolina Collection, appeared annually thereafter. Robert G. Anthony, Jr. compiled the most recent bibliography which is forthcoming in April 1999 NCHR issue.

⁴ These are the AAUW Award for juvenile literature; the Mayflower Award for nonfiction; the Roanoke-Chowan Award for poetry, and the Sir Walter Raleigh Award for fiction. A complete listing of the winners of each award appears elsewhere in this issue.

⁵ *Carolina Comments*. Raleigh: North Carolina Division of Archives and History. Bi-monthly.

⁶ These are surprisingly easy to acquire from used bookstores in metropolitan areas of the state or from out-of-print dealers who specialize in literature.

⁷ This novel was the winner of the first Carolina Novel Award, established in 1996 to recognize excellence in fiction writing by Carolina authors. The novel was first published by Banks Channel Books of Wilmington, the contest's sponsor. Its word-of-mouth sales and reviews were so good that Warner Books contracted to re-issue the work in hard cover. The winning book for 1998-1999 is Judith Stacy's *Styles by Maggie Sweet*, from Banks Channel Books.

⁸ The 1997 edition of *North Carolina Literary Resource Guide* (Carrboro, N.C.; The North Carolina Writers' Network) lists twenty-one small presses. A definitive number is hard to come by since many small publishing firms are short-lived, and it is not always easy to tell when a "publishing firm" is really just one person publishing his own works and those of his friends.

⁹ "Spotlight on Culture," *News & Observer*, January 20, 1999.