

Clyde Edgerton's Depiction of a South in Transition

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Abstract

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In each of his first five novels, Clyde Edgerton portrays a South in transition, the older generation looking back to a simpler day when people worked the land and the younger generation losing or having lost touch with these values. Edgerton treats a number of attributes of life in the South which critics often propose as characteristics of Southern distinctiveness. Among these are the importance of family and community, Southern food and cooking, a religion which is predominantly Protestant and evangelical, tension between races, and the important role of storytelling. For each of these attributes of Southern distinctiveness, Edgerton describes members of an older generation--or members of a younger generation who have completely adopted the sensibilities of their parents--who find traditional Southern ways to be a source of comfort and support. On the other hand, Edgerton provides a different set of characters who reject traditional Southern ways. They believe that the values of their parents are outmoded and are a source of repression.

In his complex portrayal of the elements of Southern distinctiveness, Edgerton reveals a deep-seated ambivalence about changes occurring in the South. Much of the charm

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and popularity of his work can be attributed to his careful depiction of traits of Southern distinctiveness. However, he also shows that change is inevitable; in fact, traditional Southern ways are an obstacle to be overcome by many of his characters. That the South is in transition is not an idea which is original with Clyde Edgerton. In fact, a resistance to change has been a characteristic of Southerners and Southern writers throughout the South's history. Edgerton's treatment of this theme places him within a rich tradition of Southern writers.

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Chapter I

The Distinctiveness of the South

In Clyde Edgerton's most recent novel, In Memory of Junior, Laura and Glenn Bales both lie near their deaths. Their children are, of course, interested in their parents' health, but not for completely admirable reasons. They believe that the land owned by the couple will pass down through the children of the one who lives longest. Glenn's children by his first marriage, Faison and Tate, are unsure of what to do with the land. Tate believes he would like to build an airstrip on part of the land; Faison would probably sell the land. Most of Glenn's relatives assume that Faye, Laura's daughter by her first marriage, would sell the land to nearby TechComm Commons, an industry that puts up glass buildings, for eighty-thousand dollars an acre. Glenn's sisters, Bette and Ansie, believe that this would be terrible. They both believe that the land should pass through them, even though there is no legal precedent on their side, because they are the ones who have actually worked the land. Here we see a generational conflict typical of today's South: like Laura and Glenn, Bette and Ansie value an agricultural way of life while the children of Laura and Glenn have lost touch with the values of their parents' generation. As Glenn lies in bed, he thinks,

I think I kind of worship--or something--them
all, standing there, all dressed in white,

working in the fields, tending crops, plowing, cutting wood and bringing it in, walking down to the spring and bringing back cool butter and milk. And this must have been the same with Mama and Papa. They must have remembered the ones before them that way. What would that boy of Tate's--I can't remember his name--what would that boy remember? And didn't Faison have one? What would he remember? (95)

This shifting set of values in today's South has been a central issue in Edgerton's work since the publication of his first novel, Raney (1985). Michael Pearson notes this tension in his article "Stories to Ease the Tension: Clyde Edgerton's Fiction": "His fiction also seems to thrive on ambivalence, fondness and aversion for Southern mores often mixing together in his work. . . . Edgerton's South is in the midst of change" (2).

One could well ask, "What is this South that Edgerton displays in the midst of change?" The question of the existence of a distinctive South has captured the attention of literary critics, historians, and sociologists for decades, and volumes have been written about the problem. An early statement of the South's distinctiveness is W. J. Cash's book The Mind of the South, published in 1941. He argues that there exists both in the North and in the South "a profound conviction that the South is another land,

sharply differentiated from the rest of the American nation, and exhibiting within itself a remarkable homogeneity" (vii). He suggests that "Nobody . . . has ever taken . . . seriously" those who "tell us that it is all a figment of the imagination" (vii). He asserts that "It is easy to trace throughout the region . . . a fairly definite mental pattern--a complex of established relationships and habits of thought, sentiments, prejudices, standards and values, and associations of ideas" (viii). He concludes, "The peculiar history of the South has so greatly modified it from the general American norm that . . . it decisively justifies the notion that the country is--not quite a nation within a nation, but the next thing to it" (viii). In his book, he attempts to trace the history of the Southern "mind." He argues that the South is and has been for the most part a frontier society and traces the "mind" of the South through three frontiers: the frontier of original settlement, the frontier of Reconstruction, and the frontier of urbanization. He believes that the essential Southern mind and will remained after the Civil War. The war had brought Southerners together with a common cause and had, in fact, strengthened their resolve to be a people apart (103-105). The war and Reconstruction further unified the South by placing almost all people on a similar economic level--poverty. During this era, the myths of the Old South

"concerning the power and prevalence of standards of honor and so on in the Old South, the proportions of its culture, and, in fact, all the other features of the legend" emerged (126).

Another seminal work is C. Vann Woodward's The Burden of Southern History. Published in 1960, this book argues that many of the factors that make the South distinctive are disappearing "in the midst of an economic and social revolution that has by no means run its course" (4). Woodward states, "This revolution has already leveled many of the old monuments of regional distinctiveness and may end eventually by erasing the very consciousness of a distinctive tradition along with the will to sustain it" (4-5). However, he suggests one factor that will slow this trend. He posits that the only aspect of the South that is "immune from the disintegrating effect of nationalism and the pressure from conformity . . . is its history" (15), that is, "the collective experience of the Southern people" (16). He suggests that the South's identity as a defeated people drastically removes it from the mainstream of American experience. Southerners do not share with other Americans an experience of economic abundance, success, and innocence (16-21). He believes that the South's defeat in the Civil War gives the Southern historian an ironic stance with regard to the country's "legend of irresistible progress, success, and victory" (190). He states, "For the

inescapable facts of history were that the South had repeatedly met with frustration and failure. It had learned what it was to be faced with economic, social, and political problems that refused to yield" (190).

In Frederick J. Hoffman's 1961 essay, "The Sense of Place," appearing in South: Modern Southern Literature in Its Cultural Setting edited by Louis D. Rubin and Robert D. Jacobs, he attempts a definition of the South:

It is rich in natural detail; its pace is slow and close to the rhythms of natural sequences; it tends to develop historically in a slow accession of patterns which accommodate to the atmospheric and biological qualities of setting; it generates loyalties to place that are much more highly emotionally charged than in any dedication to ideas; finally, its rhythm of social motion is passive rather than active. . . . Southern tradition tends to remain static, to be self-protective, and to encourage fierce loyalties to its condition of being. (63)

Hoffman agrees with Cash that the Civil War helped solidify the Southerner's conception of himself as a Southerner: "On one level the Civil War enforced the Southerner's love of place by strengthening--perhaps even, in a sense, creating--platitudes of loyalty to it. Vicissitudes of regional differences became fixed emotional habits" (63).

In his 1972 work The Enduring South: Subcultural Persistence in Mass Society, sociologist John Shelton Reed attempts to objectify Southern distinctiveness in the realms of localism, violence, and religion. Using surveys and public opinion polls, he demonstrates that there are demonstrable differences between Southerners and other Americans in these areas. Reed concludes, "Southerners . . . are more likely than non-Southerners to be conventionally religious, to accept the private use of force (or the potential for it), and to be anchored in their homeplace" (83). He states, "Two institutions, the family and the church, are more powerful in the South than elsewhere in the United States. . . . [They are] more culturally conservative generally, and may be particularly so in the South" (87).

In historian Carl N. Degler's 1977 book Place Over Time: the Continuity of Southern Distinctiveness, he refers to "the South, where roots, place, family, and tradition are the essence of identity" (xi). He identifies a number of what he refers to as objective factors that differentiate the South from the rest of the United States. First is the climate and its corollary, the "South's historic commitment to agriculture" (11). He adds that the South is the poorest region of the country (16). He notes that "The South's population has always contained a higher proportion of Negroes than the rest of the United States"

(18). He documents a "lack of diversified immigration into the South" and argues that this "has also narrowed the region's range of religions" (19). He also attributes "Less subtle social behavior" (20), alluding to the Ku Klux Klan, to "the South's lack of religious and ethnic diversity" (20). He argues that "The South is the most religious region of the country and . . . the character of its Protestantism is traditional and conservative" (22). He notes "a broader conservative outlook among Southerners" (23) and concludes with "its tendency toward personal violence" (24).

Louis Rubin takes up this question in his Preface to A Gallery of Southerners (1982). However, he does not offer any strict guidelines to define the South. Rather, he describes the South as a complex entity: "History, geography, politics, religion, economics, language: each of these aspects of human experience plays a part in the complex social organism known as The South, and each exists not in isolation but in an inescapable relationship with all the others" (xi). In his introduction to The History of Southern Literature (1985), Rubin argues that a number of developments, including

. . . widespread and enduring poverty, . . .
 pervasive segregation in almost every aspect of
 daily life, one-crop agriculture and a political
 and social order still dominated by its rural

components not only intensified the sense of the South as being set apart from, and, for the white community, united against the rest of the nation, but gave to the literary imagination, and to those who studied it, a powerful sense of regional identity and sectional mission. (4)

In spite of this list of Southern characteristics, Rubin still, as he does in other places, takes the existence of the South as a self-evident given: "Southern identity is important because it is. . . . The facts are that there existed in the past, and there continues to exist today, an entity within the American society known as the South" (5). In his 1988 essay, "Changing, Enduring, Forever Still in the South," collected in The Prevailing South, Rubin is more exact in his definition of the South. He lists "poverty, rurality and isolation, segregation, the Confederate heritage, the one-party system, fundamentalist religion and so on" as "forces that have shaped its [the South's] experience in the past" (228).

John A. Burrison, in his introduction to Storytellers: Folk Tales and Legends from the South (1989), suggests that storytelling is an important characteristic of the South. He writes,

Nowhere in the United States is storytelling more vital than in the South, where skill with the spoken word has always been emphasized. Strong

traditions of storytelling from such Old World source areas of the southern population as Ulster, West Africa, and Southern England, reinforced by the physical isolation of dispersed settlement and a conservative mindset that valued the old ways, certainly contributed to this tendency. (1-2)

Simon J. Bronner concurs in his essay on "Storytelling" in Encyclopedia of Southern Culture (1989). He states that "storytelling holds social significance throughout the South," and "Each person knows narratives that he or she can occasionally relate" (2:151).

In The Southern Writer in the Postmodern World (1991), Fred Hobson proposes that "a greater attention to the past, an acceptance of man's finiteness, his penchant for failure, a tragic sense--are more characteristic of the southerner than of other Americans" (3). However, he suggests that other qualities representative of Southern life--"a religious sense, a closeness to nature, a great attention to family, a preference for the concrete and a rage against abstraction" (3)--might also be attributed to any rural, traditional society. Thus, Hobson sees some characteristics often attributed to the South as indeed Southern but maintains that others could be ascribed to any rural region.

Edgerton himself is reticent to define the South,

although he feels that he is a Southern writer:

For my purposes of writing, I just have to kind of know my family, and it seems that my family resembles other Southern families. . . . I can't talk very confidently about the South, but I can talk confidently about what I know about my family. . . . Then it's also safe to say that that family--because they were poor, because they were agriculturally-based--[resemble many other Southern families]. (Edgerton, Interview, 5 April 1993)

Edgerton does list some factors common to his experience as a resident of the South:

. . . the climate, the religion, the fact that it's agriculturally based, . . . the agriculture especially, where families were working together, had to spend time together, and so you had this--for better or for worse--shared family life. . . . Of course, religion was strong in my family too, . . . and that resembles many Southern families. (Edgerton, Interview, 5 April 1993)

The factors listed by Edgerton here--poverty, climate, religion, agriculture, and shared family life--have been mentioned by so many of the critics that one could begin to form a tentative definition of "Southernness" based on

these factors. The question remains, however, of whether such distinctiveness remains in the face of the great changes, including rapid industrialization, seen in the South during the past several decades. That the South is changing is undeniable, yet the South seems to have always been changing. The first writers who attempted to define the factors that make the South distinctive warned that this distinctiveness was disappearing. Even in 1941 when Cash argued that "the extent of the change and of the break between the Old South that was and the South of our time has been greatly exaggerated," he admitted that "Industrialization and commercialization have greatly modified the land, including its ideology" (x).

C. Vann Woodward begins with the admission that "The South is still in the midst of an economic and social revolution that has by no means run its course" (4). He notes large demographic changes during what he calls the Bulldozer Revolution. While Rubin, in "Southern Literature: The Historical Image," refers to the South at the beginning of World War I as "a basically agrarian, ingrown, easygoing, impecunious society" (34), Woodward notes that it was a society on the brink of great change. Of the 1940's he writes, "For every three city dwellers in the South at the beginning of that decade there were four at the end, and for every five farm residents there were only four" (6). He notes also that the number of people

employed in agriculture dropped from 5.5 million to 3.2 million during the same decade. He concludes, "All indications are that the bulldozer will leave a deeper mark upon the land than did the carpetbagger" (7). Jay Hubbell concurs in The South in American Literature (1954): "The rapid industrialization of the South in the twentieth century has made the urban South at least almost indistinguishable from the urban North and West, and sectional differences seem destined to eventual extinction" (878).

While John Shelton Reed's purpose in The Enduring South (1972) is to show that certain aspects of Southern existence are distinctive and continue to be evident in spite of external forces, embedded within his title and thesis is the understanding that there are forces which are changing the South and against which the South continues to "endure." And, in fact, time after time he demonstrates that, while Southern traits and attitudes remain distinctive from those of the United States as a whole, the degree of distinctiveness is ever decreasing. Reed admits, "Certainly there have been phenomenal changes in the lives of most Southerners during the decades just past. In economic and demographic terms, the South *has* undergone a considerable transformation" (1).

Josephine Humphreys, in her 1988 essay "A Disappearing Subject Called the South," states the case most

dramatically: "To tell the truth, the South is once again in ruin" (214). The thesis of her essay is that the distinctiveness of place in the South is disappearing: "Development is the dirty family secret of the South, and, like most dirty secrets, it is known to everyone" (214). She argues that "In the past, the South had a vast supply of real places. But the first gradual and now swift metamorphosis of our geography has changed our literature. . . . It is not that we lost a war. It is that we lost our place" (215). However, she bases this loss of place as much on the changing nature of urban life as on the disappearance of rural landscape: "The natural setting of Southern fiction is not wilderness, nor farm, nor city. It is town" (215). She defines the South as a place which requires the tension between town and country, and it is this tension which she sees disappearing as the towns, ever enlarging, become cities. She believes it is the contrast between town and country that provides the tension for many Southern writers: "Stand there awhile, where you can see both town and no-town and you will know something about life on Earth. You will know enough for a novel" (218).

Jefferson Humphries, in his introduction to his 1990 collection Southern Literature and Literary Theory, argues that the Civil Rights upheaval of the 1950s and 1960s in some ways repeated the Civil War and made the tension between the South's past and present as real to his

generation as it had been to those before: "The heritage of the Old South, its economy and social structure, and the consequences of the Civil War, were thus as immediately real to me--and to many southerners of my generation--as to anyone with an uncle who fought at Gettysburg" (xi). He states that his elders, the generation of Southern critics before him, "are often heard to say that their "tensions," which define southernness for them, are growing ever fainter, more ethereal, more purely intellectual" (xii). He goes on to suggest that "Southern identity may not survive the passing of the post-Rubin generation" (xvii) in which he locates himself.

Edgerton points to education as a factor that has helped erase some of the South's distinctiveness and has led to tensions between generations.

I was thinking about me and my family. I think maybe it's a tension between me and my family, a very simple kind of thing that has happened to a lot of people in the South. . . . in a South where nobody ever went to college, suddenly, back in 1940, there were these people who were living with people who were not formally educated, entire families, and they were leaving these formally-uneducated families and going off to places like Chapel Hill and coming home again. There is a tension created there. . . . It seems

reasonable that I write out of that tension.

(Edgerton, Interview, 5 April 1993)

Rubin downplays the importance of the difference between what the South has been and what it is becoming, arguing instead that such tension between ways of life has been the defining characteristic of the South and Southern literature all along. In his essay, "Changing, Enduring, Forever Still in the South," a companion-piece to Josephine Humphreys' "A Disappearing Subject Called the South" in The Prevailing South (1993), he defines "The cultural contrast and conflict that lie at the heart of the literature of the South in our century" to be "the tension between the old and the new, between past and present, between change and resistance to change" (225). He repeats the importance of change to Southerners' conceptions of who they are:

It may well be that it is the impact of Change itself . . . upon a society aspiring to permanence that has most of all characterized the Southern literary imagination. In Southern literature, things are always about to disappear. The contrasts within the Southern experience remain vivid (229)

This is by no means a new idea. In his 1945 essay "The New Provincialism," Allen Tate attempted to explain the phenomenon of the Southern Renaissance and attributed it to such tension: "With the war of 1914-1918, the South

reentered the world--but gave a backward glance as it slipped over the border: that backward glance gave us the Southern renaissance, a literature conscious of the past in the present" (292). Fred Hobson argues similarly that "the Southern writer, who in most cases had left home for a time, focused his eye on a changing South, an industrializing South, but looked as well at a South that was slipping away, and the result was a creative mixture of detachment and involvement" (3).

One problem related to the existence of a distinctive South and its endurance is the fact of a large body of Southern literature which both relies on and perpetuates the South's distinctiveness. In fact, many critics who begin to delineate characteristics of the South quickly lapse into listing elements of the fiction which supposedly describe the South. In the case of Rubin, his discussions of the South and Southern literature are so closely related that it is difficult to tell where one ends and the other begins. In his Preface to A Gallery of Southerners, he as much as confesses this when he describes his inception into the "business of discussing literature as Southern literature": "The point . . . is that I was not merely undertaking an intellectual or literary inquiry; I was also investigating my own identity" (xi). For many of the critics who have written since, the inverse may be true: they are not merely describing the distinctive

characteristics of the South, but they are also relying heavily on the literature of that South to do so.

Whether there is a distinctive South or not, there is certainly a large body of Southern literature written by Southerners who believe that their region is distinctive. In their 1961 introduction to South: Modern Southern Literature in Its Cultural Setting, Rubin and Robert D. Jacobs argue that Southern writers have shared interests: "They have tended to depict man's nature as being religious, to view the individual very much as a creature of time and history, to assume the individual's commitment to society and his determining role within it" (12). In his preface to A Gallery of Southerners, Rubin rather vaguely defines Southern Literature as that body of literature which Southerners recognize as true to their own experience.

We do indeed see ourselves in it; imaging as it does a palpable social complexity, bounded in a time and place and with its own complex representations of reality, even its own mythos and legendry, the best literature of the South offers a version, ordered and criticized, of our own situation, and the Southern reader in particular is able to respond to it with considerable shock of recognition. (xv)

Fred Hobson offers a fairly detailed definition of

Southern Literature:

I think it can be said that the most notable southern *writers*, white and black, of the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s were far more conscious of place, family, community, religion and its social manifestations, and the power of the past in the present than were nonsouthern American writers, and that Southern *writers* did rage against abstraction more than nonsouthern writers So did those southern writers of the 1950s and most of the 1960s concern themselves with place, family, community, and religion. In particular the southern writer of that latter period continued to be fascinated with history, with the southern past and the individual past as it was involved with the regional past. (4)

Hobson's emphasis on the word *writers* indicates his belief that the literature of the South has been somewhat more distinctive than the culture itself.

In "Changing, Enduring, Forever Still in the South," Rubin defines distinctive Southern elements common to literature of the South as

. . . a distinctive awareness of the Past, a firm identification with Place, a preoccupation with one's membership in a community, a storytelling bent (as compared with a concern for Problems), a

strong sense of family and an unusually vivid consciousness of caste and class, especially involving race. (226)

He maintains that while today's South and the literature coming from it are quite different than they have been in the past, they are still distinctive: the ingredients that define Southern fiction "are handled *differently*, but they continue to give form to the literary imagination of Southern writers" (228). He uses Jill McCorkle's Tending to Virginia as an example. "No one could ever mistake Jill McCorkle's Southern community for Eudora Welty's or Katherine Anne Porter's or Flannery O'Connor's. Yet neither could that particular community be thought of as existing anywhere but in North Carolina in the South" (229).

In his foreword to Fred Hobson's The Southern Writer in the Postmodern World (1991), Michael M. Cass agrees that, while Southern Literature is changing, it maintains its distinctiveness.

The younger writers are not writing with the 'burden' of racial guilt; they are 'unburdened' characters who are very different at first glance from Quentin Compson and Jack Burden and their brothers and sisters in classic Renaissance fiction. Recent novels still feature distinctively southern voices, but their

characters apparently do not have the southern-consciousness and self-consciousness typical of a Faulkner character. (ix)

However, he notes that they are still concerned with ". . . subjects that concern the characters of Faulkner, Warren, and Percy: history, the past, and the 'ambiguous affliction' consequent to internecine warfare" (x).

Fred Hobson opines that some Southern writers began to write out of a tradition of Southern literature perhaps divorced from the reality of the culture in which they lived. "And the southern writer through the 1960s seemed very much aware, as well, of those *writers* who had gone before. Most notable southern novelists through the 1960s . . . still wrote with an eye very much on past Southern giants" (4). His allusion to Tate emphasizes his point that the tension for the Southern novelist of the 1960s and 1970s was not so much one of the present versus the past as one of the present versus the great tradition and large volume of Southern literature "as well as a preoccupation with old themes, old settings and truisms" (6). He asks, "Had what was once natural become stylized; what was deeply and painfully experienced become ritualized?" (6). He answers that "Many white southern writers, generally speaking, still thought they had a love-hate relationship with the South whether they did or not, and those writers had to write the traditional work coming to terms with

their homeland" (6).

However, he does not feel that this is the case with the white Southern writers who have begun to publish within the past fifteen or twenty years: "Those writers . . . seem hardly to have the need to join the battle, to wrestle with racial sin and guilt. What one finds in more recent novelists . . . is a relative lack of southern self-consciousness" (6). He argues that there are still what he calls "neo-Gothic southern writers who rely on traditional themes and stereotypes but warns, "The problem for the neo-Gothic novelist is that southern social reality, broad and representative reality, no longer so dramatically supports his fiction" (7). He does attempt to place a number of recent Southern novelists within a tradition of concern with "place, family, community, religion, and past which have been central in the most notable southern fiction of the first three quarters of this century" (8). One factor he sees as distinguishing most southern novelists is that they are not postmodern writers, that is, "the contemporary southern writer essentially *accepts*, rather than *invents*, his world . . . does not *in his fiction* question the whole assumed relationship between narrator and narrative, does not question the nature of fiction itself" (9).

He holds up as an ideal a number of Southern writers who portray Southern life accurately with an apparent lack

of self-consciousness of themselves as Southern writers. He suggests that Fred Chappell and Ernest Gaines, among others, perfectly embody Donald Davidson's "autochthonous ideal" which Hobson interprets as "a condition in which the writer was in a certain harmony with his social and cultural environment, was nearly *unconscious* of it as a "special" environment, quaint or rustic or backward, and thus was not motivated by any urge to interpret or explain" (80). He grants that Davidson's motivation was less than pure: "as an upholder of the racial status quo and other manifestations of the southern status quo," he was "essentially calling for a lack of social *tension* between the literary artist and his social and cultural environment" (80). Yet, Hobson maintains that such an ideal is appropriate, for writers overly concerned with presenting, interpreting, explaining, or reforming the South suffer as craftsmen. And, in spite of young Southern writers upholding Davidson's autochthonous ideal "to a degree and in a manner he could hardly have imagined--and in a state of innocence that such an ideal was ever pronounced" (81), Hobson argues that certain traditionally Southern themes still exist in the contemporary Southern fiction: "We can safely say that *most* under-fifty southern writers . . . are still more concerned with family than are most nonsouthern American writers . . . and that most of these writers are more concerned with community than most

young nonsouthern writers" (74). While he believes that some traditionally Southern themes are disappearing, he holds that "In many other areas . . . we find a great deal of continuity" (76). He concludes that Southern fiction is changing: "We find significant changes in southern fiction, then, reflecting larger changes in society as far as gender, family, and community are concerned" (78-9). However, he speaks of ". . . the enduring southern concerns for place, nature, community, and the endurance of the past in the present" (82).

What emerges from the differing views of all of these writers is a sense that--while the argument may be often overstated, oversimplified, or confused with literary questions--there is an entity called the South which is distinctive from the remainder of the United States. This distinctiveness has its roots in a climate and landscape which made slavery a profitable enterprise. As the disagreement between northern and Southern states regarding slavery intensified, a feeling of Southern identity did as well. The Civil War and the subsequent Reconstruction only served to increase the differences between Southerners and other citizens of the United States as well as solidify a feeling of Southern identity.

The fact that the South lost the Civil War has been a strong element in defining Southern identity, as the South is thus alienated from the prevailing American ideals of

success, wealth, and innocence. R. W. B. Lewis, in his study The American Adam, suggests that the typical American hero has been "an individual emancipated from history, happily bereft of ancestry, untouched and undefiled by the usual inheritances of family and race; an individual standing alone, self-reliant and self-propelling . . ."

(5). He concludes that this hero is "most easily identified with Adam before the Fall" (5). C. Vann Woodward restates Lewis's position: "According to this legend Americans received a sort of regeneration of sinful man by coming out of the wicked Old World and removing to an untarnished new one" (19). Woodward suggests that this legend has indeed been representative of American history, even into the twentieth century; America has achieved almost unparalleled economic, social, and political success. However, he argues that the experience of the South has been quite different and that the Southerner cannot buy into this myth of unparalleled success: "The South's preoccupation was with guilt, not with innocence, with the reality of evil, not with the dream of perfection" (21).

Thus, as a result of its history, the experience of the South has been quite different than that of the country as a whole, and the South has developed its own unique identity. Among other factors that are often listed as particularly Southern are a loyalty to family, community,

and place; the importance of and conservative nature of religion; a historical racism, vestiges of which remain today; and a tendency of Southerners to tell stories. All of these are factors which have been emphasized by Edgerton throughout his career as a novelist as he depicts the tension between the past and present of the contemporary South.

One factor that makes Southerners and characters in Southern literature distinctive is the individual's dependence on family, community, and place. Woodward argues that Southern novelists treat man "not as an individual alone . . . but as an inextricable part of a living history and community, attached and determined in a thousand ways by other wills and destinies of people he has only heard about" (37). Rubin and Jacobs agree: "In the Southern novel, man as an individual does not exist apart from a social framework" (12). They argue that Southerners exhibit "a cantankerous individualism that manifests itself, regardless of social pressures" (12) while at the same time relying on community: "This conflict--the individual within society, product of it and often as not its victim, yet at the same time a free agent with the responsibility for his actions--is present in every one of the Southern writers" (13). This seeming paradox within Southern life, intense individuality juxtaposed with an interdependence on community, had also been noted by Cash,

who stated it as a contradiction between individualism and paternalism, the willingness of Southerners to subordinate themselves to their acknowledged authority figures. Cash theorizes that, while the contradiction is real, it can be partially explained by the fact that most Southerners "associated the authority yielded the master class, not with any diminution of [their] individuality, but with its fullest development and expression" (113). Rubin and Jacobs go on to emphasize the importance of place to Southern writers: "From Ellen Glasgow to William Styron, the writers of the twentieth-century South have addressed themselves to the milieu in which they and their fellow Southerners have their being" (14). John Shelton Reed suggests that "Southerners seem more likely than other Americans to think of their region, their states, and their local communities possessively, as *theirs*, and as distinct from and preferable to other regions, states, and localities" (33). He continues, "It appears from the data that Southerners are more likely to choose their 'normative reference individuals' from among their neighbors and kin" (35). Thus, the interdependence of the individual and the community is a characteristic of Southern life and Southern fiction, and this is a theme throughout Edgerton's work, from Raney's complete deference to family and community norms in Raney to Morgan Bales' initiation into family tradition in In Memory of Junior.

Historic slavery and an enduring tension between races are other characteristics of Southern life and fiction. Cash argues that the poverty incipient with the loss of the Civil War and the ensuing Reconstruction caused the common or poor white to be obsessed with his superiority over blacks, even more so than before the war. He believes that the Reconstruction both increased hatred of the Negro in poor whites and instilled it in the upper class, where it had hardly existed before. According to Cash, violence against blacks was the only recourse for Southern whites, who would not dare attack Northern "carpetbaggers." He states that "no loyal white man could hope to find justice" (119) in the courts of the South in the ten years after the war and that this led to "direct action" or violence against blacks. He believes that, although white men who had killed black men were publicly reviled, young Southerners saw through this hypocrisy and learned to admire them (109-123).

Woodward also addresses the importance of racial tension to Southern identity, arguing that Ulrich B. Phillips' assertion that the essential theme of continuity and unity in the Southern heritage was "'a common resolve indomitably maintained' that the South 'shall be and remain a white man's country'" has proved even more durable than the Agrarians' assertion that the South should maintain its agricultural identity (8-10). Fred Hobson also

acknowledges the centrality of this theme in Southern life and literature. In his praise of Ernest Gaines as the epitome of Donald Davidson's autochthonous ideal and as a traditional Southern writer, he notes Gaines' "continued attention to that most frequently treated and most dramatically powerful of southern subjects, racial tension and conflict" (92). Again, Edgerton treats this theme throughout his fiction, from the racist attitudes of Raney's family in Raney to the subtle, institutionalized racism depicted in the fictional Campbell College in Killer Diller.

Another factor frequently referred to as characteristic of the South is the important role that religion plays and the conservative nature of that religion. John Shelton Reed argues that

Probably the most striking feature of religion in the South is that the region is, and has been since antebellum times, monolithically Protestant. Not only is the South more uniformly Protestant than the rest of the country, its Protestant population is itself more homogeneous--and in a way that makes the region unique. (57)

Carl N. Degler agrees, stating that "The South is the most religious area of the country and . . . the character of its Protestantism is traditional and conservative" (22).

He states that "Its dominant Baptist and Methodist churches remained strongly individualistic and conservative" and that "Religion helps set the South apart from the nation not only because it is conservative, but also because it is taken seriously by southerners" (23). The importance of religion in the South is a theme throughout Edgerton's works, from the pervasive role that church plays in the lives of Raney in Raney and Mattie Rigsbee in Walking Across Egypt to his caricature of a Baptist college in Killer Diller.

The importance of oral tradition and a penchant for storytelling are other characteristics often attributed to the South. Simon J. Bronner writes, "A robust and vital storytelling tradition is part and parcel of the South's persona" (2:150). Fred Hobson, in his praise of Fred Chappell's I Am One of You Forever, writes, "There could hardly be a better example of the traditional southern novel, with its . . . portrait of an organic society producing its own mythology" (85). In "Changing, Enduring, Forever Still in the South," Louis Rubin identifies "a storytelling bent" (226) as a distinctive Southern element. A concern for storytelling is evident in Edgerton's novels. From the role of Aunt Flossie and Uncle Nate as storytellers in Raney's family in Raney to storytelling as the form--and to a certain degree the subject--of The Floatplane Notebooks and In Memory of Junior, storytelling

is important throughout Edgerton's work.

A number of writers see storytelling and writing as closely related to the South's identity as a defeated nation and its fascination with the past. Hoffman notes the South's emphasis on preserving its past: "It is impossible to speak of the South as place without discussing it as a region possessing a uniquely clear and responsible memory of its past" (65), and often such memory occurs in the form of stories. In fact, Woodward suggests that "The most reassuring prospect for the survival of the South's distinctive heritage is the magnificent body of literature produced by its writers" (24). Jefferson Humphries argues that "The conflict between Old and New South, the sort of tensions we lived through, and still feel . . . are too powerful to find expression in the quieter, cooler mode of history alone. Only literature can accommodate them" (xii). Allen Tate also theorized the nature between conserving culture and storytelling when he suggests that "a backward glance gave us . . . a literature conscious of the past in the present" (293).

A final factor which Edgerton uses to illustrate the tension between old and new South is Southern cooking. Of course, it is natural that cooking would be important in a region known for its rural ways and dependence on agriculture. In Edgerton's work, however, cooking also becomes an exponent related to other traditional Southern

values, including the individual's close ties to family and community and the importance of religion. In Raney, an important part of Charles' indoctrination into Southern ways is his learning to cook traditional Southern meals. In Walking Across Egypt, Mattie Rigsbee's love of cooking and nurturing is interwoven with and almost indistinguishable from her conservative religious beliefs. And in Killer Diller, Wesley Benfield's cooking is closely related to another central theme, the tension between escaping an intolerable situation and his need to have a family and be a part of a community.

In summary, there is a distinctive entity called the South and a distinctive literature that can be called Southern literature. Clyde Edgerton, in his pervasive use of themes common to the South and Southern literature, identifies himself as part of a tradition of Southern literature. In fact, the tension between what the South has been in the past and what it is becoming is central to the whole of his work. Of course, it is sometimes difficult to define the South and Southern literature precisely, and Louis Rubin and Robert Jacobs, in their introduction to South: Modern Southern Literature in Its Cultural Setting, argue that the "shared characteristics [of Southern writers are] . . . the more profound for the very fact that they are in large matter implicit" (12). Both Rubin and Edgerton defer to their own personal

experiences as people who live in the South to define what the South is and what Southern Literature is for their own purposes. To some extent, this amorphous but very real set of common values is what Glenn is afraid his grandchildren are losing as he lies dying in In Memory of Junior. Glenn remembers his relatives working the fields and imagines that they remembered the ones that came before them. The tragedy in his eyes is that his grandchildren--whose names, ironically, he cannot remember--will not share the same memories or the same code that he has.

Edgerton consistently portrays a South in transition, the older generation looking back to a simpler day when people worked the land and the younger generation losing or having lost touch with these values. Edgerton manages to depict both generations and the fragile balance that exists between them. The source of much of his humor is the folly of a backward South, but at the same time it is a humor that reveals his great love for these people. While Edgerton produces a great many laughs at the expense of provincial Southern customs and beliefs, his tone is also one of endearment. One cannot render Southern customs as faithfully as does Edgerton without knowing them well. In his novels, younger characters are often intellectually in the right, but they are also insensitive to the older generation and may, in fact, have lost a great deal in Edgerton's eyes.

Chapter II

Family, Community, and Place

The dependence of individuals on family, community, and place is characteristic both of the South and of Southern Literature. Sharon A. Sharp, in her article on family in Encyclopedia of Southern Culture, states that "Powerful images of the southern family persist in the region's literature, music, and art" (3:455). She suggests that "the region's population density, large numbers of kin residing within a given area, and existence of lineages over a long period of time" are "keys to the family's importance in southern culture" (3:456). She provides a number of popular images of Southern families, including "genealogists seeking their roots and sometimes engaging in ancestor worship; the reality of family feuds . . . and family rituals, such as births, weddings, and funerals, each an occasion for homecomings and celebrations of kin" (3:455).

Sharp reports that these images of the Southern family can be traced back to the romantic view that the pre-Civil-War South was "one huge plantation family ruled by powerful white patriarchs who protected both the gracious white women and the childlike, contented black slaves who were their charges" (3:455). In this vision of the South, "family position governed social life, and family background was the criterion for judging social

worth" (3:455). While this patriarchal view of slavery is certainly romanticized, family has been important in the South both before and after the Civil War. Historians and sociologists have provided ample support for two generalizations about the Southern family: "(1) that extended kin networks predominate throughout the region and (2) that expectations for contact, mutual support, and affection between family members are high" (3:456).

Like other attributes of the South's distinctiveness, the importance of family is gradually abating. While "evidence of families as tradition bearers in the South persists in countless forms" (3:457), recently "southern families have experienced much the same rates of change as families throughout the rest of the nation, with growing numbers of divorces, single-parent families, and two-income couples seeking childcare" (3:457). Sharp continues, "Most adults maintain frequent contacts only within the nuclear family and with parents and siblings"; however, "In countless ways the family still lies at the center" of the South's unique belief system (3:457).

Just as individuals' ties to family have been central to the South's distinctiveness, so have their ties to a local community. In his study The Faraway Country: Writers of the Modern South (1963), Louis Rubin describes Southern communities of the early twentieth century: "The Southern community had been self-sufficient, an entity in itself,

with a mostly homogeneous population, relatively orderly and fixed in its daily patterns" (5). Furthermore, this community had a profound effect on the young person who lived there. Rubin describes "the settled, fixed community where there were prescribed limits and boundaries to what he could be, where nothing was unknown, where he, his family, and all the other inhabitants occupied their accustomed and proper places" (8).

Of course, these communities eventually began to change. Rubin posits that, for many important Southern writers, "The communities in which they were born were just beginning to change from being small, contained, settled towns, in which agriculture was the chief occupation, in which all was fixed and ordered, and everyone knew everyone else, and who he was" (5). Rubin believes that this disintegration of community life is the reason why many Southern writers moved to other places to write their best works, and Charles Reagan Wilson, in his article on community in Encyclopedia of Southern Culture, writes, "Literary critics have linked the declining sense of community to the 20th-century Southern Literary Renaissance" (3:451).

A devotion to place has also been a characteristic of Southern distinctiveness. In Wilson's essay on "Sense of Place" in Encyclopedia of Southern Culture, he links this devotion to the South's history and rural isolation:

"Southerners developed an acute sense of place as a result of their dramatic and traumatic history and their rural isolation on the land for generations" (3:515). Josephine Humphreys, in her article, "A Disappearing Subject Called the South" in The Prevailing South, argues that, while Southerners are in danger of losing their sense of place, it is the loss of small towns and not rural settings that is important. Moreover, she believes that towns, and not farms, are the natural setting for Southern fiction, for it is in towns that characters interact with one another (214). Rubin agrees that the nature of Southern towns is changing: "For the Southern community as it used to be has broken down, and the twentieth century has come in. The settled, fixed patterns of town life have been violently disrupted. . . . Towns [have] become cities, and cities, metropolises" (7). Humphreys links the importance of towns to a sense of community in Southern fiction: "[Town] is the place that has seemed most fitting for the kinds of stories we have wanted to tell--narratives of the human community. . . . One life alone is not enough in a Southern novel. Our subject is the concert of human lives" (215-216).

Clyde Edgerton's expertise in depicting Southern settings has been evident since the publication of his first novel, Raney. His five novels are all set in fictional Bethel, Listre, and Summerlin, North Carolina. These three cities are all small, and their residents tend

to move at a leisurely pace. However, these places are not unchanging. They are becoming increasingly modern, and in this fact lies much of the tension in the novels. The older residents yearn for the simplicity of days gone by while some of the younger inhabitants long to escape from the slow pace and from what they perceive to be outdated modes of behavior and thinking. Families tend to live near one another, and individuals rely heavily on their families and neighbors. Some characters are searching for ways to escape from communities and families which they see as stifling while others go to great lengths to form those same bonds. Michael McFee, in "'Reading a Small History in a Universal Light': Doris Betts, Clyde Edgerton, and the Triumph of True Regionalism," argues that Edgerton's first three novels are about "coming to responsibility, growing up and into community. . . . A recurrent pattern in Edgerton's fiction is the acceptance (or rejection) of one's place in the family, and hence the community at large" (63).

In Edgerton's first novel, Raney, the tension is between Raney Bell, a woman from Listre, North Carolina, and her newlywed husband Charles Shepherd, an assistant librarian at Listre Community College and originally from Atlanta. Don O'Briant's review in The Atlanta Constitution states that the novel "humorously details the Southern odd couple's first two years of marriage in a small college

town as they attempt to come to terms with different backgrounds and beliefs" (8-C). Edgerton listed possible titles, including When Two Worlds Collide and Family Backgrounds, inside the cover of the folder containing the first draft. This list reveals that Edgerton was thinking about the importance of family and community from early in the process of writing Raney.

Raney is a clear symbol of the old South and its customs. She is a dedicated Free Will Baptist who values living by a strict but unwritten code. She is surrounded by family, and family seems to be the one fixed value in her life. Although Raney attended Listre Community College, she has no career goals. As George Core writes, in "Tall Tales, Guffaws, and Sly Southern Humor," Raney's behavior "is circumscribed by her family and her church" (11). Charles, on the other hand, is a clear symbol of a South in transition. He is a Methodist, is a social drinker, and is involved in a number of liberal causes. He is not from Listre but from Atlanta, and his extended family is spread throughout the United States. Charles' liberal attitudes are a constant source of tension and embarrassment for Raney. However, Charles rejects Raney's culture at least as much as Raney rejects his, and McFee suggests that "Charles comes across as arrogant, self-consciously superior to and condescending to the life around him" (66).

That family is central to Raney's understanding of her identity is evident from the first page of the novel, her engagement announcement in the Hansen County Pilot, which states that "the family attends Bethel Baptist Church" (3). This close connection is reinforced when Charles and his friends drink at the wedding rehearsal. Raney is angered, thinking, "Charles *knew* . . . how I--how my whole family--feels about drinking" (11). Soon after the wedding, Raney explains that she intends to maintain her close ties to her family, trying to call her mother every day. She explains, "Belinda Osborne drives to see her mother every day--forty miles round trip--which I'm not about to do. That is too close. Three times a week is often enough" (23). After the tension between Charles and Raney becomes too much, they separate briefly. When Charles suggests that they need to talk, she answers, "I have my own family. I have my own family to talk to" (145).

Charles's family, on the other hand, is not nearly so close as Raney's. Raney complains, "It's too bad Charles was a only child brought up without any family around. When he went to see a aunt or uncle, his mama and daddy had to carry him to another state. He just don't have a single sense about family, about having family" (52). In fact, "Charles said he wasn't even sure about the *names* of anybody in his family, besides his mama and daddy and aunts

and uncles. [Raney] couldn't imagine aunts and uncles not sitting around and telling about *their* aunts and uncles" (54). Charles understands that his family is different from Raney's and even wishes his were more like hers: "Charles said he wished he had a Aunt Flossie in his family. His aunts are all out West, or in Connecticut" (33).

While Raney understands the difference between her family and Charles's, she feels that it is up to Charles alone, and not to her, to make adjustments. In fact, she is comforted that, after the wedding, "we won't see [Charles's parents] except maybe a few times a year" (13). When Charles asks Raney how she would feel if she lived near his family, her response is that she doesn't, so it isn't an important question. After their brief separation, Charles and Raney start seeing a marriage counselor. During their first session, Raney is adamant that the difference in family background is the entire problem, but she sees this only as a problem for Charles: "What it is, Dr. Bridges, is Charles's family background and that's not entirely his fault" (156). They discuss how Raney and Charles behave and feel when they are around her family, then shift to Charles's family. Raney immediately objects,

"Well . . . that's different. We don't live in Atlanta. We live in Listre. If we lived in Atlanta I could see coming in here and talking

about Charles's parents. But we live in Listre and have a problem right here, so I don't see any need in talking about Charles's parents." (160)

Raney demonstrates that her family and community are her only reference points. She knows that the difference in family background is the primary problem she and Charles face, but, more specifically, she believes that the problem is the way that Charles's family is different from hers.

In another episode, Raney overhears Charles on the phone with his friend Johnny Dobbs. Charles is complaining about Raney's mother's entering their house when they are not home and asks, "It's weird, Johnny. . . . What am I supposed to do?" Raney, overhearing this, thinks, "Now why didn't he ask *me* what he was supposed to do?" (28). Again Raney reveals her belief that all ultimate answers must come from within her family, and she quickly dismisses Charles's honest grappling with his dilemma. Raney is quick to defend and to take refuge in her family and culture; however, when Charles attempts to do the same, he is criticized. He also, according to Raney, should get his answers from her culture.

Just as their family backgrounds are a major barrier for Charles and Raney, so is the community in which they live. Charles hosts a meeting of the TEA Club (Thrifty Energy Alternatives) in their home, and the group decides that the Ferris-Jones nuclear plant being built nearby must

be stopped. Raney can't believe this, revealing her refusal to question local authority. She refuses to see past the plant's immediate effect on the community. The mayor, Mr. Crenshaw, has said that the plant would bring new jobs and make taxes lower, and Raney argues, "Now he's the mayor. He's somebody I can listen to. Somebody with a respectable position in the community who *has* to know what he's talking about, else he wouldn't be mayor" (67). Raney uses circular reasoning to posit Mr. Crenshaw's authority: a mayor is a person with a respectable position who should make responsible decisions in the best interest of the community; therefore, according to Raney, if Mr. Crenshaw has been elected mayor, he must know what he is talking about. From Raney's viewpoint, Mr. Crenshaw's expertise in decision-making derives from his position of respect in the community, not vice-versa. On the other hand, Charles and his friends do not consider the attitudes of the community. Their belief that nuclear energy is wrong allows them to rapidly formulate a position that does not take into account the complexity of economic and social factors involved.

By the end of the novel, Charles and Raney have begun to reach a compromise. Raney, who at the beginning of the novel sees sex as her duty, finds herself wanting to put her bare fanny on a bag of feed and asking Charles for a "warm-up of Southern Comfort" in spite of her strong

principles about alcohol. The degree of their compromise is revealed in the birth notice of their child. He is baptized at St. John's Episcopal Church, according to Charles's wishes. Even though the racism in Raney's family has been a constant source of tension between Charles and Raney, Johnny Dobbs, a black friend of Charles is named godfather. However, he does not stay with the couple at their home; he stays at the Ramada Inn.

While true compromise does not begin until near the end of the novel, it is hinted at much earlier in a song that Raney sings to Johnny Dobbs over the telephone. The song underscores the conflict between the old and new South. The song tells the story of a farmer, Mr. Oakley, who is told by the town council that the airport is expanding and that the new runway is going to point toward his farm. Mr. Oakley's chickens stop laying, and his cow goes dry. He complains to the governor, a doctor, and a lawyer but can get no help. Finally, a librarian gives him a copy of Chickens Can Fly by B. F. Skinner. The farmer teaches his chickens to fly and "aim at the intakes as the jet planes flew by" (22). The man's "kamikaze chickens" finally close the runway down. The song seems to champion an old South over a new South, but closer examination reveals two ironies. First, it is a librarian who can finally give the man help, and Charles is a librarian. Second, the book is by B. F. Skinner. Raney demeans the

social sciences throughout the novel. She feels that Charles's insistence that her Uncle Nate, who committed suicide, could have been helped by a psychiatrist is wrong and feels that Charles and the marriage counselor want to discuss topics that are better left alone. Therefore, in this song which appears early in the novel, we see that it is not simply the old South of Raney and her family that will conquer, but a coalition of the cultures of Raney and Charles.

In Edgerton's second novel, Walking Across Egypt, a similar tension is revealed between Mattie Rigsbee, a seventy-eight-year-old woman and her children. Like Raney, Mattie is a representative of the old South. She derives much of her sense of identity through cooking for and caring for others, she places a high priority on family, and she is a faithful church attender who is called on to coordinate the Lottie Moon drive. However, she finds herself in a world that is rapidly changing. Her primary vice is watching All My Children each day *before* she washes her dishes. She tries to rationalize this:

But after all, things did happen in the real world just like they happened on that program.
 . . . anybody who read the paper nowadays knew things like that were happening all the time.
 . . . Erica was . . . such a good character, good actress. People almost exactly like her actually

existed all over the place nowadays. (9)

Her repetition of the word nowadays underscores that things are changing. Once the world had been a predictable and sensible place, but nowadays the world is as far-fetched as a soap opera. In a similar passage later in the novel, she thinks about how "she'd been reading so much about sperm lately. Used to be you didn't read the first thing about sperm, but it had got so you read about it in Reader's Digest even" (207). Mattie is likewise surprised to find that a "farm worker" whom her daughter Elaine dates for almost a year was from Boston and didn't actually work on a farm. Instead, he "went on crop walks--looking at crops" (51). This underscores the difference between Mattie and her daughter. In Mattie's day, farm workers were people who worked in the fields; in Elaine's South, farm workers work for the state and go on crop walks.

Family is again a major issue in Walking Across Egypt. While Mattie may seem to be the stereotypical Southern grandmother, she is not a grandmother, and this is one of her primary concerns. In fact, both of her children are introduced as "unmarried" (3, 19). Mattie worries that she will never have grandchildren:

She often thought of the links that extended back to Adam, a direct line, like a little dirt road that extended back through the forests of time, through a little town that was her mother and

father, on back through her grandparents, a little road that went back and back and back across lands and woods and back across to England and back to deserts and the flood and Noah and on back to Adam and Eve. A chain, thousands and thousands of years long, starting way back with Adam and Eve, heading this way, reaching the last link with Robert and Elaine Rigsbee, her own two children, two thousand years after Jesus. And there to be stopped forever. (53)

She wishes that her own mother were still alive, for "*She* could have somehow shown them, convinced them that having a family was more important than anything in the world, more important than anything on earth" (151). When Wesley Benfield, whom she has earlier visited at the YMRC (Young Men's Rehabilitation Center), escapes and comes to her for food and shelter, she thinks of him as someone who is needy but quickly reminds herself, "Of course Elaine and Robert were both needy in their own way. They needed a husband and a wife" (141). Mattie's obsession with grandchildren extends to the point that she becomes interested in sperm. Her son Robert is forty-three, and "she'd just read somewhere that sperm from a man over forty-four started losing its freshness" (207).

Elaine, a twelfth-grade English teacher, is clearly more liberated and educated than her mother. Mattie has

always dreamed of talking with her daughter about woman things, but "When Mattie tried to talk to Elaine, Elaine would launch into all these confusing questions: Why couldn't career goals be as important as kitchen goals to a woman?" (52). Elaine continues in this vein later in the novel when she is on her way to Chapel Hill for a conference on women's issues and tries to explain how some women in prison are put here because of circumstances that they cannot rise above. Many, according to her, "are forced to stay in the home" (123). She adds, "You don't see many men staying home with the kids, going crazy" (125). Of course, Mattie can hardly understand Elaine's line of thinking. In her day, women simply didn't have the same opportunities as men, and housekeeping goals were all-important. In spite of her daughter's beliefs, Mattie asks Winston Sullivan, a man whom Elaine is bringing to a yard sale, if he has "any intention of marrying Elaine" and "How's your sperm?" (220).

While Mattie's views may seem somewhat provincial, Edgerton is careful to show that Elaine has lost some important things as she has made other gains. While she argues with the less-enlightened during dinner at her mother's, she finds herself enjoying her mother's butterbeans and wishing "she could cook like her mother" (125). In an earlier scene, Elaine had come to visit her mother only to find Lamar Benfield cleaning out her

mother's gutters. She is impressed: "She'd just been reading about how people used to build each other's barns. Maybe that was the good thing about this community. The one good thing" (64). Elaine is obviously hostile to her mother's community, and it is ironic that her learning has led her to appreciate the type of community from which she tries so hard to escape. She cannot understand the worth of her mother's community and its values first-hand; she can only come to appreciate them circuitously after they have been affirmed by her reading.

While Elaine rejects much of her mother's culture, and both Elaine and Robert are hesitant to start their own families, Wesley Benfield, who has no immediate family, longs for one. He understands the strong value that the South places on family and tries to use it to manipulate his uncle. When Wesley escapes from the Young Men's Rehabilitation Center, he goes to the home of his Uncle Lamar and pleads, "Well, I got to sleep somewhere. Goddamn, Lamar, I'm family, man" (112). When Mattie visits him at the YMRC, he is quick to imagine that she is his grandmother. He wants a grandmother as much as Mattie wants grandchildren. His parents had put him in an orphanage when he was a baby and moved to Arizona. His grandparents have never seen him. When Lamar refuses to keep Wesley, Wesley follows him to Mattie's house, where he gets plenty of good food and attention. At the end of the

novel, Mattie decides to adopt him.

Therefore, Edgerton uses Wesley's attitude about family as a foil for those of Elaine and Robert. Elaine and Robert have a nurturing mother who wants grandchildren more than anything else, but they are not immediately interested in starting their own families; in fact, they are trying to escape from the type of community that their mother represents. However, they continue to come to their mother's house for food and are often reluctantly impressed by the values of their mother and of her close-knit community. Wesley, on the other hand, longs to be a part of a family. Orphaned at birth, he wants a grandmother and relishes the attention that Mattie gives him.

Edgerton's third novel, The Floatplane Notebooks, describes the Copeland family of Listre, North Carolina. One of the themes of the novel is that little has changed in the South, or at least in the Copeland family. Through their emphasis on family, their annual traditions, and their storytelling, the Copelands have both preserved much of their past and continue to live it in the present. The Copeland family is proud and defiant; in fact, Edgerton considered the title The Last of the Hardheads. This defiance can be traced all the way back to the time of the Civil War. One of the oldest surviving stories about the family is how Caroline threw a pot of boiling water on some Yankee soldiers who had stolen some meat from their

smokehouse. When one of the soldiers grabbed her, her son Ross, who, according to one version of the story, "won't big as nothing" (123), aimed a shotgun at the soldier (101-2). This episode represents a traditional Southern defiance to outside authority, where even women and children take bold actions to preserve their dignity. The earliest generations mentioned in the novel lived during the Civil War; three generations later, Meredith and Mark go to fight in Vietnam, where both are profoundly changed. Meredith is the mischievous prankster and courageous defender of the family, just as Ross had been during the Civil War.

The family lives in Listre, North Carolina; however, the place most closely associated with the family and its traditions is the family graveyard. Bliss, a member of the family by virtue of her marriage to Thatcher, the oldest son, quickly accommodates family traditions. Her first association with the family is the annual gravecleaning: "The graveyard itself is very serene, with shafts of light coming down through tall pines onto the gravestones, which go back into the 1800's" (7). In fact, she schedules the wedding, against her own parents' wishes, for the same weekend as the gravecleaning "so Uncle Hawk and Aunt Sybil could be here for both, and not have to make two trips" (37), and the weekend becomes the "graveyard-wedding weekend" (39).

The two main characters in the present generation are Meredith and Mark, and they have very different attitudes about their relationship with the family. Meredith thoroughly embraces the family and its traditions. He has been raised in a family with a rich oral tradition, and he wants to establish his place alongside the characters he hears about in family stories. His antics throughout his childhood and adolescence, sometimes dangerous and always humorous, are not only tolerated but encouraged insofar as he is never sternly punished. He feels loved and accepted by all of his family. Only his older brother Thatcher occasionally expresses jealousy at the favoritism shown Meredith. During the last gravecleaning before Meredith leaves for Parris Island, he announces, "I'm going to be buried right over there. I want to make it official." No one has been buried in the graveyard in years, and Aunt Scrap tells him, "This graveyard is full. . . . That was decided a long time ago" (166). However, after Meredith is injured in the war, he insists that "Whatever there was of me left would be in the graveyard" (211). And, in fact, we learn at the end of the novel that he is in the graveyard. His burial there serves to relate him even more closely than others to the family's past.

On the other hand, Mark, a cousin of Meredith and Thatcher, feels smothered by his over-protective mother. Mark's father died in a previous war, and there are

whispers that he had "'another woman' overseas during the war" (25). His mother, Esther, does not respond to these allegations, and her repression of this information is typical of the way she raises her son. Mark learns to play the piano, for his mother hopes that he will "be a concert pianist and dedicate [his] body and mind and soul to Christ" (150). However, as a young man, he finds himself playing at the Club Oasis with a rock band. When he is offered a beer, he refuses: "My mouth opens. I am saying no thank you. Mother is saying no thank you. I'm five or six, lying on a blanket in the yard with mother" (150). His refusal is linked as well to his extended family, to the community, and to his religious upbringing: "My Sunday school teachers . . . Sunday school students . . . aunts, the Bible, Jesus, Paul, Peter, Doubting Thomas, and God are all saying no thank you" (151).

That the close-knit nature of the Copeland family can be both a strength and a weakness is seen most clearly through the attitudes of Bliss and Rhonda, who marry Thatcher and Meredith. Bliss embraces the family and all of its traditions from the very beginning. She is pleased to be joining a family like the Copelands that has traditions. Her father can only respond, "Oh, great. . . . I didn't know they had traditions" (38). Bliss longs for a bridge over the "black valley between [her] family and the family of [her] husband to be" (38). She adds that "We

even lack an adequate bridge inside my family. My sister Claire is practically not in our family. She works in Hoover, Alabama, and we never hear from her" (38). When Bliss considers the Copelands' graveyard, she thinks about her "mother and father's parents and grandparents, buried in large conventional cemeteries--so unromantically--without an entire enclave, an entire force as it were, buried all around them" (44). She notes the difference in family size at the wedding: "On my side were all my aunts and uncles, a total of only four" (54). As Bliss sees it, the Copelands are a large family bound together by place and tradition, while her family has already become somewhat spread out and lost its roots.

Bliss refers to large, conventional cemeteries as "unromantic," and "romantic" describes perfectly her obsession with Thatcher's family. From the beginning, she is willing to alienate her own family, for she "must not be deflected when such an exciting, new additional family is in [her] grasp" (38-39). When listening to Aunt Scrap's stories about the family, she romanticizes both the family and her role in it: "I thus found myself looking into the eyes of one of the very backbones and spirits of this marvelous family, which continues even unto today--witness Mr. and Mrs. Copeland, Meredith, Noralee, and now Thatcher and me--unabated into the future" (44). After Bliss and Thatcher have a son, she wants Taylor to absorb as much

family history as he can. As the family tells stories, she thinks,

I had heard all of this many times but it never failed to interest me greatly, because my parents were born twenty years later than Thatcher's parents and these stories of child labor laws and tent preaching and a cow in town were so enticing, so authentic, and it is a major part of Taylor's heritage. (257)

On the other hand, Rhonda, Meredith's wife, feels smothered by the closeness of the family and perceives their traditions as a burden to be borne. Before she marries Meredith, she is snubbed at a family gathering. As the family sits around telling stories, Uncle Hawk accidentally calls Rhonda "Frances," then light-heartedly comments, "It was Frances last year, wadn't it, Meredith?" (123). When Meredith is injured in Vietnam, he knows, even before he sees her, that Rhonda will leave him. He worries "about when Rhonda's going to leave, before or after the baby's born" (218). Shortly after their son is born, Rhonda does leave. Meredith's cousin Mark goes after her, ostensibly to bring her back or at least find out for the family what her plans are. She explains to him that there is enough family left to care for her son, Ross:

That's all they do anyway. It's just one big happy family that cooks, and talks about dead

people, and don't never ask anybody else about their family, and if you don't *have* a family, or if you have a shitty one, you feel like shit.

(241)

She continues, "Goddamn, *you* birth a baby and then put up with five or six in-law mamas and I don't know what all else" (242). Clearly, Rhonda's experience with the family has not been as positive as Bliss's. For Bliss, the family fills a void: she needs the sense of tradition and ritual provided by a family that is unlike her own. For Rhonda, the weight of tradition leaves no room for her own sense of self. She is from a family that does not have a rich history such as that of the Copelands. Whereas the Copelands make Bliss feel better about herself, they only remind Rhonda of her meager beginnings. Finally, she leaves to become a singer in a band.

Edgerton's fourth novel, Killer Diller, is a sequel to Walking Across Egypt. This novel, however, focuses on Wesley Benfield, not Mattie Rigsbee. At the end of Walking Across Egypt, Mattie was considering signing the adoption papers to become Wesley's guardian, and Wesley now refers to her as "the old Christian lady he used to live with, the one that got him to become a Christian himself" (14). However, Wesley has found himself in trouble again. He is in the BOTA House (Back On Track Again), a halfway house adjacent to Ballard University, a Baptist college in

Summerlin, North Carolina. He believes that "his residency at BOTA House is a kind of mistake. He was already a Christian when somebody left their keys in the ignition of a white Continental with a tan interior. And now he's asked God for forgiveness" (17). In any case, Wesley is not living with Mattie, the grandmother he had so wished for in Walking Across Egypt. Instead, Wesley is at an impersonal college which hardly even functions as a community. Wesley has become a part of a musical group, the Noble Defenders of the Word, that is important to him and serves as a substitute for a family, but does not fulfill his needs for a real family. Even though this is not a family, Wesley feels a kinship with these people. He explains to his girlfriend Phoebe, "We got a band and everything. Just a few people that had bad breaks" (18). When his roommate Ben suggests running away, Wesley answers, "Not me. No way. I'm running out of second chances" (224). However, when marijuana is found among Ben's socks and Wesley is tipped off by an unhappy employee at the college, Wesley changes his mind. He explains to his girlfriend Phoebe, "They're playing around with us. See? They're playing around with Ben. It ain't fair. I can't just sit there and watch him get carted off after we finish that gig" (227). At the end of the novel, Wesley and the rest of the band do run away, choosing their loyalty to one another over the hypocrisy of the college.

When asked if Wesley, unlike characters in the first three novels, is fleeing from a sense of community and responsibility, or "lighting out for the territory," Edgerton responded, "I think to call Ballard University a community is a vast discredit to the word community. When you consider what Wesley's running from, I think you can say that anywhere he gets will be more of a community than Ballard" (Edgerton, Interview, 5 April 1993).

A family which provides a contrast to Wesley's experience is that of Vernon and Hollister Jackson. Vernon is a Special Education student at Hansen County High School, whom his teacher chooses to learn masonry at Ballard University as a part of Project Promise, an innovative project in which BOTA House residents teach skills to special education students. Wesley is paired with Vernon, and the two soon become friends. Vernon's mother had abandoned him soon after he was born when she realized that Vernon was retarded and that her husband, Holister, was obsessed with cars: "All this drove Vernon's mother out West. Alone. Forever" (4). So Vernon and Holister live alone, and Holister tries to raise Vernon; however, he lacks parenting skills. He raises Vernon "mostly in the auto shop out back" (4) while working on cars: "He would reach down into the engine, work for a few minutes, then stand, wipe his hands and arms with a dirty rag, look around, locate the baby on the floor, shift the

drop light to another spot, and bend back to what he was doing" (4). When Wesley comes to visit, the only food in the house is some tomatoes and "froze fish" (60). When Wesley offers to cook a meal, both are delighted, Hollister answering, "Yeah, I wouldn't mind eating something that was cooked" (60). In spite of Hollister's lack of parenting skills, Wesley envies Vernon. When Wesley and his band are planning to run away at the end of the novel, Vernon wants to accompany them: "I don't want you to leave. It's the first band I ever been in" (229). Wesley explains, "You got a whole . . . a whole garage, here, . . . And your daddy, and a house and everything" (230). In spite of the fact that it is an imperfect family, Wesley still sees that Vernon has a family and doesn't understand why he would want to leave it.

Wesley's decision to run away at the end of the novel is not an easy one for him. He explains to Phoebe that Mattie is "like my grandmother" (18), and running away will mean leaving this grandmother that he has wished for so long. When Wesley gets a telephone call telling him that Mattie has had a heart attack, he announces to Ben, "My grandma's sick" (194). Wesley's need to be with her is so strong that he attempts to climb down a downspout after curfew at the BOTA House. He has an accident himself and ends up a patient at the same hospital as Mattie, where he is able to go see her. Wesley has become an avid Bible

reader and has even experimented with preaching into a tape recorder. While considering the story of Noah and the ark, he says, "Wouldn't it have been nice to be Noah's son back in them days? . . . Noah was good and if you was in his family, you had the right connections" (212). He also considers the plight of those who drown, imagining a little girl who never had a chance "on account of her mean parents" (213). He concludes that these parents never had a chance either and that the problem can be traced "all the way back down the line to the first mean parents that started it all. They had to be real mean" (214). For Wesley, his relationship with Mattie is a "right connection," one which he is not eager to break since his own parents abandoned him to be raised in an orphanage. Mattie asks him not to leave: "You've got a good job skill and you're starting to get some roots around here. I don't know what you'd get into without any roots" (226).

In the end, however, he cannot stand the hypocrisy of Ballard University and leaves in spite of Mattie's warning. Like Huck Finn, he has seen a glimpse of what it is like to be civilized, and he cannot abide the Ballard University version of civilization. At the end of the novel, he and his band, now the Wandering Stars, are in a bus traveling south with only a vague notion of beginning a musical career in Myrtle Beach. While they travel, Wesley has troubled dreams about Mattie, the grandmother he believes

he is losing. He dreams that he is in a church singing, "Is there a place for me in heaven--is that my seat?" (242). Repeatedly the answer is "No, that's somebody else's seat" (243-4). He then dreams that he is in Mattie's yard, trying to open the screen door with a matchbook, just as he did in Walking Across Egypt. However, the matchbook is stuck, and not even Mattie can open the door. Finally, he starts tearing a whole in the screen, planning to climb in through the screen. However, his feet will not move; they are stuck to the steps. The dream shifts back to the church, where Wesley finally finds his seat and sits in it while everyone claps (244-6).

When Wesley wakes up, he is in the bus with Phoebe, who is moving her hands up and down his legs, and Vernon who is reaching over Wesley's shoulder for some of the popcorn in the bag in Phoebe's lap (246-7). This, at least temporarily, is Wesley's family at the end of the novel, one he is not completely comfortable with. However, they are together, and this is more family than the three have experienced before. Both Wesley and Vernon were abandoned by their mothers soon after birth, and Phoebe's mother is dead, leaving her with a military father who is most concerned with appearances and fitting easily into a new institution. Wesley's dreams indicate that he is worried that there is no place for him. Mattie and her home had been his place, but now he is unable to enter any more.

Wesley has made a decision to leave Ballard and all of the falseness it entails, but by doing so he has also left the only place that he ever felt completely welcome. Now he is, appropriately, a "Wandering Star," still without a home.

Edgerton's most recent novel, In Memory of Junior, merges the experimental style of The Floatplane Notebooks with the light humor of the other three. In this novel Glenn and Laura Bales lie dying. Because this is the second marriage for both of them, it is assumed that the land that they own will pass to the side of the family of the one who lives longest. Glenn's children by his first marriage, Faison and Tate, have little use for Laura's daughter by her first marriage, Faye, and vice-versa. Finally, both parents die in the middle of the night, and no one knows which died first. The children squabble about what will happen to the land until finally someone looks at the deed. Glenn's father had specified that, if Glenn died, the land would pass not to his children, but to the next oldest living sibling. In addition to the obvious conflict of what will happen to the land owned by Glenn and Laura Bales, there are a number of subplots about various family members trying either to become a more integral part of the family or escape what they feel is the stifling nature of the family.

Faison is very ambivalent about his role in the

family. He had worked the land and resents his younger, college-educated brother and professional step-sister. He has no son to pass his culture to and wonders, "Who do I leave my part to when I'm dead and gone" (145). Even though Faison had run away to live with Uncle Grove, whom the rest of the family detests, and would sell the land if he inherits it, he is desperately seeking a way to connect to the family and leave something of himself behind. He had begun to teach his stepson to hunt and fish when the boy was killed in an automobile accident. The title of the novel is an allusion to the stepson's footstone. Even though the boy was not Faison's, he wanted his last name on the footstone. June Lee, his estranged second wife and the boy's mother, cannot understand why "it's so important for [him] to have a boy that won't [his] in the first place named after [him]" (62). This becomes a major point of contention between Faison and June Lee. They finally compromise, settling on "In Memory of Junior." Moreover, the debate over the gravestone seems ironically to bring about a reconciliation and reunion between them.

Faye, on the other hand, sees herself as a modern liberated woman and has little use for the family at all. She knows they don't understand how "a *woman* could get a law degree, move away to Charlotte, and then *stay* there after her mama gets sick" (88) or be as old as she is without a husband. When her mother dies, she wishes she

could "just grieve alone, and not have to put up with those boys, those aunts, and all that" (113). She would sell the land with no reservations at all and hates "To think that [she] would have to share one blade of grass from that farm with anybody in that godforsaken family" (158-9). She considers the Bales to be "horrible country people" (159).

Evelyn, Glenn's first wife and the mother of Tate and Faison, reacts much like Faye when she becomes a member of the Bales family. She had believed that after a few years of marriage on the farm, Glenn would move to town. When it becomes obvious to her that Glenn has no plans to move, she begins to feel smothered. When she meets and falls in love with a woman, Honour Walters, she leaves Glenn and the two boys and runs away with Honour, even though Tate was still nursing. This explains the hatred that Bette and Ansie harbor for Evelyn and her brother Grove. Evelyn considers her flight from the family to be away from "the thicket--it seemed, though there were only two--of sisters. . . . Honour was life away from the thicket" (103-4). She refers to the family as "the Mama-Papa-Glenn-Bette-Ansie-aunts-uncles-cousins glob of mudclayglue" (108).

Her brother Grove, however, yearns to return to the community, the site of his happy adolescence, and become a part of the community. He knows that his own daughter and son-in-law are preparing to put him in a nursing home, so

he returns to North Carolina to die there. His son-in-law, Adam, tries to get Grove to forget

all that prehistory, that aboriginal, Java man, woolly mammoth prehistory, especially to be buried, for crying out loud. At least we've got a community in Arkansas--a community not all that different from Ann Arbor, for example. (45)

When Grove does return, he is startled at the changes and complains about "them ugly glass mile-high ugly buildings all over the countryside" (128). While Grove is detested by everyone in the family except for Faison and Tate, he perhaps values the heritage of the family's agricultural way of life more than anyone else. His years away from North Carolina provide him a distance on the community, and he can gauge the drastic changes that have occurred better than anyone else.

The one character who best embodies a South in transition is Morgan Bales, the son of Tate, and a major strand of the novel is the story of Morgan Bales's initiation into family and community. Morgan spends much of his time as a recluse, spending every available minute at his computer, trying to improve his score on Tetris, a computer game. When his father gives him a gun for Christmas, he thinks, "I didn't want a gun. I wanted a Hayes-compatible modem" (69). His idea of community is a computer bulletin board: "I tried to explain to him about

bulletin boards creating a world community--global network and such as that" (69). He does not enjoy listening to the stories of his relatives about family and seems intent on not fitting in. A neighbor of Glenn and Laura, Harold Fuller, describes him as "a sight--a downright disgrace. Long hair, earring, the works" (35). Harold believes that the reason that Tate has taken up flying again is to try to get Morgan interested. Morgan disparagingly refers to the family as "all these generations or something" (67). Morgan does not understand the fierce family loyalty of Bette and Ansie and asks why Laura shouldn't be buried in the Bales' graveyard. Ansie asks him, "Whose blood do you have--had *better* have--in your veins, son?" (74) and Bette adds, "Son, . . . she was from Hoke County" (75).

However, when he meets Uncle Grove, whose stories are alive to him, and accompanies his father, Faison, Grove, and a friend of Faison's on a fishing trip, he seems, at last, to be comfortable with family and his place in his culture. He is not impressed with Uncle Grove at first, thinking, "This old guy used to fly airplanes and drive trucks and all this, but he's about a hundred years old now" (38). Furthermore, Morgan does not share some of Uncle Grove's prejudices. When Uncle Grove is telling him a story, Morgan corrects him, "They are not 'niggers.' They are people. . . . They are African-Americans" (139). Uncle Grove tells him that he calls them "niggers" and

continues as if it is a matter of no importance. However, Morgan loves Uncle Grove's stories: "He's a good storyteller. He makes these really old stories seem like they just happened. . . . I can see why Uncle Faison ran away to go live with him" (139).

Two main incidents are involved in Morgan's initiation. The first is the fishing trip with Grove, his father, Faison, and Jimmy, a friend of Faison's. Morgan isn't sure that he'd enjoy the trip at first but soon discovers the ocean's attraction: "It was so peaceful, and *big* out there--so much space and nobody, nothing, way, way down the beach anywhere" (183). And when the first fish hits his line, he is hooked. Long after the other men are cleaning the fish, he remains on the beach fishing. The fishing trip is also the occasion of Grove's telling Faison and Tate that their mother was a lesbian. While Morgan's values are different from the other men's--Jimmy reports that he "about cold-cocked the kid because he wants to know what's wrong with being a lesbian" (191)--he at least is treated as one of the men and is present for an important revelation that had been a matter of family conjecture for many years. The second occasion is an airplane accident that Morgan shares with the same group of men, and Morgan relishes in telling the story to his girlfriend. Like Uncle Grove, Morgan has become part of a storytelling tradition.

Therefore, as in Edgerton's other novels, we encounter both characters who are attempting to escape family and community and characters who strive to make these bonds even tighter. Evelyn runs away from the family because she feels smothered, and Faye loathes the family her mother marries into. On the other hand, some characters go to extraordinary lengths to feel a part of a family or community. Uncle Grove runs away from his daughter and son-in-law in Arkansas so he can be buried in the community he grew up in, even though most of the people there despise him. Faison, who has no son to pass his heritage on to, fights to have his last name engraved on his son's footstone. And, Morgan Bales, who early in the novel has no use for what he sees as the provincial attitudes of his family, becomes an important part of it and joins in its storytelling tradition.

In summary, Edgerton examines a wide variety of responses that Southerners have to family, community, and place. Raney Bell Shepherd, Mattie Rigsbee, and Meredith Copeland are content as integral members of close-knit families. These characters have fully adopted the norms of the communities that they live in and are comfortable there. Raney's marital problems are, at least partly, the result of having so fully adopted those norms that she cannot see the world in any other way. Mattie Rigsbee's problem is that she does not have the grandchildren she

wants; in a sense, her discomfort comes from her children's not having adopted the community norms as fully as she has. Meredith Copeland is so comfortable with his heritage that he insists on being buried in a family graveyard that has not been used for years.

Another set of characters are members of such close-knit families who see these families not as supporting but as stifling. Mattie Rigsbee's children, Elaine and Robert, are in no hurry to have grandchildren. Elaine tries to explain to her mother that women have many options besides those of mother and homemaker. Robert complains to her mother about having to listen to her quote scripture for so many years. Mark, Meredith Copeland's cousin, can hardly wait to escape from his overprotective mother, and finally commits an act of unfaithfulness to the family, sleeping with Meredith's wife who has run away to Key West. In In Memory of Junior, Faye cannot stand the family that her mother has married into and does not even wish to grieve with the family when her mother dies.

Other characters are either outside these close-knit families or new to them and value the security provided by the family. Wesley Benfield, whose own parents abandoned him soon after birth, badly wants a grandmother and gladly receives all the attention Mattie gives him. Even though he runs away from his community at the end of Killer Diller, he does so amid troubled dreams that he is losing

his connection to Mattie. Bliss Copeland marries Thatcher, and is willing to alienate her own family in order to become a part of what she sees as the rich Copeland heritage. In In Memory of Junior, Grove McCord returns to the home of his adolescence to die where his fondest memories are even though the family he returns to despises him because his sister had deserted them long ago. Faison Bales, though a member of the Bales family, feels marginalized because he has no son to pass his heritage along to and tries to pass it on to his stepson and then, after that stepson dies in an automobile accident, to have his last name placed on the boy's footstone.

Other characters who are outside these close-knit families and marry into them are immediately unhappy. When Rhonda marries Meredith Copeland, she finds that there is no room within the rich family heritage for her to express herself. The family always tells stories about itself and never asks her about her own. When Meredith is injured in the war, she runs away leaving her child behind. Evelyn McCord, first wife of Glenn Bales, is a similar character. She marries Glenn, believing that they will soon move to the city, away from Glenn's family. When this turns out not to be the case, she also runs away, leaving two young children behind.

Two important characters who bridge the gap between reveling in the support of close-knit families and

rejecting them completely are Charles Shepherd and Morgan Bales. Both are initially uncomfortable with their families and communities. After Charles marries Raney, the difference between his beliefs and those of Raney and her family become so obvious that the couple soon parts. However, they work to learn to communicate with each other and soon form a strong coalition, built on the strengths that each has to offer. An element of Southern culture that Charles quickly adopts is Southern cooking. Morgan Bales represents a new generation of Southern youth who is interested in computers and has politically-correct attitudes about race and sexual preference. At first, he has little use for his family, but after some important shared experiences with his father and Uncle Grove, he comes to value certain aspects of the family and even becomes a part of its storytelling tradition.

In conclusion, Edgerton reveals the importance of shared family and community life in the South. The close-knit nature of Southern families and communities serves as an invaluable support system for some characters and as an obstacle to be overcome for others; however, it is always an important factor in Southern life, and Edgerton captures it in all of its complexity. One place where Southern families have often gathered together, both on a daily basis and for special occasions, is the kitchen or dining room table. Southern food and cooking are another

attribute of the South's distinctiveness, and Edgerton captures the importance of Southern food, as well as the tensions related to food, in all of his novels.

Chapter III

Food

The South has long been noted for the uniqueness of its food and for the important role that food plays. Peggy Whitman Prenshaw, in her introduction to a special double issue of The Southern Quarterly, dedicated to "The Texts of Southern Food," writes about "the habits of eating that have been so dominant in and determinative of the region" (12). This dominance of food in the South has its origins in a society that survived primarily by agriculture for hundreds of years. Southerners established a close relationship to the earth and depended on the earth for both daily bread and economic security. As John Egerton writes in Southern Food:

[The South's] heritage originated in nature, in sun and earth and water. From early in its history, the South seemed made to be a food-conscious culture: It had the necessary range of altitudes and temperatures, the proper levels of rainfall and humidity, the right kinds of soil, and the wild habitats to create a strong balance of resources and to allow for optimum growth. (35)

He continues, "In every generation prior to World War II, the vast majority of all Southerners spent most of their waking hours in direct or indirect association with the

broad subject of food" (35). Clyde Edgerton also notes this centrality of food to the South's early economy: "If you look at the daily life of . . . a typical Southern family in the early part of the century, food is essential for survival, for manufacture, and it was how they made a living: by selling it . . . and eating it" (Edgerton, Interview, 5 April 1993).

Because the climate and landscape of the South made agriculture central to its economy, food inevitably became central to its culture. Peggy Prenshaw suggests that our understanding of the South's oral tradition should be expanded to include both storytelling and feasting and that the phrase "culinary arts" is quaint and archaic and "is wholly inadequate to indicate the powerful force that food exerts in defining the cultural milieu and in commanding societal attention, both utilitarian and artistic" (6). John Egerton agrees,

Within the South itself, no other form of cultural expression, not even music, is as distinctively characteristic of the region as the spreading of a feast of native food and drink before a gathering of kin and friends. For as long as there has been a South, and people who think of themselves as Southerners, food has been central to the region's image, its personality, and its character. (2)

The South's obsession with food, as well as the nature of the food itself, may be explained, in part, by the poverty or near-poverty in which millions of its residents have lived. The South has undergone periods when food has been vital to staying alive and has been all of value that people have had. Life has been hard in the South for a number of reasons. During original settlement, many areas of the South were frontiers. As people moved westward from Georgia and South Carolina or across the Appalachian Mountains into Tennessee, they had to clear away the land and struggle to wrest a living from it. Later, during the Civil War, many farms were laid waste and men were away fighting, unable to work the land. Women and children were left behind to make do on the land. They had to protect it from Union soldiers, who might take it for their own. Clyde Edgerton deals with this topic in The Floatplane Notebooks, when he has Caroline throw boiling water on Yankee soldiers and her son Ross threaten to shoot them after they steal some hams from the smokehouse (101-103). Certainly defiance of Northern authority is involved as well, but they are also hungry, and that food is their only sustenance. As Caroline says, "There're ways to sustain without taking from women and children" (102). After the war was over, the South didn't fare much better during Reconstruction.

In these periods, raising food has not simply been a

job; it has been what families did to have food to eat. John Egerton argues, "At least twice in our history, in the eras of the Civil War and the Great Depression, a majority of the South's population came face to face with the terrible reality of hunger and starvation" (viii). While John Egerton refers to the effects of the Depression, Clyde Edgerton suggests that, in his own family and many others like it, the Depression was not an important phenomenon in the South (Edgerton, Interview, 5 April 1993). The South was poor before the Depression and remained poor during it. Few Southerners had much at stake in the stock market. Instead, Southerners continued to live from hand to mouth off of the land. Joe Gray Taylor states the case even more dramatically in Eating, Drinking, and Visiting in the South: An Informal History, alluding to "the long famine from the end of the Civil War until World War II" (150). With few other luxuries, Southerners have learned to savor their food. A society that has known great poverty still persists in taking great pride in spreading a big table.

The importance of food in the South is also closely related to shared family life. Agricultural families in the South often rose from bed early in the morning and worked together in the fields all day to raise food. During breaks they were together eating. Clyde Edgerton believes,

Much of release, I guess, in some families came

at the table, the only times of the day, often, when they weren't working very hard. They were doing something besides working. So that being together every day three times, no matter what you're doing, if you're with this group of primary relationships, family relationships . . . had to be central. . . . A family had few material comforts, and food was one of them.

(Edgerton, Interview, 5 April 1993)

John Egerton agrees, "Family life often revolved around the kitchen and the dining table" (36). Clyde Edgerton continues, arguing that even the food on the table is not as important as the gathering of people around the table:

I get a great feeling of community. Again, it's not the food; it's not the kitchen; it's not the cooking. It's what happens afterwards when people sit at the table, and there's a release from the world. There's an escape; it's like drugs. A lot of people get from drugs what it's possible to get at a table with good food if the relationships are right. It all comes back to relationships among people. (Edgerton,

Interview, 5 April 1993)

During its first centuries, the South was an agrarian culture, with an economy based on land ownership and agriculture and most of its population involved with either

the raising or preparation of food. In fact, many Southerners have resisted the advances in technology that have been brought by the twentieth century. The twelve Agrarians who wrote I'll Take My Stand in 1930 argued that the changes they saw coming to the South were not necessarily good. They argued that the South should maintain its identity as an agrarian region. To them, an agrarian region was more than simply one that depended on agriculture. It had as much to do with pace of life. The Agrarians worried that, as the South became more modern, it would adopt a faster pace, and they felt that much of the South's beauty had derived from its slower pace. Andrew Lytle argued, "A farm is not a place to grow wealthy; it is a place to grow corn" (qtd. in Manning 70). In other words, it is not so much the money that one makes from farming as it is the benefit that one derives from living in a close relationship with nature at a slower pace. The Agrarians were calling Southerners to keep their strong connection to the earth and to food--to maintain the immediacy of the question of how one gains nourishment. Carol S. Manning, in her essay, "Agrarianism, Female-Style," makes the obvious connection between agrarian values and the importance of food in the South, proposing that the "logical center for agrarianism's communal values is the home in general and the kitchen and dining room in particular" (71).

Women have historically had the primary responsibility for preparing the food. John Egerton argues that this has been both a curse and a blessing for these women. Of course, women had few or no career options and were "held captive in the kitchen . . . by the social and cultural expectations of the male hierarchy" (17). Cooking was often grueling work. Women would get up early in the morning to prepare meals without the benefit of modern conveniences. Much of the day was consumed in either cooking or cleaning up after a meal. Women were forced to live with the same routine day after day, with little variation and often no sense of fulfillment. After a woman cooked three meals one day, the next day offered no new challenges.

At the same time, the kitchen provides a certain freedom and opportunity for self-expression. Cooking, in many cases, has been a woman's contribution to the well-being of her family and has represented the height of her personal creativity. To take food--often the same food day after day--and make something new and interesting out of it is a challenge. Women must be artistic to make these meals interesting. According to John Egerton, "The kitchen . . . was one of the few places where either blacks or women could let down their guards and be themselves. . . . In the kitchen, they could be extravagant, artistic, whimsical, assertive, even sensuous" (17). Carol S.

Manning concurs, "If the growing of corn is, according to the agrarian ideal, meaningful and creative work . . . , so then should the preparing of food for family and friends be a parallel act of creativity and meaning for women" (71). In fact, women have often received praise for the meals they prepare. Cooking was what they could do to provide for the family, and the praise that meals received could be a source of great satisfaction. Furthermore, cooking could be a method of achieving some status in the community. Women know who the best cooks are in each community, and these women are envied by others. Clyde Edgerton underscores Southern women's roles as cooks when speaking of the relationship between his own mother and Mattie Rigsbee in Walking Across Egypt: "The life of that woman [Mattie] does, in fact, resemble my mother but not much, if any, more than another hundred thousand women in the South. . . . If anybody's around and there's food, she's going to ask someone to eat" (Edgerton, Interview, 5 April 1993). Angeline Godwin Dvorak, in "Cooking as Mission and Ministry in Southern Culture: The Nurturers of Clyde Edgerton's Walking Across Egypt, Fannie Flagg's Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Cafe and Anne Tyler's Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant" argues that cooking is closely related to maternal instincts and can provide important self-esteem: "Cooking is not simply a task or a chore; it is a mission that fulfills a sense of belonging. . . .

Cooking can be an extension and sometimes a substitution for maternal nurturance" (90).

Edgerton relates two stories about elderly Southern women who become concerned that their refrigerators are making funny noises and explains the centrality of those refrigerators to those women's lives:

In that refrigerator, it's like [their] life savings in a safe. Their food is in that refrigerator, and, man, it is important. This is something your life has been centered on. . . . The food represents all kinds of relationships. It represents love--giving love and taking love. There it is in that one box, and if something's wrong with that box, it's a problem, and so no wonder they're obsessed by it. And also the importance of that food, giving that life. . . .(Edgerton, Interview, 5 April 1993)

Edgerton explores both the positive and negative side of the expectation that women be cooks in The Floatplane Notebooks. Bliss wants "to be immersed in the whole tradition of the gravecleaning and all that went with it, which included, of course, the women preparing the food" (39). Bliss is proud that she "had fixed lemonade and brownies as [her] portion" (39). Bliss readily accepts her inevitable role as cook in the Copeland family. Rhonda, on the other hand, lists cooking as one of the reasons she

flees the family after Meredith's accident: "Esther, and Mildred, and Noralee, and Bliss can take care of Ross. That's all they do anyway. It's just one big happy family that cooks, and talks about dead people" (241). Rhonda, unlike Bliss, has a need to express herself in ways other than by cooking.

Death in the South is often accompanied by an outpouring of gifts of food. One may not know how to respond to the enormity of death and the questions it raises; however, one can always cook, providing at least a pragmatic response to immediate circumstances. John Egerton reports, "Mourning, too, had a gastronomical dimension. A death in the family always brought a steady procession of kin and neighbors to the door with food to feed the funeral guests" (36). Clyde Edgerton portrays this phenomenon in his novels. In Raney, after Raney's Uncle Nate dies, Raney reports, "Right away everybody started bringing food to the house" (135). When Julius dies after a fist fight with his brother in The Floatplane Notebooks, his wife Rebecca "had so much food that she brought the overflow from their house" (162). Likewise, in In Memory of Junior, after Glenn and Laura Bales die, Wilma Fuller tells Faye, Laura's daughter "not to worry at all about food. [She]'d made a few phone calls and the chicken and cakes and pies were already rolling in" (116).

As all other characteristics that make the South

unique, the uniqueness of its food is also slowly disappearing. As John Egerton writes, "By any measure, it is a new and different South in the world of food" (46). The causes of this change are many, and Joe Gray Taylor suggests, "The automobile, radio, television, and voluntary and involuntary travel have increasingly forced the South into the dietary mold of the rest of the country" (Eating 150). Another factor is the pace of life in the South. Egerton states, "By the time World War II was over, the South had begun to assimilate many modern American foodways. . . . Hurrying was not a strong Southern trait, but it eventually caught on anyway" (39).

Of course, one manifestation of this hurrying is fast food. Egerton reports that

It was in the 1950's that McDonald's and its string of fast-food hamburger-outlet imitators began their takeover of the turf staked out by Krystal and White Castle a generation earlier. . . . In just thirty years, these fast-food pioneers have become global giants--and they have revolutionized the eating habits of countless millions of people. (44)

In his essay on "Foodways" in Encyclopedia of Southern Culture, Joe Gray Taylor concurs, "The hamburger emporium, the fried-catfish stand, and the fried-chicken establishment provide meals for a tremendous number of

southerners each day" (363). However, in Eating, Drinking, and Visiting in the South, he is not so restrained: "Whole families, even three generations, sit in automobiles and eat abominations" (153).

Of course, this change in eating habits also has consequences for family life. Once many, if not most, families sat around a common table and shared not only food, but their daily experiences. Now it is common for different family members to eat at different times, if not at different places. A world in which even school-children often have hectic schedules requires that many meals be eaten on the move. John Egerton reports,

For a significant and growing number of Americans, none of the meals they used to sit down and eat at home three times a day are now taken in that fashion. . . . People aren't eating the way they used to--not at home, not together, often not sitting down, and never three times a day. (42)

Clyde Edgerton depicts this change in his first novel, Raney. Even though Raney is a part of a culture in which food plays a central role and is a spokesman throughout the novel for traditional Southern ways, she also represents a generation of Southern woman who are not as tied to the kitchen as their mothers. After Charles and Raney are married, they go to Penny's Grill for lunch one day. Raney

explains, "I refuse to cook three meals a day, I don't care what Mama says" (26).

The North Carolina of Clyde Edgerton's fiction faithfully reflects the changing nature of food in the South. Not only does he describe carefully-prepared Southern meals eaten around kitchen tables but he also describes a landscape dotted with McDonald's, Hardee's, and Pizza Huts. In In Memory of Junior, Uncle Grove reminisces about growing up in North Carolina, "People don't know the good life anymore. Fresh sausage stored in the smokehouse in soft, green corn shucks. Different families using the same smokehouse . . . It was a different time" (48). In the same novel, Tate praises his Aunt Bette's kitchen, which "smelled like snuff, gas heat, oil-cloth, and apple pie. That close-smelling kitchen is something out of my father's life . . . and now forever gone out of my life except when I'm here in this kitchen, or in Aunt Ansie's kitchen" (76). He complains that his ex-wife "had us a big fancy kitchen with no table in it. She had a 'work station.' Marilyn's kitchen was the first one in the family without a table since before Jesus" (76).

Food and cooking play central roles in three of Edgerton's novels: Raney, Walking Across Egypt, and Killer Diller. In all three of these books, Edgerton provides a rich description of traditional Southern foods and the importance of that food. Furthermore, food and cooking in

Edgerton's fictional world are closely related to belonging to family and community. The family table is a place both where families unite and where they recall past injuries. Several characters in these novels also relate their roles as cooks to their sense of Christianity; by cooking they fulfill a need to minister to others. Alongside this description of traditional Southern food and cooking, Edgerton also details the fast food available in the South and suggests that foodways are changing in the South, that the family doesn't unite around the table as much as in the past.

Food plays an important role in Edgerton's first novel, Raney. In fact, food and eating are prominent from the first page. Two days before Raney's marriage to Charles, she, her mother, and her aunts go to dinner with Charles's mother. They discover "that she's, of all things, a vegetarian" (4). Raney and her mother eat meatloaf, Aunt Naomi eats turkey, Aunt Flossie eats roast beef, but Mrs. Shepherd eats the vegetable plate. When Mrs. Shepherd explains that she has stopped eating meat as a part of program of simple living, Raney and her family are taken aback. Raney reports, "We all looked at her" (4). The novel is to report the marital differences and gradual reconciliation between Raney and Charles. Their differences are largely due to their different family and social backgrounds. The first difference that Edgerton

introduces is that of food. Raney and her family are part of a tradition that believes that no meal is complete without meat. Charles's mother, on the other hand, questions this given of Raney's culture.

While food is originally portrayed as a difference between the backgrounds of Charles and Raney, it quickly becomes, along with music, one of the main things they have in common. While Charles and Raney disagree over almost every difference in their family and cultural backgrounds, Southern food and cooking are aspects of Raney's culture that Charles readily assimilates. This is hinted at early in the novel. Aunt Flossie, who eventually helps Charles and Raney reconcile their differences in a number of ways, including providing a place for Raney to stay away from her immediate family during her brief separation from Charles, is also a good cook. Raney reports that "Charles can't get over how good her apple pies are. He asked her for the recipe and he don't even cook" (30). Charles may not cook at the beginning of the novel, but he soon starts. When Charles's mother comes to visit, "Charles had cooked--of all things--one of Aunt Flossie's apple pies. He got her to show him exactly how to cook one--he likes them so much" (64). Charles's mother raves about the pie and asks Raney for the recipe, and Raney explains that Charles had fixed the pie. Ironically, Raney has never "taken on any kind of pie" (64).

One of the most Southern of dishes, okra, is also part of Charles's initiation to Southern food. At a Sunday dinner with Raney's family, Aunt Naomi passes the okra to Charles, who says that he doesn't want any and doesn't like it. When asked if he has ever tried fried okra, Charles doesn't think so, although he has eaten some boiled okra in the past. At this point, Raney's mother asks Charles's mother, "You hadn't ever fried any okra for this boy?" (74). Mrs. Shepherd says that they've "never been much on okra somehow" (74). In spite of Charles's not wanting any, Aunt Naomi drops a piece onto his plate. He repeats, "I really don't care for any" (74). After being harassed by Aunt Naomi, he finally eats the piece of okra and reports, "It was pretty good" (74). However, when Aunt Naomi hands the bowl to Charles, he once again politely refuses (73-75).

Later, after Charles and Raney have an intense argument about their racial attitudes, Charles calls Johnny Dobbs, his black friend, to touch base with someone outside of Raney's family. Raney is able to overhear Charles's part of the conversation by listening through the vent. Charles begins by complaining about the family's racism; then Raney cannot hear because the furnace comes on. When the furnace goes back off, Raney is surprised that Charles "was asking Johnny, of all things, if he'd ever had any fried okra. He went on and on about how good it was!"

(122). At the end of the novel, when Charles cooks a Southern meal for a friend of his from New York, okra is a part of the menu.

Charles's conversion to okra reveals two things about his relationship to Raney and her family. First, in spite of the fact that it is Raney and her family who are usually depicted as provincial and narrow-minded, Charles approaches okra with a closed mind, determined not to like it. When forced to try it, he finds that he does like it. Charles approaches much of Raney's culture in this manner. He begins with the assumption that any new part of Raney's culture which he encounters will somehow be connected to the worst characteristics of the South and the Southern mind. Second, food and cooking are major factors in the eventual reconciliation of Charles and Raney. Charles, who at the beginning of the novel doesn't cook, learns to love both cooking and Southern food as the novel progresses, and his learning to cook parallels his reconciliation with Raney. While attitudes about other things, such as religion and race, continue to be barriers, food and cooking are always agents of reconciliation.

Charles and Raney disagree on religion throughout the novel. Raney is a staunch Free Will Baptist and holds fundamentalist beliefs; Charles, on the other hand, is from an Episcopalian family and is much more interested in social justice than in fundamental principles. Near the

end of the novel, Raney's family has their pastor, Preacher Gordon, for Sunday lunch. Raney has recently started to work part-time at her father's store, and Charles asks the pastor about his views on the topic and how societal expectations play into his answer. Charles is surprised to find that Preacher Gordon is willing to discuss the matter openly with him and that the pastor's thinking is more flexible than much that he has encountered in Raney's family. Raney reports, "I think Charles likes him better now that he's got to know him over a meal" (187). Once again, we see that food can be an agent of reconciliation. While Charles and Raney have argued about religion throughout their marriage, the differences somehow become less important when food is involved.

Finally, near the end of the novel, Charles himself becomes an agent of Southern culture, cooking a Southern meal for his friend Tom Robin, who has recently moved from New York, and Tom's girlfriend, Marilyn. The meal consists of squash, fresh corn, snap beans, okra, and chicken. Raney offers her help, but Charles doesn't want it. Raney informs Charles that he should shave the corn kernels off before boiling it on the cob, that he has too much water for the snap beans, and that brown and serve rolls are better if they're browned in the stove oven. Finally, Charles explodes, telling Raney, "I want to fix this meal by myself. If it turns out awful and I do it myself, I'll

be overjoyed. If it turns out perfect and you helped, I'll go crazy" (217). The supper is finally a success and almost meets Raney's approval: "The supper was pretty good. Too much water in the snapbeans and the chicken was dry" (218).

In conclusion, cooking is an important part of the eventual compromise reached by Charles and Raney. While certain issues, such as religion and racial attitudes, remain problematic, food does not. Even though we are confronted by the difference in their backgrounds on the first page when we discover that Charles's mother is a vegetarian and even though Raney herself is not as faithful a cook as her mother, refusing to cook three meals a day, food, along with music, is something that Charles and Raney have in common. Charles learns to like and even cook apple pies and okra, and at the end of the novel he is preparing Southern meals on his own, passing along this part of Southern culture to his friends who are not from the South.

While cooking is important in Raney, it is central to Edgerton's second novel, Walking Across Egypt. The book describes Mattie Rigsbee, a seventy-eight year old woman whose main purpose in life seems to be feeding people. Just as Raney begins with a description of eating at the K & W, Walking Across Egypt begins with a description of Mattie throwing out table scraps for the birds and feeding a stray dog. Mattie is Edgerton's finest representative of

how central cooking is to the South. She has lived through many changes in the South. In her youth, she did not have little choice about what to do with her life. It was inevitable that she would become a mother and a cook, and Mattie has relished these roles. She has taken great pride in helping her children with school work, mending their clothes, and cooking for them. She has maintained these values throughout her life, never questioning them. Mattie receives great pleasure from her reputation as a good cook and connects this to her understanding of what it means to be a Christian. She is constantly involved in nurturing others, whether it be a dog, her children, her neighbors, or a juvenile delinquent.

Mattie takes every opportunity to feed people. Whenever someone is to come by her house on any kind of errand, she tries to arrange a meal around the errand. She has recently noticed that her chair bottoms are looking dingy and has asked Bill Yeats to come to get them and re-cover them: "Mattie told him to come around eleven-thirty and she'd have a little bite for him to eat. There was that chicken in the refrigerator" (5). When Bill brought back the covered chair bottoms, "He arrived at about 3:30. Mattie had a pound cake, apple pie, and vanilla ice cream for him to choose from" (48). After calling the dogcatcher to come and pick up the dog from her backyard, she quickly develops a similar relationship with

the dogcatcher, Lamar Benfield. In the process of helping extract her from a bottomless chair that she has accidentally sat in, he leaves his wallet on the floor. Later he calls her to see if it is there, and she finds it. She tells him, "Listen, you come on at about 11:30 and I'll have you a little bite to eat" (23).

Later, she develops a friendship with Wesley Benfield, Lamar's nephew, based primarily on her food. When she finds out that he is serving time at the YMRC (Young Men's Rehabilitation Center) for stealing a car, she takes him some cake and pie. When Wesley escapes, he comes to Mattie's house to steal a pound cake. He eventually stays for a meal and even overnight. While he is there, Mattie's son Robert calls and asks if he can bring the woman he is dating by for Sunday lunch the next day. Mattie is delighted. She thinks, "It would be all right for Wesley to be there. She would feed them all. They would be together, enjoy her food" (134). The next day, when Mattie discovers that Wesley has escaped and is not out on leave, as he had told her, Wesley decides it is time to depart before he is caught. In spite of his dilemma, Mattie tells him, "Well, if you ain't out of town by 12:30 or 1:00 then stop by for dinner. I got all that food, and it's ready" (159). After he leaves, she worries, "Now there's that extra pork chop" (159). However, Wesley does show up for lunch, stealing a car out of the church parking lot, and

Mattie ends up serving lunch not only to him but to the sheriff and his deputy as well. After this unusual lunch, the preacher, Mr. O'Brien, calls Mattie and asks her if she had been kidnapped. She told him that she had not been kidnapped, but "if he wanted to come around one day during the week she'd fix him a little something to eat and talk about it" (192).

Obviously, feeding people is important to Mattie, and the extent of this importance is illustrated in her attitude about her seat covers for her kitchen chairs. She asks Bill Yeats to re-cover the seats. When he returns, she decides that she likes the original color better than the new one and asks him to clean the original covers and put them back on and cover them with clear plastic. After he leaves, she thinks, "No need not to have your kitchen like you want it if that's where you spend most of your life" (50). Angeline Godwin Dvorak notes the centrality of cooking to Mattie's existence, listing Walking Across Egypt along with Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Cafe as novels which feature "characters for whom cooking food and feeding people form the central core of their everyday lives and the culture" (91).

In fact, feeding people is vital to Mattie's self-esteem. When Bill Yeats complains that Mattie should not have gone to so much trouble to fix a meal for him, she responds, "No trouble. I cook three meals a day. Except

for once in a while I'll warm up leftovers--just can't go like I used to" (7). Not being able to go like she used to is a concern for Mattie. After she gets stuck in a chair with no bottom and becomes involved with Wesley Benfield's escape from the YMRC, her children become worried that Mattie can no longer take care of herself. Cooking becomes her method of maintaining her independence. Dvorak argues that cooking "supports her claim of independence and productivity at age seventy-eight" (91). Dvorak continues, "Mattie maintains her challenge to stay independent and to feed anyone who will let her" (96). It is ironic that, although Mattie had few choices about the direction her life would take, the very thing which she must do is the thing she enjoys most and becomes, in her later years, her method of asserting her independence. She feeds everyone who comes to her house as if to prove that she is still a productive member of the community who does not have to rely on the help of others.

Cooking, for Mattie, is also closely related to her identity as a Christian. Mattie sees herself fulfilling Christ's admonition, "Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me" (Matthew 25:40) when she feeds Wesley Benfield, first at the YMRC then at her own home. When Mattie finds that Wesley has never been to church, Edgerton makes a direct connection between Mattie's views of religion and

nourishment: "Mattie saw before her a dry, dying plant which needed water up through the roots--a pale boy with rotten teeth who needed the cool nourishing water of hymns sung to God. . . . That would bring color to his cheeks, a robustness to his bearing" (130). Dvorak notes this close connection between cooking and ministry, writing, "Hunger of the soul and spirit drives the force behind the spoon and skillet with the same intensity as a growling stomach" (90). In fact, for Mattie, religion in the abstract is not enough to satisfy her need for ministry. She takes comfort in the fact that she has Jesus, but thinks, "But it wadn't his way to come in and keep you company. You couldn't cook for him" (79).

Much of the tension in the novel derives from differences between Mattie and her daughter Elaine, a young professional woman who has grown up in a South far different than the one her mother grew up in and has a considerably different view of her role as a woman. Mattie has always dreamed of being able to talk to her daughter about woman things, but when Mattie tries to initiate such conversations with her daughter, Elaine always asks questions which are confusing to Mattie: "Why shouldn't a woman have the same opportunities as a man? Why couldn't career goals be as important as kitchen goals to a woman?" (52). When Mattie is preparing a meal for Wesley and his girlfriend, Patricia, Elaine thinks, derisively, "She will

never die. . . . She'll always have a meal going which will not turn her loose" (121). However, once the meal is prepared--and in spite of an argument at the table about the role of women--Elaine is impressed by the food: "The older she got, the more she wished she could cook like her mother" (125).

Mattie needs to feed people, and Edgerton provides her with a cast of characters who are either undernourished or at least unaccustomed to the type of fare that Mattie offers. First is the dog that appears on her back steps at the beginning of the novel. The second such character is Lamar. When Lamar first sits down to eat with Mattie, Edgerton tells that at home Lamar usually had "crackers, Vienna sausages or sardines, a small can of peaches, and a six-pack of Miller. When he got low on money he cut back on the beer" (32-33). In contrast, Mattie serves him "Hot food. Vegetables all over the place. Soup--thick vegetable soup. Three kinds of pickles, chow-chow. Fresh tomatoes" (33). By the end of the novel, Lamar and Mattie are friends. Lamar fixes her broken chair, cleans out her gutters, and uses his truck to take some of Mattie's things to a garage sale. Mattie cooks for Lamar. The two fulfill each other's needs. Mattie needs someone to help her with some of her physical labor, and Lamar needs to eat better food. Of course, Mattie also needs to cook.

If Lamar needs Mattie's cooking, his nephew, Wesley,

needs it even more. At the beginning of the novel, he is in the YMRC for stealing a car. When Mattie discovers this, she imagines that the food there is not very good (80). When she takes him a piece of cake, a piece of pie, and a glass of tea, he complains that "The iced tea they got here is rotten. Tastes like it's got rotten oranges in it" (96). Furthermore, Edgerton explains that the cake "was the best thing [Wesley]'d eaten in his life" (96-97). At the end of the novel when Wesley is faced with returning to the YMRC, he dreads, "Plastic dishes [and] bland foods" (177). Mattie's food leaves a lasting impression on Wesley. When he escapes from the YMRC, he has his girlfriend Patricia follow Lamar to Mattie's house, and tells her, "I'll be back inside ten minutes with the best pound cake you ever eat in your life" (114).

He is unsuccessful at stealing the pound cake but does manage to get invited to lunch. Lamar is surprised to see him and asks him why he is there. Wesley answers simply, "I come to eat" (118). This elemental answer is repeated when Wesley appears after church the next day (166). When the sheriff and a deputy show up at the house, Wesley explains to Mattie why he had taken a chance by coming to her house for lunch instead of leaving town: "I just wanted something to eat" (170). Finally, when the sheriff comes to question Mattie on Monday morning, he asks her why Wesley returned to her house after stealing a car from the

church parking lot. Mattie answers, "Pound cake, I imagine" (202).

While Mattie offers to her guests plenty of traditional Southern food, the novel presents plenty of evidence that the food and eating habits of the South are changing. Fast food is one manifestation of this change. In contrast to the lunch that Mattie offers Lamar, he usually had "two wrapped grocery-store ham and cheeses and a Mello Yello; or a Big Mac, fries, Coke, apple turnover, or if he had time, a Personal Pan Pizza at Pizza Hut" (32). Furthermore, at the end of the novel when Wesley is caught at Mattie's by the sheriff, she asks the sheriff if he will eat while he is there. He declines because he has just had a cheeseburger at Hardee's (173). In spite of this trip to Hardee's, Larry, the deputy, sits down to eat some cornbread, explaining to the sheriff that the cheeseburger had been "a little one" (175), and even the sheriff eats some dessert (179).

In fact, this scene at the end of the novel, where the sheriff waits to take Wesley away while everyone finishes dinner is the novel's best example of how important food is to the South. When the sheriff insists on arresting Wesley, Mattie tells the sheriff, "Well, just tell him he's arrested" (170). The sheriff does so; then they all go sit down and eat lunch together. Mattie serves a big lunch and dessert. Finally, when she offers second helpings of

dessert, the sheriff decides, "This could go on all day. . . . Got to get untangled from all this" (181). However, for the duration of lunch, Mattie has successfully stopped time, at least so far as Wesley and his return to the YMRC is concerned. Her kitchen serves as a sanctuary, where no one can touch Wesley. The rules of the outside world do not apply here. In her kitchen, she is the boss, telling even the sheriff that "Wesley needs to eat a bite before he goes with y'all" (169). Furthermore, this meal provides a setting where a diverse group of people can sit and learn more about each other, in spite of differences in social class, education, or even orientation to the law. The group gathered includes Mattie, her son Robert, Robert's girlfriend Laurie, and even a criminal and law enforcement officers--Wesley, the sheriff, and a deputy. Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings, in Cross Creek Cookery, describes the role of hospitality as providing a safe place: "The guests--friends, family, or strangers--must be conscious of their welcome. . . . At the moment of dining, the assembled group stands for a little while as a safe unit, under a safe roof, against the perils and enmities of the world" (qtd. in Egerton 3). Mattie certainly provides this type of atmosphere at her Sunday dinner before Wesley is returned to the YMRC.

In conclusion, cooking is central in Walking Across Egypt. The main character, Mattie Rigsbee, achieves much

of her self-esteem from providing food for others. Furthermore, cooking serves both to help her maintain her independence and to fulfill her need to minister to others. Edgerton provides a number of undernurtured characters for her to feed, and Mattie is able to fulfill these characters' needs, just as they fulfill hers. Even Mattie's daughter, Elaine, while having a dramatically different view of her role as a woman, admires her mother's cooking. Finally, at the end of the novel, we see that Mattie's cooking, can, at least temporarily, provide sanctuary from the world and unite a diverse group of people.

Edgerton's fourth novel, Killer Diller, is a sequel to Walking Across Egypt, and food and cooking are again central concerns of the book. Mattie, now eighty-six years old, still cooks. Near the end of the novel, Wesley, now a Christian, visits her to talk about some of the confusing things that he has found in the Bible. The meal they eat includes black-eyed peas, cornbread, cucumbers, iced-tea, and dessert. In fact, the black-eyed peas serve as a catalyst for a story that illustrates how important food has been throughout Mattie's life. Her sister Pearl had intended to elope with Merle Bogart. She had packed her bags in the middle of the night and waited, but Merle never showed up. When Pearl returns to the house, Mattie "said the only thing [she] could think of--'Don't you want

something to eat?'" (184-185), and they had eaten ice cold black-eyed peas (183-185).

Late in the novel, Mattie is hospitalized for congestive heart failure. The doctors give her some medicine that makes her hallucinate. She imagines that Wesley, Elaine, and Robert are trying to cook some fish, but don't know how. Mattie gets out of bed to try to show them, and the nurse puts her back to bed and puts sides on the bed. Eventually Mattie crawls over the railings and pulls all of her tubes loose (203). While Mattie's condition is such that Wesley truly worries that he will lose her, it is interesting that, even when hallucinating, Mattie's main interest is food. Her hallucination indicates that she worries that, when she is gone, her children and Wesley--whom she thinks of as her child--will not be able to cook for themselves. Near the end of the novel, Mattie is in Shady Grove Nursing Home. When Wesley asks her if she wants to go to Myrtle Beach with him and his band, she responds, "No, I just want to go home where I can be by myself and cook" (227). Mattie fought to maintain her independence throughout Walking Across Egypt, and cooking was her main mode of asserting that independence. Now, in a nursing home, she sees the ability to cook as equivalent to regaining that independence.

While Mattie's identity is still closely related to her cooking, it is Wesley who has become the primary

nourisher in Killer Diller. Wesley is in BOTA House (Back on Track Again), a halfway house associated with Ballard University. Wesley has accepted the two main forces in Mattie's philosophy, cooking and Christianity. Of course, Wesley has not always played the role of nourisher; in fact, he has been undernourished. When Mattie tells her story about eating black-eyed peas in the middle of the night, Wesley remembers the inaccessibility of food in the orphanage: "They locked up the food" (185). However, now he has become a cook. When he first meets Phoebe, who is to become his girlfriend, he starts to tell her that he will cook for her before he remembers that she is in town to lose weight (20). Later, when he visits Vernon Hollister, a special education student whom he is to teach masonry as part of Ballard University's Project Promise, and Vernon's father, he admires the house and "sees himself inside four walls cooking for this family of two" (60). And, in fact, Wesley does prepare Vernon and Hollister a home-cooked meal on his first visit.

Like Mattie, Wesley makes a close connection between food and religion. He explains to Vernon that Mattie taught him to cook: "She gave me some great food, and told me about Jesus" (64). Later, he explains to Ben, his roommate at BOTA House how Mattie has visited him at the YMRC, bringing him "this iced tea in a jar and the best pound cake you ever eat, *plus* a piece of this apple pie

with this real light crispy crust and this cinnamon flavor, and it was the beginning of me being a Christian" (119). At the end of the novel when Mattie is sick, Wesley is overcome with the need to ask her questions. He suddenly realizes that "He's never really known a lot about what she thinks about besides Jesus and food" (204). Wesley has absorbed Mattie's values, in which cooking is closely related to her spiritual beliefs.

Just as Mattie encounters a number of characters in need of nourishment in Walking Across Egypt, including Wesley himself, Wesley encounters Vernon and Holister Jackson in Killer Diller. In the novel's first scene Holister is working on a car and trying to watch Vernon at the same time. Vernon eats a banana, and "Holister spreads mayonnaise on a piece of white bread, folds it, and puts half of it into his mouth" (5). When Wesley visits and begins to cook them a meal, Vernon tells Wesley, "We just eat sandwiches mostly. . . . One week ham, one week chicken salad, one week ham. Sometimes we eat bacon or frozen pizza" (64). In contrast, Wesley is cutting okra to fry for them.

While the Jacksons are in need of the kind of food Wesley can prepare, his girlfriend, Phoebe, presents a different kind of problem. She has taken a year off to come to Ballard University's Nutrition House to solve her weight problem. She has tried in the past to rationalize

that she is simply large and not fat but has finally decided, with the help of literature from Nutrition House, "that she had a real weight problem and had to take control of her life and solve it with the help of Jesus" (20). Ironically, while she is overfed, Phoebe is still undernurtured in terms of the support she receives from her family. Her mother is dead, and her father, who was previously a military officer, is most interested in being a team player at Ballard. When discussing Wesley with Phoebe, he suggests that Wesley and his friends are "a group of people who aren't used to certain institutional norms, and they've got to conform or the university suffers" (186). He advises her that Wesley has "a way to go" (186) and that "there is a fine student body on campus--eligible young men. And a fine ROTC" (186). Therefore, while Phoebe is not undernourished, she does not receive the kind of nurturing and affirmation that Wesley has learned to associate with food.

In fact, Ballard University as a whole is not the sort of nurturing environment that Wesley, Phoebe, and others need. While on the surface the university is involved in a number of innovative and nurturing programs--BOTA House, Nutrition House, and Project Promise--the main concern of Ted Sears, president of the university is that the programs provide good publicity with a minimum of liability on the university's part. Ironically, Ted's expertise is food:

"He's the author of two full-length books on nutrition: *Food and the Bible* and *Nutrition for a Christian*" (33). However, while Ted may be an expert on nutrition and may have been instrumental in founding Nutrition House, he creates an environment at Ballard that is far from nourishing. Stan Laurence, the assistant treasurer at Ballard, lives below the poverty line, and he and his wife have decided "that to avoid embarrassment about using the food stamps that they are now eligible for, and plan to use, they should shop at the Listre Winn Dixie, ten miles away, rather than at the Food Lion near campus" (92). Edgerton also reports that Wesley's housemother at BOTA House, Mrs. White, was once a Ballard dorm mother, but "Now working for the Federal Bureau of Prisons, she's making three times her old salary" (10).

In fact, Ballard University is worried about the well-being of its "family" on a superficial level only. When Ned Sears, Ted's brother and the provost of the university, suggests that they might encourage Wesley to take a grammar class, Ted agrees but then considers that, from a public relations standpoint, "even if he comes across a little underprivileged in that department, that might not hurt" (101). Ted's superficiality is again repeated when he discusses the death of Leroy Yates who had worked in maintenance for twenty-seven years. When he finds that the family has been sent a dozen roses and some

chicken, he frowns and says, "I thought we usually sent just one or the other" (102). It is obvious that, while Ted may be an expert on nutrition, he has little interest in the nourishment of those who work for him.

This is underscored by the kick-off dinner for Project Promise at the university. Even though Ted is proud that "people of all stripes" are "eating at the same table" (127) and is proud that he eats with the black help on the first Monday of every month as "Jesus would have done" (130), he also wonders why they won't carry on a conversation with him or take any of the night courses the university offers them. He takes consolation in the fact that "at least ours don't complain" (131). At the end of the dinner, Stan Laurence's wife, Darleen, complains, "I'm still thinking about being hungry," and Stan answers, "It wasn't very filling, was it?" (133). In fact, the purpose of this dinner was never to provide food for anyone; the dinner's purpose was to provide good public relations. Therefore, that Stan Laurence, a university employee, and his wife leave the dinner hungry is no great surprise.

At the end of the novel, Wesley can no longer tolerate the hypocrisy of Ballard University, and he and his friends run away to become "The Wandering Stars," a blues band. However, this decision has consequences for Wesley beyond the inevitable punishment for his early escape from a halfway house; he is also losing his ability to cook for

himself. When he tells Mattie of his plans, she warns him, "You need to settle down, have a kitchen and a wife and children. You can't have roots where you can't cook" (226). Appropriately, at the end of the novel, Wesley, Phoebe, and Vernon are eating popcorn. They have run from what little nurture they have known and must eat junk food. Wesley is forced to choose between two types of nourishment. At Ballard, he can cook for himself but is surrounded by people who do not really care for him. On the road, he is surrounded by close friends but must resort to eating popcorn. At least temporarily, he chooses the nourishment of faithful friends. Ballard cannot fulfill the dual roles of physical and spiritual nourishment that Mattie Rigsbee provided for him in Walking Across Egypt, and one without the other is insufficient.

Therefore, Killer Diller provides a wide range of perspectives related to food. Wesley becomes the cook that Mattie had been in Walking Across Egypt, and, like Mattie, sees his cooking as related to his Christianity. Also, as in Walking Across Egypt, Wesley is confronted by people for whom he can cook and fulfill his need to help others in this way. However, unlike the previous book, food is not the answer to all problems in Killer Diller. Phoebe Trent has come to Ballard University to lose weight. While she is overfed, she does not get the type of spiritual support from her father that Wesley has received from Mattie.

Ballard University, with its President who has published books on nutrition and its innovative Nutrition House, also fails to provide nourishment, either physical or spiritual, to its "family"; its entry level employees are on food stamps, and its ostentatious banquets leave the diners unfilled. In the end, Wesley flees from this environment.

In summary, food and cooking tend to either link or distance characters from their communities in Raney, Walking Across Egypt, and Killer Diller. In Raney, food serves as an agent of reconciliation between Charles and Raney. The difference in their cultural backgrounds, with Raney representing traditional Southern values and Charles representing a changing South, causes friction from the early days of their marriage. They disagree on many important issues, including religion and racism. However, food serves to unite them. Charles learns to enjoy eating Southern food and even becomes a cook himself, preparing traditional Southern fare for a friend from the North.

In Walking Across Egypt, cooking serves Mattie Rigsbee both as a way to assert her own independence and to unite her family and her community. Mattie is seventy-eight years old, and fears that, as she slows down, her children or others will take some of her independence from her by moving in with her or forcing her to live in a nursing home. She uses her expertise at cooking as evidence that she is still able to care for herself. Conversely, she

uses cooking to create a sense of family and community. Her children, who believe that their mother's views are dated and resist her pressure that they start families of their own, nevertheless come to her home to eat on a regular basis. Furthermore, Mattie's table is a place where the entire community, including neighbors, dogcatchers, even juvenile delinquents and law enforcement, unite to enjoy her good cooking.

On the other hand, in Killer Diller, Edgerton presents a world where cooking and community are not necessarily synonymous. Wesley has become a cook and uses this skill to minister to others just as Mattie has taught him. However, Wesley finds himself in an institution which provides no sense of community and even less nurture. Ironically, the president of the university, Ted Sears, is an expert on nutrition and has even founded a nutrition house. In spite of this, one of his own employees uses food stamps, and Sears begrudges a bucket of chicken sent to the family of a recently-deceased maintenance worker. Wesley finally flees from this environment even though it means that he is losing his ability to cook. His relationship with Mattie Rigsbee taught him to equate cooking and community, and he cannot tolerate Ballard University, where lip-service given to nutrition is divorced from any real sense of nurture or community.

In conclusion, food and cooking are important

characteristics of the South's distinctiveness. The South's early economy was built on agriculture, and this fact, along with the poverty or near-poverty in which many Southerners have lived for much of the South's history, has caused food to be central to the South. Like the close-knit nature of families and communities, the centrality of food can be either a source of strength or an important obstacle to individual Southerners. The gathering of the family around the table for meals or at special occasions certainly provides a place for the family to share its experiences. At the same time, the expectation that women be responsible for the preparation of the food is often an unwanted expectation for Southern women who have many more opportunities than they once had. Of course, in the antebellum South, the responsibility for preparing the food often fell to the black slaves, and the preparation of meals became, paradoxically, both an unwanted task and the primary means of creativity and self-expression for many black women. Edgerton also captures the historic tension in the South between its black and white inhabitants and portrays the complexity of this problem in his novels.

Chapter IV

Racism

Historic slavery and an enduring tension between races is another factor characteristic of Southern life and the fiction that describes it. Winthrop D. Jordan, in his article on "Racial Attitudes" in Encyclopedia of Southern Culture, states that Southern attitudes about race "have been remarkable in the history of the world cultural contacts for their virulence, consistency, pervasiveness, and persistence through time" (3:481). He suggests two sources of Southern attitudes about race: "The origins of white racial attitudes may be found in the interaction of two powerful forces: certain important attributes of English culture, and the need for bound labor in land-rich colonies, which needed to export in order to survive" (3:480). Jordan reports that some scholars maintain that pejorative attitudes about black men pre-date the establishment of the American colonies and are, in fact, "a part of an ancient western European heritage" (3:481). Jordan continues, "From their earliest contacts with West Africans, both in Africa and America, the English regarded them as heathen, uncivilized, brutelike, and oversexed" (3:481).

While twentieth century students often think of slavery in terms of its relationship to the Civil War, it was deeply embedded in the South by the time of the

American Revolution and was, in fact, an important point of contention between Northern and Southern states during the framing of the Declaration of Independence. In their introduction to Race and Family in the Colonial South (1987), Winthrop D. Jordan and Sheila Skemp reveal James Madison's assertion during the Constitutional Convention that "The institution of slavery and its consequences formed the line of discrimination" (xii) between Northern and Southern states. Carl N. Degler, in Place Over Time: The Continuity of Southern Distinctiveness (1977), argues that this attribute of Southern culture quickly accelerated: "When the new government was formed in 1789, the beginning of identification of the South with slavery was even more clearly evident than it had been in the Constitutional Convention" (30). Degler documents the rapid growth of the centrality of slavery to the South's economy in the nineteenth century: "If ever the Jeffersonian hope that slavery would one day disappear from the new republic had been a reality, by the late 1820's it was no longer seriously entertained" (41). Furthermore, he argues that "as early as 1825 the South had committed itself so deeply to slavery and that slavery was so imbedded in the South's identity that the region could only view any proposal to end it, however gradually, as an attack upon its being" (42).

After the abolition of slavery and the end of the

Civil War, racism increased rather than decreased in the South. Charles Reagan Wilson, in his article on Reconstruction in Encyclopedia of Southern Culture, proposes, "At the end of the war southern whites had accepted the end of slavery, but Reconstruction showed their real commitment to a racial color line. This, not slavery, was a life-and-death matter" (2:441). He continues, "In the proslavery argument the defense of white supremacy was couched in the broader defense of slavery, but race itself became the key issue in the post-bellum era" (2:442). W. J. Cash, in The Mind of the South, argues that the Civil War and Reconstruction had the unanticipated result of devaluing, rather than increasing, the value of a black man's life. He writes,

So long as the Negro had been property, worth from five thousand dollars up, he had been taboo--safer from rope and faggot than any common white man, and perhaps even safer than the master himself. But with the abolition of legal slavery his immunity vanished. The economic interest of his former protectors, the master class, now stood the other way about--required that he should be promptly disabused of any illusion that his liberty was real, and confirmed in his ancient docility. And so the road stood all but wide open to the ignoble hate and cruel itch to

take him in hand which for so long had been
festering impotently in the poor whites. (113)

In fact, when the ex-slaves no longer had intrinsic economic value to white Southerners, lynching became common. William I. Hair, in his article on "Lynching" in Encyclopedia of Southern Culture, writes, "The Civil War and Reconstruction intensified southern lynching activity" (1:294). He continues, "Lynching became more widespread in the Reconstruction years and was directed mostly at exslaves, because the free blacks, no longer valued as property, were often viewed as threatening the existence of white civilization" (1:294). Carl Degler agrees, "Throughout the post-Reconstruction years, the high incidence of lynching in the South . . . [testifies] to the extra-legal ways used by whites to control Negroes who had once been controlled by slavery" (64).

Cash argues that the Southerners' propensity for taking the law in their own hands was the natural result of having power wrested from them by Reconstruction governments: "Stripped for a decade of all control of its government, stripped for three decades of the effective use of that government to the ends it willed, the South was left with scarcely any feasible way to mastery save only this one of the use of naked force" (117). Cash goes on to say that the dominant feeling among Southerners was that lynching was "an act of racial and patriotic expression, an

act of chivalry, an act, indeed, having definitely ritualistic value in respect to the entire Southern sentiment" (118). Lynching is often associated with the lower classes of white society; however, Hair points out that "Without the tacit approval of most of the dominant elements in the white community, lynching could not have been so frequent" (1:296). Cash agrees that lynching had, in most cases, "the approbation and often the participation of the noblest and wisest of that revered generation of men which was now bending to the grave" (118), the former Confederate soldiers. Cash concludes by suggesting that to many Southerners lynching was seen as "not wrong but the living flesh and bone of right" (118).

This feeling that lynching was somehow righteous was related to fear of black men raping white women. Hair writes, "Lynch-law was supposed to be . . . 'the white woman's guarantee against rape by niggers'" (1:295). However, according to Hair, "In fact only about one-third of all lynching victims were suspected of rape or attempted rape" (1:295). In spite of this, "Whenever lynching was discussed, rape became the central theme" (1:295). Southern newspapers were slow to condemn lynching, and Hair reports that Henry J. Hearsey, editor-publisher of the New Orleans Daily States admitted that "The question of actual guilt . . . did not really concern him; he was sure lynching deterred black crime, and that was the important

thing" (1:296).

The obsession of Southern whites with the idea of their superiority over black men persisted well into the twentieth century and, in fact, is still evident in many cases. Historian Ulrich B. Phillips asserts, in his 1928 essay "The Central Theme of Southern History," that white Southerners possess "a common resolve indomitably maintained that [the South] shall be and remain a white man's country" (31). He refers to this premise as "the cardinal test of a Southerner and the central theme of Southern history" (31). John W. Cell, in his essay on "Race Relations" in Encyclopedia of Southern Culture, concurs, "Throughout southern history . . . the region's ruling class dedicated itself to one overriding principle--white supremacy" (1:318). C. Vann Woodward, in The Burden of Southern History, states that Phillips' argument has proved more durable than the Agrarians' assertion that the South should maintain its agricultural identity (10). He argues that traditionalists have been helpless as "cherished values of individualism, localism, family, clan, and rural folk culture" have gradually been replaced by "industrialism, urbanism, unionism, and big government" (10). However, he holds that the race issue has been different. While change in other areas of life divided the people, "Advocates and agents of change [in the race issue] could be denounced as outsiders, intruders,

meddlers. Historic memories of resistance and cherished constitutional principles could be invoked" (10-11).

Throughout the first half of the twentieth century, white violence against black men slowly abated; however, a system of segregation became firmly entrenched in the area. Cell reports that "Segregation covered all areas of life, love, work, leisure, and even death" (1:320). He continues, "Parks, beaches, golf courses, tennis courts, and swimming pools excluded [black people]; again comparatively rarely they might find separate but undoubtedly inferior facilities" (1:321). While "Segregation was a means of placing the race question on hold," eventually policies of segregation were to be challenged by the Civil Rights Movement. Cell writes, "The pivotal Supreme Court decision *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) represented a national judgment on the South's racial system" (1:323). As the Civil Rights movement gained strength, change spread to many areas of life in the South. Cell states, "Eventually, . . . white corporate and political leaders made the decision that though economic, political, and educational discrimination was far from ended, the career of white supremacy as a legal system was over" (1:323). Peyton McCrary, in his article on the "Reconstruction Myth" in Encyclopedia of Southern Culture proposes, "The Second Reconstruction [i.e., the Civil Rights Movement,] was, however, far more successful than

the first" (3:485-486). He continues, "By 1970, when a series of political leaders below the Mason-Dixon line were proclaiming a 'New South' that turned its back on racial prejudice, a great change had taken place in the region's political culture" (3:486).

Southern attitudes about race have been gradually changing as well, though not as fast as the legal system has. Winthrop D. Jordan reports that "It is no longer polite . . . to institutionalize pejorative attitudes in an obvious way or to express them in more public forums . . . and directly to members of the other race" (3:482). He questions how much these changes in etiquette are affecting actual attitudes but affirms, "Certainly, there has been some effect, especially among younger people" (3:482). Woodward does believe that even the South's attitudes about race are changing with time. In fact, he sees that the South must change to survive. He believes that, during the Civil War, the South identified its whole cause with the one institution in its culture that was most vulnerable, slavery. He warns, "If Southernism is allowed to become identified with a last ditch defense of segregation, it will increasingly lose its appeal among the younger generation" (12).

Clyde Edgerton faithfully describes the tension between races in the South. In The Floatplane Notebooks, he portrays some of the worst results of slavery, including

lynching, both before and during the Civil War. In this book and in all of his novels, he describes a tension over the race issue that still persists in the South. Often, but not always, this tension occurs along generational boundaries. For the most part, the older generations, as well as those who would hold on to other more admirable aspects of the South's past, still hold racist attitudes, while the younger generations question these attitudes. Edgerton also examines how these racist attitudes have often been perpetuated by organized religion.

This tension is evident in Edgerton's first novel, Raney. Early in the novel Charles travels with Raney's family to the beach. After Charles and Raney take Raney's brother and sister, Norris and Mary Faye, to the beach, they return to the cottage, where Aunt Naomi wants to know "how thick the niggers had been down at the boardwalk" (41). Raney responds that they hadn't been bad, but Charles argues, "They've got as much right as anyone else to walk on the boardwalk" (41). Raney's matter-of-fact response to Aunt Naomi's question reveals that she has absorbed her culture's values regarding race, as do her thoughts about Charles's response: "Charles has this thing about niggers. For some reason he don't understand how they are. Or at least how they are around Listre and Bethel" (41). While Raney keeps her thoughts to herself, Aunt Naomi attacks Charles's view, arguing that, even

though black people may have a constitutional right to use the beach, they should stay on their own beach:

And so long as they've got *their* beach . . . then I don't understand to my life why they don't use it--why they have to use ours. In Russia they wouldn't have their own beach . . . It's just that they need to stay in their own place at their own beach just like the white people stay at their own place on their own beach. (41)

Charles does not respond to Aunt Naomi; instead, he simply leaves the room. Raney is relieved that Charles doesn't make an issue of Aunt Naomi's speech because she knows that "Charles don't like to hear nothing about niggers unless it's how Martin Luther King laid down in some restaurant or something . . . he has this thing" (77).

However, the inevitable argument finally occurs during Christmas dinner at Aunt Naomi's house. The impetus for the argument is the newly-adopted child of Jessie Faye and Richard, a couple who cannot have their own children. Raney believes that the child looks "half *colored*" (116). She rationalizes, "I don't think anybody has necessarily been done any harm, unless he turns on Jessie Faye and Richard. And off and on the coloreds get in the habit of burning down their own houses" (116). Charles argues that "they are burning down unfair landlords' houses, not their own houses" (117), but Raney doesn't think so. She

believes that they start in their own neighborhoods and is "sure that it has something to do with their forefathers having those bonfires in Africa" (117).

Uncle Nate remarks that the child's hair is "as kinky as . . . well, as a nigger's" and asks, "He looks like a nigger, don't he?" (118). After Raney answers that he does, Charles remarks, "I don't think skin color makes any difference" (119). Raney thinks "of all of the years the colored people around Bethel and Listre had lived in real low conditions and had never amounted to anything and [she] figured if Charles thought skin color didn't matter then he must be blind" (119). In spite of her racism, Raney sees the world as it is, and Charles recognizes this, for he later tells their marriage counselor that Raney has "these stabs of common sense, or something, which [stun him] sometimes" (154). Carol Verderese, in her review of the novel, notes that "we are . . . awed by her simple wisdom" (21). Charles immediately takes the standard liberal approach, generalizing that black people are "burning down unfair landlords' houses, not their own houses" (117) and that "skin color [doesn't make] any difference" (119). In this episode, Raney is creative in her thinking, making a direct statement about the world as she observes it while Charles' insistence on being politically correct leads him to make ridiculous generalizations.

However, Raney soon demonstrates the limitations of

her reasoning. When Charles tries to discount racism based on an analogy from nature, Raney defends her family's racism based on cultural norms and reveals her belief that whatever exists in her community is both right and universal. Charles suggests that the difference between black rabbits and white rabbits is unimportant, that the animals socialize freely, and that the difference between black and white people is just as superficial and unimportant. Raney doesn't follow:

Anybody knows a white rabbit and a black rabbit wouldn't mind marrying if they could, but that white people and colored people do mind marrying. That right there is difference enough to me. If it was natural for white and colored folks to marry then they would do it. (120)

Raney assumes that whatever is in her community is right. Since she cannot see beyond this, Charles's analogy fails. When Uncle Nate states that the difference between a white man and a black man is "smell, lips, nose, hair, clothes, and laziness" (121), Charles walks out. Raney tries to explain away Charles's behavior and, ironically, argues that Charles's "unusual ideas came from being raised sheltered-like His daddy was a college professor" (121). Of course, it is Raney who has been sheltered, but she cannot see this; according to her, the norm for human behavior is the customs of her family and community, and

Charles is "sheltered" to the extent that he does not share the views of these people.

A source of some tension throughout the novel is Charles's friend Johnny Dobbs. During one of Charles's phone conversations with Johnny, Charles warns Johnny "not to drive in after dark" (29). Raney begins to deduce that Johnny, a black man, is not "a regular white person" (29). During another of Charles's later conversations with Johnny, Raney tries to rationalize why Charles would be friends with a black man; she decides, "Something traumatic in the army had *caused* them to be best friends" (122). That Charles and Johnny could simply be friends because they like each other is beyond Raney's realm of experience. Raney finally decides that it is acceptable that Charles has a black friend from the army because the army is segregated, and Charles and Johnny may have roomed together or at least eaten together. However, having Johnny visit is another matter: "If he *is* a nigger, he can't stay here. It won't work. The Ramada, maybe, but not here" (29).

The debate over Johnny intensifies when Charles and Raney are expecting their first child. During another of Charles's phone conversations with Johnny, Raney overhears him asking if he would be the baby's godfather. Raney is terrified, thinking, "I don't know what a godfather is supposed to do, but if a black gets legally kin to my family, we'll have to move to Hawaii" (220). Soon Charles

suggests to Raney that they have the child baptized. This is another point of contention, for Raney is a staunch Free Will Baptist and does not believe in infant baptism. The degree to which Charles and Raney have learned to compromise is evident in the announcement of the child's baptism which ends the novel. The child is baptized at St. John's Episcopal Church, according to Charles's wishes. Both sets of grandparents are present, and Raney's parents even give a reception at the Bethel Free Will Baptist Church after the baptism. The most important evidence of their compromise is that Johnny Dobbs is named godfather. However, he does not stay at Charles and Raney's home, where Charles's parents are staying; rather, he stays at the Ramada, as Raney predicted he would have to early in the novel. Therefore, both Charles and Raney give some ground at the end of the novel. Raney allows Johnny to become the baby's godfather, challenging her family's attitudes about race. Likewise, Charles does not insist on having Johnny stay at their home, yielding to a community norm.

While attitudes about race never become a central issue in Walking Across Egypt, racist attitudes are depicted in Edgerton's second novel, and Edgerton reveals how the tension about racial issues forms along generational lines and how racism is often linked to organized religion. Elaine Rigsbee, daughter of Mattie

Rigsbee, comes to eat lunch on a Saturday and her thoughts all reveal disdain for her mother and her community.

Elaine is a liberated woman--and to her mother's disappointment, unmarried--and believes that she has grown beyond the ways of her mother and her mother's community. Mattie realizes this, thinking, "Talk a little to the people you grew up beside but don't hardly ever speak to now that you got a degree" (66). The other guests in the house are watching the Braves baseball game, and Alora, Mattie's neighbor remarks, "I declare they got so many niggers playing these days. . . . There was a team on the other day . . . they had a nigger playing every position but third base" (72). Her husband, Finner, explains that third basemen are a special lot: "You don't see many nigger third basemen. . . . Third base is the hot corner" (72). Elaine cannot stand the conversation any longer and goes to the restroom to wait for them to leave. Mattie's neighbors are accustomed to calling black people "niggers." Apparently, Mattie and her other guests in the house are accustomed to hearing this, for no one is uncomfortable except for Elaine. They have all grown up in a society where this word and demeaning attitudes toward black people are acceptable; Elaine, on the other hand, has left the community and received a liberal education and is no longer comfortable with the intolerance expressed by those who live in her mother's community.

Later in the book, we see how deeply such attitudes are engrained in Mattie's community and even--perhaps especially--in the church. When Wesley Benfield escapes from the YMRC, Mattie agrees to keep him overnight if he will go with her to church the next day. When he goes to Sunday School with her, a member of the class realizes that he is the young man that she has read about in the morning paper and calls the police. When the sheriff arrives, he asks Dodson Clark, an usher, for help finding a "Caucasian, sixteen years of age, five feet nine, sandy hair, light complexion" (162). Dodson pictures, "a sixteen-year-old youth--he'd better be Caucasian--standing and spraying the congregation with machine-gun fire. Dodson would duck, crawl along under the pews, grab the assailant by the ankles, pull hard, trip him up, disarm him" (162-163). The thought of having an escaped juvenile delinquent in church who may be dangerous is exciting, but the thought that someone who is not white could be in the church is intolerable.

Of course, historically the church has been an agent of oppression in the South. Winthrop D. Jordan and Sheila L Skemp write, "We think of the region as the Bible Belt when, if measured by any conceivable sort of social yardstick, it was the least Christian portion of the eastern seaboard of North America" (x). Bill Leonard, in his article on the Southern Baptist Convention in

Encyclopedia of Southern Culture, stresses that race has played a part both in the origin and practice of the country's largest Protestant denomination. He attributes the formation of the convention in 1845 to "disagreement with northern Baptists over slavery and sectionalism" (4:114). He argues that "By sanctioning the southern white way of life--economics, politics, morality, race--Southern Baptists helped preserve regional unity among whites following the Civil War" (4:115). James Sessions, in his article on "Civil Rights and Religion" in Encyclopedia of Southern Culture, states the case more directly: "At its worst, [the white church in the South] was the ideological linchpin of racism and segregation" (4:27). In fact, the 1914 Annual of the Southern Baptist Convention includes a statement that the push for social equality among races is "the devil's bugaboo" (298). Leonard believes that the convention has "focused primarily on individual conversion and personal morality, often ignoring the corporate sins of southern society" (4:115). While certain courageous individuals among Southern Christians supported civil rights, Sessions reports that "They were often defrocked, fired by their own churches, and forced to seek employment outside the region" (2:28). Sessions also links white churches in the South to the undermining of integrated schools:

Many [churches in the South] formed the

institutional base for evading public school desegregation by founding private "Christian academies" and for promoting reactionary policies through the electronic church and the New Christian Right in the 1970s and 1980s. (1:29)

In Edgerton's third book, The Floatplane Notebooks, he deals with these corporate sins of Southern society during the Civil War and more recently. The Copeland family, with which the novel is primarily concerned, is party to the great Southern sin. A vine, one of many narrators in the novel, tells a fascinating story. William, one of the second generation of Copelands in the novel, moves into town. One morning he brings home a parcel which he shoves under the smokehouse where the black sharecropper and freed slave Zuba lives while Ross, William's brother, watches. William later returns with two wagonloads of men. They discover a dead little girl under the smokehouse, and hang Zuba with some of the wisteria vine. William just stands there and allows it to happen, as does Ross, who has witnessed what William has done earlier (206-209). During one of several storytelling sessions from beyond the grave, Ross claims that he had tried to stop the men from hanging Zuba (174). However, the vine reports only that "Ross dug at his thumb nails with his middle fingernails. Blood came" (208). Like Ross, Vera, the sister of William and Ross, has a hard time dealing with what happens to Zuba.

Ross reports that "she worried a lot about Zuba after he got strung up with the wisteria" (174). Vera's behavior becomes more and more eccentric until, near the end of her life, she walks nine miles to Raleigh to buy laudanum whenever she gets her pension check (174). Guilt over her family's killing of Zuba for a crime committed by her brother plays a large part in Vera's downfall. This scapegoating of black people for white sins is typical of the South during Reconstruction and enhances the novel's primary metaphor about the difference between recorded facts and actual truth. In fact, Zuba is silenced even in death; he is one of the rare characters who does not join in the storytelling sessions in the graveyard. He sits apart from the rest of the group and does not participate.

Edgerton also deals with another phenomenon which, if not common, was at least present in the South during the period of slavery and Reconstruction, miscegenation. Winthrop D. Jordan and Sheila Skemp list miscegenation in the British southern continental colonies as one of several results of a scarcity of European women in the colonies (xi). Tilden G. Edelstein, in an article on miscegenation in Encyclopedia of Southern Culture, writes, "From the 18th century to the Civil War liaisons between white slave masters and black female slaves did occur" (1:301). John W. Cell also discusses this phenomenon, stating that miscegenation "was very frequent during slavery, when

owners had power over black women" (1:321). While white men may have abused their position of authority to gain sexual favors from black women, sex between black men and white women was, perhaps, the South's greatest taboo and was the primary justification for lynching in the post-Reconstruction South. Cell reports, "White females and black males were simply not supposed to meet, study, or work together except under the most rigid of protocol, lest sexual conduct be the result" (1:321).

In The Floatplane Notebooks, Ross tells a story--again, from beyond the grave--about Harper McGuire, who falls in love with Zuba's daughter, Zenobia. They meet regularly at Buzzard Rock. Harper later finds out that his father is also meeting Zenobia. When Zenobia becomes pregnant, Harper does not know who the father is. Someone tells Harper's father that he had seen Harper and Zenobia together, and Harper's father "beat Harper within an inch of his life" (176). As Harper is being beaten, he repeats, "You done it, too. You done it, too" (176). Harper's father's motivation for beating his son is complex. On the one hand, his son has broken a strong Southern more by having sexual intercourse with Zenobia. However, he may also be jealous, for Zenobia was his lover as well. In either case, Harper is confused; he does not understand the double standard under which his father is operating.

Moreover, vestiges of racism remain in the South of

Mark and Meredith, who go to fight in Vietnam. As a child, Meredith starts a welldigger while he and Mark are camping out in the yard. When he is confronted about it, he blames it on "a nigger," believing that his appeal to a strong Southern fear will get him out of trouble. The response of his cohort, his cousin Mark, reveals a great deal about Southern attitudes about race. He is deeply religious and prays for forgiveness for being party to Meredith's lie: "I prayed: 'Jesus, I'm sorry--if the nigger won't there. I think he might have been there, though. Dear Jesus, I'm sorry--if the nigger won't there'" (33). Here we see Meredith sincerely troubled by his lie, but oblivious to his own deeply-instilled attitudes about race and perfectly willing to make a scapegoat of the nonexistent black man: "Jesus would still love me if the nigger had been there and he probably had been" (33). This combination of religious fervency and racism is reminiscent of Huck Finn and his ruminations about helping Jim escape to freedom and is common in the South.

Noralee, the younger sister of Meredith and Thatcher, must also deal with the issue of race and her family's attitudes about race. While still young, she notices that "Mama says not to say nigger but everybody else does except Mama and Bliss" (51). Later, when Noralee is in high school and becomes a cheerleader, she meets J. W. Potts, a young black man who is a halfback on the football team.

They sit together on the bus during road trips, and Noralee likes him. However, she worries about her father: "What Papa would die if he knew about is J. W. Potts" (109). She decides, "The problem will come if he actually asks me for a date. I don't know what I'll do. I'll probably say no. But in a way I'd like to say yes because he's so neat" (109).

Another episode which reveals the family's racism is a basketball game which Meredith arranges with, according to Thatcher, Meredith's "little nigger buddy, City Lewis" (112). During the game, smoke from the coal stove begins to descend from the ceiling. Meredith and Mark try to fit two loose sections of the stovepipe together; instead, they completely break the pipe, and black smoke roars out of the stove. Thatcher reports, "The bottom of the cloud was just about at everybody's heads and Meredith's face was as black as City's" (114). The game ends and everyone leaves. However, one of the boys' neighbors sees them and reports that the boys have "dressed up like niggers" (115). When Meredith and Mark arrive home, Meredith's father "blessed them out for changing races" (115).

Edgerton attempts to show the consistency of the Copeland family over several generations, and he reveals their consistency on the race issue by providing a number of parallel stories. First, just as Zuba was lynched during Reconstruction for a murder that William committed,

Mark and Meredith try to escape from their responsibility for starting a welldigger by blaming a non-existent black man. Second, both Vera and Noralee are uncomfortable with their families attitudes and behavior regarding black people and adopt, at least in the eyes of their families, eccentric behaviors. Vera moves to town where she works alongside black people and becomes a laudanum addict; Noralee has a crush on a young black man she knows she cannot date, so she dates a "hippee" instead. Finally, characters in both generations have a fear of mixing races. Harper is beaten by his father for having intercourse with a black sharecropper's daughter; likewise, Albert threatens to beat Meredith and Mark simply for having black coal smoke on their faces. While Southern attitudes about race have moderated over the years and while the manifestations of that racism have become less severe, Edgerton reveals that Southern racism lingers.

Edgerton again deals with racism in his fourth novel, Killer Diller, this time relating it closely to institutionalized religion. When Phoebe Trent reports that she is losing weight, Mattie responds, "Appearance does count for a lot, don't it?" (144). At Ballard University, appearance appears to be everything. Ted Sears, the president of the university, has helped start a number of innovative programs; however, each program is carefully considered in terms of its liability. Ted is hesitant to

establish a relationship with BOTA House (Back on Track Again), a halfway house, "because it involved, even though indirectly, known criminals, black criminals in some cases" (8). He worries that the black criminals will have a negative effect on the university's public relations. Later, however, he hopes that the parents of the Ballard students "will see a form of Christian education at Ballard that touches the criminal, the Negro criminal even" (33).

Ned Sears, the provost of the university and Ted's twin brother, is concerned about the band that has formed at BOTA House. The band was "a wonderful idea" when conceived of "as a white gospel quartet" (25). However, he soon becomes worried:

But then the two blacks joined, and they started singing Negro spirituals, never checking with Mrs. White. Well, of course black gospel music is all right, as long as they don't move on over into rock and roll or any of that bong-bong black stuff. (25)

Ned rationalizes that the black men in the band will be acceptable because "A mind is a mind and a soul is a soul, regardless of that Ham stuff in the Bible" (25). Later, Mysteria, Ted's secretary, refers to Wesley Benfield as "one of the ones in the Christian band they've got over there with the blacks in it" (95). Ted asks his brother, "How are those blacks working out, by the way? In the

band" (96). That two members of the band are black is obviously a great concern at Ballard, so much so that it has become the defining characteristic of the band.

In this novel, Edgerton also describes black hatred of whites, using a bitter young black woman, Shanita. She is the girlfriend of one of the young black men in the band and is angry because "Larry told me he wouldn't *never* play music with no white-assed cracker" (23). Edgerton explains, "Shanita does not like the bass player, Wesley Benfield, or the lead singer, Sherri Gold. Because they are white" (22). When she sees Ned Sears's "pasty-white face" (24) coming to check on the band's practice, she thinks, "Oh, God . . . Another honky" (24). Shanita's name-calling continues throughout the book and is one of the novel's sources of humor. She refers to Sherri Gold as "Goldyass" (89) and Jake Davis, the general manager of a local radio station, as a "pasty-faced white boy" (90). She later assumes that the disc-jockey of the station's morning show is a "red-faced-queer-fag-honky-cracker shit" (97). When Wesley introduces Phoebe, Shanita thinks, "White tub of lard" (138).

When Wesley suggests adding Vernon Jackson to the band, Shanita's first thought is, "Is he white or black?" (138), and when Vernon and his father arrive at Vernon's first practice, she thinks, "Two more pasty-faces" and whispers to her boyfriend, Larry, "This thing getting to be

like the city council" (159). Larry is much more accepting of white people than Shanita but is careful how he behaves when he is around her. The band plays at a university and hayride, and, after a successful number, "Larry reaches over, pats Vernon on the back, catches himself, looks at Shanita" (161). Larry simply wishes to show his approval of Vernon's performance but is uncomfortable doing so in front of Shanita. Shanita's racism is at least as objectionable as that of any white character in Edgerton's work. In fact, her views and behavior preclude any meaningful dialogue between blacks and whites. Her boyfriend would try, but she prohibits him.

Later Wesley tries to write a song about what Jesus would be like if he were alive today "because it's like whatever he'd be would be kind of weird" (170). He decides to describe Jesus as he would not be: "a banker with a white Continental, joined a country club in 1962. He had a house . . . he had a mansion on the lake, played golf once a week . . . Watched Monday Night Football" (170). Vernon, who throughout the novel has had no inhibitions, suggests the line, "Jesus was a ugly nigger woman" (170). In spite of Vernon's explanation that he is simply stating what Jesus is not, Ben, the other young black man in the band becomes angry. However, Wesley sees how the line could work in the song, "It's like Jesus was at the bottom of the barrel. People were spitting on him and stuff, like if

someone was to call you a 'nigger'" (171). To appease Ben, he suggests that "we could put that in about 'honky' too. Then we could say he was a Jew somewhere in there" (172). Lost on all involved is the irony that Jesus was, in fact, a Jew. Wesley sees that black people, like Jesus, have suffered oppression and can see how Vernon's line could be a powerful statement in the song. Ben, however, cannot see past the word "nigger." Both are right, and Edgerton balances their views, revealing the tension ever-present in a South with a history of racism.

In an earlier draft of the novel, the objectionable line was part of one of Wesley's sermons. A parenthetical note in the text of the early draft reveals that Edgerton intended to show the relationship between Wesley's calling Jesus an ugly black woman and Mattie Rigsbee's concern for "the least of these." Wesley preaches,

Us slaves sing to God. We sing sweet chariot,
not clangy fiery metal chariot of the Egyptians.
Oh God, we sing sweet chariot, coming fo--these
are niggers talking, folks. Oh God, oh God. The
voice of God tells me oh sinner. That Jesus is
this: Jesus is this. Jesus is a nigger. Jesus is
a nigger woman. Jesus is a ugly nigger woman.
Oh, yes, Dear God. Jesus is a ugly nigger
lesbian woman. Oh, yes, sing it, Dear God.
Jesus is a ugly nigger lesbian woman with AIDS.

(Clyde Edgerton, The Clyde Edgerton Papers)

This passage makes it obvious that Wesley's intent in including the line in either a sermon or song is not to belittle black people, but to connect Christ and Christ's ministry with the oppressed sections of society. These oppressed could be black people, women, ugly people, or people with AIDS.

Finally Ben, Wesley's roommate, is caught with marijuana, and the way the administration deals with the episode causes Wesley to flee Ballard. At first the administration fears that "This would throw a wrench in everything" (225), alluding to an upcoming performance by the band. However, they soon decide that "There may be a way to maximize on this thing. Every part of it. In fact, this could be a blessing in disguise" (225). They decide that "Benfield comes out of it clean," that they will emphasize "Benfield's faith and [Ballard's] influence [on Benfield's faith]," and that they will "close that place down" (225). Stan Laurence eavesdrops on the administration's discussion of the topic and writes Wesley a note, warning him of what is about to happen. Wesley decides that he cannot "just sit there and watch [Ben] get carted off after we finish that gig" (227). Ballard intends to use Ben's arrest as an excuse to close BOTA House and, in doing so, end its liability both legally and from a public relations standpoint. It will no longer need

to worry about running a halfway house where black criminals are housed, nor will it be responsible for the band with two black members. When Wesley finds out about this, he arranges to flee with Ben and the other members of the band.

In summary, Edgerton deals with a number of facets of racism in Killer Diller. He examines the close relationship between racism and organized religion in the South, showing how Ned and Ted Sears, the twins who run Ballard University, a Baptist University, are always worried about how the young black men at BOTA House affect their public relations. For the first time, Edgerton also examines black racism, showing how Shanita hates all white people and adopts a stance which disallows any dialogue between the races. Finally, Wesley Benfield must confront the university's racism and racism in general. Wesley is quick to see that black people have been oppressed. Furthermore, he understands that Christ's ministry aimed to relieve oppression and upset the establishment--especially established religion such as represented by Ballard University. When he finds that Ben is to be arrested while he is to be used as an example of everything that is good about Ballard, he cannot play along and arranges the escape of both Ben and himself.

Southern attitudes about race are also a concern of Edgerton's most recent novel In Memory of Junior. He has a

number of characters who express a distrust of the way that Southern culture is changing. When Bette Bales, brother of the dying Glenn Bales, asks her nephew Morgan whether or not he likes an airplane his father has recently bought, he responds, "Yeah." She thinks,

If the government hadn't started that integration, that boy might have been taught to say, "Yes ma'am." . . . When they started messing with . . . people's habits and manners and likes and *personal* dislikes and *personal* preferences, and started mixing the races, they went too far. (72)

Bette reveals her dislike of black people here, blaming integration for what she perceives as Morgan's disrespect. She also exhibits the typically-Southern attitudes of individualism and defiance of authority. The government, as far as she is concerned, has no business trying to legislate against her *personal* likes and dislikes.

This distrust of changing attitudes about race reappears near the end of the novel when Tate, Morgan, Uncle Grove, and Jimmy go on a fishing trip. Jimmy mentions that he has recently read a newspaper article about "this group of feminists and abstractionists or some such at Duke University who are trying to cut out everything that dead white males have ever done" (175). While Jimmy is certainly overstating the goals of

revisionist historians and those who would attempt to change the literary canon, from his point of view, "These professors are trying to actually destroy all of civilization" (175). Jimmy argues that dead white males are "the very ones that's done everything that's ever been done that's important" (176). He lists as examples Columbus, George Washington, and "hell, I don't know, George Jones" (176). He claims that, over history, while men were forming the basis of civilization, "women were at home having babies and cleaning up baby doo-doo and dusting pianos," "yellow people were all eating with chopsticks and plowing rice with these oxes, and the black people . . . were all whooping it up around some campfire in Africa" (176). Finally, he gets to the heart of the matter, his fear that "If they kill off the dead white men, where is that going to leave the live ones--with, I mean, you know, what kind of power base" (176). He has written Jesse Helms a letter about the matter.

In his ranting, Jimmy has revealed a number of his prejudices--against women, blacks, and Orientals. At the same time, he is a spokesman for an entire group of people who are experiencing a backlash against rapid changes that threaten the power base that white men have always had. Edgerton himself jokingly expresses this fear, including this short letter in his notes on the novel:

Dear Editor,

Dead males of Southern Literature? Dead
males? . . .

I've gone to great pains to get a dead male
in each of my novels so I could be a part of that
great tradition. (Clyde Edgerton, *The Clyde
Edgerton Papers*)

While Edgerton is only playing with a humorous theme which
he later develops in *In Memory of Junior*, he expresses here
a fear experienced by many white people, and particularly
men, who see the power base that they have always relied on
deteriorating.

Morgan Bales, Tate's son, represents a younger
generation of Southerner who does not share the attitudes
about race--or other prejudices for that matter--held by
most of his relatives. Morgan enjoys Uncle Grove's
stories, but when his Uncle Grove refers to a "nigger"
while telling a story about bird hunting, Morgan corrects
him: "They are not 'niggers.' They are people
They are African-Americans" (139). Uncle Grove simply
responds, "I call them niggers" (139), and continues his
story as if the issue is of no importance. Morgan notices
that his father, Tate, a college professor, doesn't correct
Uncle Grove.

Edgerton also develops two black characters in the
novel, one humorous and the other the model of consistency.
The first is Bill, a black man with an eye that looks off

to the side. He and four of his friends are standing around looking for work when Uncle Grove and Morgan drive up. Grove is searching for someone to help him dig a grave. After haggling over wages, Grove and Bill finally agree on three dollars and twenty-five cents an hour with a bonus later. Bill reports, "Old white man figure he got him a nigger now" (131), and, in fact, Grove probably did go searching for a black man for this particular job because he wants someone who is not a part of his own family and community. Grove plans to kill himself; Bill's bonus is that he is to be paid fifty dollars for burying Grove the next day. However, Grove changes his mind and decides to live, leading Bill to "wonder about the peoples I get work with" (156). Bill is not a particularly strong character; he is, in fact, a stereotype of the shiftless, unemployed black man. However, he is at least self-aware enough to understand how Grove views him.

On the other hand, Gloria, the practical nurse for Glenn and Laura Bales, who both lie dying, is the model of quiet good sense and consistency, reminiscent of Dilsey in The Sound and the Fury. Edgerton uses her as a disinterested outsider who reflects on the dissension in the Bales family. Sometimes Gloria wishes she were white so she could have an easier life, but she reflects, "most time I realize if I was white how much I'd miss out on" (27). In fact, as an outsider to the family and someone

who can be depended on to keep to herself, she is privy to secrets about the family that even other family members don't know. Just as Bill is chosen for Uncle Grove's gravedigging expedition because he is black, Gloria's blackness and her role as a caregiver make her someone that family members will confide in.

Therefore, In Memory of Junior reveals a wide variety of attitudes about race in the South. Bette Bales, Uncle Grove, and Jimmy all demean black people and resist the changes that they perceive as being foisted upon them. On the other hand, Morgan Bales represents a younger generation which sees itself as more enlightened and speaks against intolerance. Edgerton also develops two black characters in the novel who represent different aspects of the black experience in the South. Bill tries to make just enough money to get by and picks up odd jobs. Gloria, on the other hand, is a model of good sense and consistency and serves as a foil to the petty nonsense of the Bales family and its dissension.

In summary, Edgerton's novels portray a South where attitudes about race have long been a source of tension and continue to be so. In The Floatplane Notebooks, he describes the attitudes of white people and the plight of black people during the Civil War and Reconstruction. Zuba, a black sharecropper, is hanged for a crime committed by William Copeland, and at least two characters who know

that Zuba is innocent allow this lynching to occur. Harper McGuire, a young white man, falls in love with a black woman and is beaten by his father even though he knows that his father has also been the woman's lover.

In the present South, much of the tension about racism occurs along generational boundaries. Several older characters represent traditional white Southern attitudes about race, using the word "nigger" often and railing against the changes they see occurring in their society. In Raney, Raney and her family represent these attitudes. Aunt Naomi complains about integrated beaches and extols the virtue of everyone staying in his or her own place. Uncle Nate describes black people as malodorous, ugly, unkempt, and lazy. In The Floatplane Notebooks, most of the Copeland family have similar attitudes. Albert chastises Meredith and Mark for changing races after they get black smoke on their faces, and Thatcher derides the black friends of both Meredith and Noralee. In In Memory of Junior, Aunt Bette lectures on the evils of integration while Uncle Grove consistently refers to black people in a disparaging manner.

On the other hand, all five of Edgerton's novels contain younger characters or characters who are new to Southern communities who challenge community norms regarding racism. In Raney this character is Charles. Possessing a college education and coming from Atlanta, he

has a hard time adjusting to the attitudes Raney and her family have regarding race. He makes some small strides toward getting Raney to change her vocabulary when referring to black people and even convinces her to allow Johnny Dobbs, a black friend of Charles, to become the godfather of their child. In Walking Across Egypt, Elaine Rigsbee, a professional woman who has moved away from Listre, finds herself in a room in her mother's house where everyone is deriding black people. She is not as confrontational as Charles; she simply takes refuge in the bathroom to wait the discussion out. In The Floatplane Notebooks, Noralee Copeland finds herself attracted to a young black man but will not date him because she fears what her father will say. Instead of challenging this prejudice directly, she takes a safer method of rebelling against her family's standards, dating a "hippee." In Killer Diller, Wesley Benfield rejects the institutionalized racism of Ballard University, a Baptist college, learning instead to connect Christ's ministry to "the least of these" to the downtrodden in his community, especially black people. Finally, in In Memory of Junior, Morgan Bales challenges his uncle's use of derogatory terms to refer to black people.

Edgerton also examines the role that religious institutions have played in perpetuating racism in the South. In Raney, Raney often speaks of the importance of

the church in her life and of her personal relationship with Christ but is slow to let go of her demeaning attitudes about black people. In Walking Across Egypt, Dodson Clark, a deacon in the church, insists that anyone inside the church had better be Caucasian. In Killer Diller, the administrators of Ballard University are proud to be a part of an innovative alliance with BOTA House, a halfway house, but always weigh the advantages against the public relations liability, expressing special concern about the black criminals there. When one of the young black men is caught with marijuana, they decide the liability is too dangerous and end the relationship.

Finally, in his most recent two novels, Edgerton provides a range of black characters and examines their responses to living in the South. In Killer Diller, Shanita is a black racist, hating all white people and discouraging her boyfriend from becoming friends with the white members of the band he plays in. Black characters in In Memory of Junior are not so militant in their hatred of white people as Shanita but are aware of their special role in society. Bill is aware that Uncle Grove has picked him to help dig a grave because he is outside of white society and that his working for Grove fulfills a need in Grove to maintain superiority over black people. Similarly, Gloria, nursemaid to Glenn and Laura Bales, realizes that she is privy to many family secrets because she is a black person

who can be depended on not to meddle in family matters.

In conclusion, the South's treatment of its black inhabitants has been a problem for centuries. Prior to the Civil War, Southern landowners used black men as slaves. After the Civil War and the abolition of slavery, Southern white hatred of black men only intensified. White superiority over black men, which had once been primarily an economic concern, became a matter of regional identity. White Southerners seemed determined to show that even the losing of a war would not cause them to accept black people as their equals. Discrimination in almost every facet of life continued until the Civil Rights Movement and even beyond. Unfortunately, even the Southern churches played a role in maintaining white superiority over black men and women. The church stressed individual salvation over societal concerns and, at its best, had little to say about racism. At its worst, it was an outspoken proponent of racism. Edgerton portrays the importance of a distinctive Protestant religion in the South, as well as its relationship to Southern racism, throughout his novels.

Chapter V

Religion

The importance of religion and the conservative nature of that religion are other factors characteristic of the South. Carl N. Degler, in Place Over Time: The Continuity of Southern Distinctiveness, states that the South is the most religious region of the country and that this religion is distinctive because of its conservative nature and because of the seriousness with which Southerners approach religion (22-23). John Shelton Reed, in his study The Enduring South: Subcultural Persistence in Mass Society, agrees, arguing that the religion of the South is "monolithically Protestant" and that even the Protestantism of the South is distinctive from that of other regions and is remarkably homogeneous (57). Dennis E. Owen, in his essay on Protestantism in Encyclopedia of Southern Culture, suggests that the distinctive Southern religious pattern "results from a combination of geography (America's early and hence formative frontier), economic conditions (extremes of plantation wealth, slavery, and rural poverty), great mobility . . . and a fierce individualism" (4:63).

Samuel S. Hill examines the distinctiveness of Southern religion in his essay on religion in Encyclopedia of Southern Culture. Like Degler, Reed, and Owen, he concludes that "The American South perpetuates a

distinctive type of religion. Although different from forms of Christianity found elsewhere only in degree, the degree is decisive" (4:12-13). Hill identifies four common convictions which define a "normative southern religious position" (4:3). First, "The Bible is the sole reference point of belief and practice." Second, all people have direct and dynamic access to God. Third, "Morality is defined in individualistic and personal terms." Fourth is the informal nature of worship (4:3).

Hill's first point is the centrality of the Bible to religious belief and practice. Charles H. Lippy, in his Bibliography of Religion in the South, proposes the importance of an inerrantist position to Southern religion: "In popular perception at least, insistence on the inerrancy of Scripture and on a literal interpretation of the Bible are regarded as keystones of religious orthodoxy and often seen as basic to fundamentalism" (487). Carl N. Degler believes that both the conservative nature of Southern religion and the South's fondness for a literal interpretation of the Bible have their roots in the slavery issue. He points out that "At one time in the early nineteenth century the South contained the beginnings of religious radicalism in the form of Unitarianism" (60). However, by the beginning of the Civil War, Unitarianism had disappeared from the South (61). Degler argues that this reversal can be explained by an important issue in

Southern society:

Since a literal interpretation of the Bible gave little or no support to an abolitionist position, it is not surprising that antislavery people in order to use Christianity *against* slavery resorted to an interpretative or metaphorical exegesis of the Bible. It is not accidental therefore, that southerners should become increasingly fond of a literal interpretation of the Bible just as they found a narrow construction of the Constitution useful in defending slavery. Under such constraints a highly interpretative form of Christianity like Unitarianism could hardly have flourished in the late antebellum South. (61)

Therefore, Degler connects the South's predilection for a literal reading of the Bible to its attempt to defend slavery.

Another of Hill's common convictions that define a normative Southern religious position is the importance of individualistic morality as opposed to a concern for social issues. In fact, evangelism, the push to convert or save individuals, has been the major thrust of religion in the South. Walter B. Shurden, in his article on the Southern Baptist Convention in Encyclopedia of Religion in the South, argues that "Evangelism has been the salient

denominational characteristic in this century" (723).

Charles H. Lippy extends the importance of evangelism to all religion in the South: "The evangelical dimension cut across institutional lines, creating more similarities than differences in the everyday beliefs and practices of white Southerners regardless of their denominational affiliations" (25).

The importance of evangelism and individual morality to religion in the South has often precluded a concern for social issues. Just as Degler shows the link between an inerrantist position and a defense of slavery, Lippy links the disengagement of the church from secular matters to the race question:

One could argue that the conscious or unconscious efforts of the white community to perpetuate distinct white and black societies, with the latter kept clearly subordinate to the former, may themselves have been central to the dominance of a Protestantism that stressed personal conversion and saw ethical issues almost exclusively through individualistic lenses. (24)

In his study Religion and the Solid South, Samuel S. Hill also speaks of Southern religion's conservative position with regard to Southern culture, alluding to "the role of religion as conservator and reinforcer of, as distinct from agent for change within, popular (white) southern culture"

(22). Hill also points out the irony that a religion that calls for change on an individual level has been a primary agent of conservatism in social matters: "It is one of the major ironies of ecclesiastical and American social history that a religious tradition so desirous of being change-oriented should serve as a powerful force in keeping tradition intact for so many decades" (Religion and the Solid South 22).

Walter B. Shurden traces several characteristics of Baptists in the South to their early days on a new frontier. After the American Revolution, many Baptists traveled across the Appalachian Mountains. Shurden suggests that "The frontier became fertile soil for Baptist growth, intensifying Baptist individualism in ethics, congregationalism in church life, revivalism in ministry style, and simplicity in worship patterns" (720-721). Bruce D. Dickson, in his essay on "Influence of Frontier" in Encyclopedia of Religion in the South, examines this question in more detail and extends its scope to include all Southern religion. He stresses that frontier life was hard and that this had important theological implications: "Not only was that [frontier] life physically hard, but it was characterized by powerful economic and social frustrations as many people moved about the South in search of good lands and an opportunity for prosperity" (274). He proposes, "In religious individualism and otherworldliness

. . . believers found alternate goals to those which, in this world, were so easily frustrated" (274).

Dickson notes that frontier churches also served as "frontier moral courts," often substituting for secular courts. He relates this to what he refers to as the "'petty moralism' of the Southern understanding of Christian ethics" (274). Like Lippy and Hill, he connects an emphasis on individual morality to a lack of concern for social evils:

Disinclined, given their individualistic and otherworldly theology, to identify sinfulness in deep-seated social ills, the churches chose to fight such private sins as gambling, drinking, dancing, and shady business practices, rather than those that might have represented problems inherent in the social order. The emphasis was on the individual's living right in a sinful world, so that frontier churches gave little attention to changing the world itself. This moral focus continues to dominate Southern religious life. (274)

Like Dickson, Samuel S. Hill notes the "virtual equation of Christian holiness with abstinence from personal vices" (Religion and the Solid South 21) as a characteristic of Southern religion. Dickson goes on to relate the emotion and anti-intellectualism of Southern religion to its

development on the frontier. He proposes that church members valued personal religious experience more than they did ideas: "Indeed, many frontier believers strongly opposed the establishment of seminaries and the employment of an educated clergy, because of their appreciation of experience over learning" (275). Dennis E. Owen argues that this characteristic persists, positing that what is central to Southern preaching is "emotive, rhetorically persuasive preaching designed to produce personal crisis and conversion" (4:63-64).

Therefore, the religion of the South was shaped in important ways by its origins on the trans-Appalachian frontier and by its accommodation of the institution of slavery and the racial attitudes that persisted well beyond emancipation. In fact, religion in the South changed only in small ways well into the twentieth century. Glenn T. Miller treats the Southern response to modernism, a style of theology "that attempted to adjust traditional religious doctrines to the intellectual demands of the modern world, especially to biological evolution and historical-critical study of Scripture" (4:51). He reports, "For many southerners, resistance to modernism was a central element of their faith" (4:52). Thus, we see that religion in the South has been resistant to change.

On the other hand, as all other areas of Southern distinctiveness, the uniqueness of Southern religion may be

slowly disappearing. Glenn T. Miller argues that, given the other important changes in the region, "It seems likely that the distinctiveness of southern Protestantism and culture will become increasingly difficult to preserve" (4:66). Hill states the case more dramatically: "The region's pervasive Evangelical Protestantism, a mixture of positive and negative influences in the past, shows the barest promise of serving southern people well under the conditions of a new cultural situation" (Religion and the Solid South 181).

Clyde Edgerton depicts the distinctiveness of religion in the South, as well as the growing segment who find the South's traditional religion untenable, throughout his five novels. He provides a range of characters who represent the normative Southern religion; he also provides a range of characters who challenge that norm, some to greater degrees, some to lesser. Edgerton examines institutionalized religion, revealing the hypocrisy of local congregations and the bureaucracy of Christian universities. After the publication of his first novel, Raney, Edgerton encountered contractual problems with Campbell University, a Baptist university, and this certainly played a role in the writing of his fourth novel, Killer Diller, in which he lampoons a fictional Baptist University. Edgerton also examines the problems of equating patriotism and economic success to religious

righteousness. Finally, in spite of Hill's propositions that the Bible is central to Southern religion and that morality is defined in personal terms, Edgerton's fictional world is a place where social norms often take the place of and, in fact, are often mistaken for spiritual values.

In Edgerton's first novel, Raney, religion is an enduring source of tension between Charles and Raney. Raney is a faithful member of Bethel Free Will Baptist Church and is fundamental and dogmatic in her approach to religion. Charles, on the other hand, demonstrates modernism in his religious views. Charles does not readily accept absolute answers and believes that all values are conditioned by the cultures in which they occur. Raney is disappointed that, after their marriage, Charles does not quickly adapt to the doctrines of her church. In fact, after only a few weeks, he stops attending church with Raney, and Raney is embarrassed when Deacon Brooks suggests that "since Charles was a Methodist he must think he's too good for Free Will Baptists" (23). If Raney is surprised by Charles' disinterest in her church, Charles is just as surprised by just how dogmatic and inflexible Raney is in her beliefs.

Charles's disagreements with Raney about religion soon extend to her family. As the family travels during its annual vacation trip to the beach, Charles argues with Aunt Naomi, who tells a story about how her church has recently

"voted out" their pastor for visiting a woman when he claimed to be visiting his brother. Charles suggests, "It's possible that Jesus would have forgiven him. After all, he forgave a prostitute." Aunt Naomi's only response is "Well, I don't know about that." Raney thinks, "I've been going to church since I was born and I don't remember anything about Jesus forgiving a prostitute" (39). In a later scene, Charles and his mother argue with Raney's family over a Sunday dinner that prostitution is a victimless crime, and should have a low priority as far as law enforcement is concerned. Aunt Naomi's response epitomizes the family's reasoning: "I don't know what victims has to do with all this. . . . You don't need a victim to break the word of God" (80).

These episodes reveal important differences between Raney and Charles. Raney and her Aunt Naomi believe in a strict set of guidelines for behavior, what Bruce D. Dickson has referred to as "petty moralism." When a standard for behavior is broken, punishment naturally follows. Charles, on the other hand, believes that, while the preacher may have done wrong, Christ taught forgiveness.

The argument about religion is continued on the return trip from the beach. Raney's mother picks up a pamphlet in a drug store about "having a Christian home and the husband's role and the wife's role" (55) and begins to read it aloud. Although Raney thinks that it makes good sense,

Charles argues that customs were different in Bible times. Raney believes that Charles is missing the point, and, in fact, both are missing the point. Charles will not listen and learn what Raney and her family expect of him; neither will Raney or her family listen to Charles explain that customs and beliefs are relative to the cultures that hold them. Ironically, Raney thinks that Charles is delivering "a sermon right there in the back seat" (55). Certainly Raney's mother is also sermonizing, but the methods of reasoning of the two are so different that both fail to perceive the inflexible didactic tone of their own position.

When Charles's mother comes to visit Charles and Raney, Mrs. Shepherd wants to attend Eucharist at an Episcopal church. Charles and his mother convince Raney to go with them, and Raney is as uncomfortable there as Charles has been at the Free Will Baptist Church. Raney is surprised at how poorly the Episcopalians sing, that the priest wears a robe with a butterfly on the back--"A house of worship is no place to play Halloween" (72)--and that the Episcopalians drink real wine as part of communion. Raney is most surprised that "the very thing you come to church to hear" (72), a sermon, is not a part of the service: "The priest talked about three minutes on hope and people in the ghettos, which may have been a sermon to him, but not to me" (72). After the service, Charles reports

that he had liked it because it was "formal," but to Raney it had simply been confusing. Samuel S. Hill's article on religion in Encyclopedia of Southern Culture supports Edgerton's depiction of Raney's discomfort with the Episcopalian service. Hill states that one example of the dominance of the evangelical strand of religion in the South is "finding fault with the Episcopalian church because it practices formal worship" (5).

Religious differences become so important that Raney and Charles separate for a brief time after the suicide of Raney's Uncle Nate. Charles is appalled that Raney's mother ignored the advice of the VA hospital to take Uncle Nate, an alcoholic, to a psychiatrist for treatment and, instead, tells him "to rely on the Lord" (133). Charles tells Raney that Uncle Nate had suffered from depression and "Given the self-righteousness of . . . of fundamental Christianity in this family, your Uncle Nate didn't have a chance" (143). Raney packs her things and goes to stay with her Aunt Flossie, accusing Charles of throwing out "all this garbage psychiatric crap" (144).

In spite of their vastly different religious beliefs, Charles and Raney are able to compromise in this area at the end of the novel. After Raney becomes pregnant, Charles mentions that he would like to have the child baptized at the Episcopal church in White Level. Raney has two immediate objections. First, she, as a member of a

Free Will Baptist Church, does not believe in infant baptism. Second, she doesn't want her "own flesh and blood" (222-223) baptized in an Episcopal church, which is "against some of the very things we [Free Will Baptists] believe in most" (223). Charles and Raney, revealing how far they have come in learning to compromise, agree to sit down and have a long talk about the problem and listen to each other. And they do reach a compromise on this issue, for the book ends with a newspaper report of the child's baptism in the Hansen County Pilot. The child is baptized at the Episcopal church with both sets of parents present, and the baptism is immediately followed by a reception at Bethel Free Will Baptist Church (227).

Soon after the publication of Raney, Edgerton found himself embroiled in controversy at Campbell University, where he was currently teaching. March 1, 1985, Edgerton received a letter from Dr. Walter Barge, Campbell's acting dean, requesting a conference to discuss a couple of matters of mutual interest. When Edgerton called to ask about the nature of the meeting, Dr. Barge told Edgerton that he had "several ambivalences about the book" and that the book "might cause some pressures from down East," referring to the Baptist State Convention. Edgerton suggests, "It was a political problem. [There] was a fund-raising problem probably related to that book that I can only guess about" (Clyde Edgerton, Personal Interview,

5 April 1993).

On March 6, when Edgerton met with Dr. Barge and Dr. Wallace, Dr. Barge expressed concern about three "messages" conveyed by the book: "1) the book caricatured part of the Body of Christ; 2) in it there was a clash between the old and the new, with the former being laid aside and replaced by the latter; and 3) alcohol was used as a catalyst" (Megivern). According to "Publish and Perish" which appeared in the May 10 Publisher's Weekly, a fear was expressed that "portions of his novel might be read out loud on the floor of the Baptist State Convention and that the speaker might then put the question to Campbell's president, Norman A. Wiggins: 'How does this novel further the purpose of Campbell University?'" (225). Dr. Barge asked Edgerton to answer this question. According to Edgerton, "I asked them if my answer to that question would effect what my contract might be, and the answer was 'Yes'" (Clyde Edgerton, Personal Interview, 5 April 1993).

Edgerton later decided not to try to answer the question of how his novel furthered the purpose of Campbell University; instead, he suggested that Dr. Barge "go to the readers of the book. Within the readers is where the book, the art, bears its fruit, and you need to go there" (Clyde Edgerton, Personal Interview, 5 April 1993). On March 30, Edgerton received his contract, which included neither a raise nor the tenure which he expected. On April 4,

Edgerton presented his case before the faculty senate and asked for the formation of an ad hoc committee to study the situation. The faculty senate voted against a motion by Dr. Barge to deny Edgerton's motion. They then voted seven to three in favor of Edgerton's motion with three members abstaining. It was ruled that the seven votes were not sufficient to approve the motion, for that number did not represent two-thirds of the members present. It was later discovered that the by-laws called only for two-thirds of those present and voting. However, before the matter could be brought back to the senate, Edgerton had resigned. The Campbell Senate did pass a motion that "Dr. Edgerton pursue normal procedure in good faith and for all to be sensitive to his needs" (Megivern). On April 9, Edgerton signed his contract; however, on May 24, he submitted a letter of resignation, complaining that the academic freedom question had never been dealt with.

As for the three "messages" that Dr. Barge found in the book, there can be little argument that the third is accurate: "alcohol was used as a catalyst." Raney does have two glasses of white wine at the Ramada before having intercourse with Charles in the feed room of her father's store and reports, "It was like something was melting to a gold-yellow color--and I just don't know how to explain this, but I wanted to sit on a feed bag in my underwear" (210). In fact, one of Edgerton's concerns in his revising

was how to make this scene a fulfillment of Raney's character and not a change of character. He wanted to make Raney the initiator in the final scene, and alcohol is a means of achieving this. He has Raney buy some wine for cooking, drink some wine at the home of her friend Madora, and drink wine with Charles at church to help prepare the reader for the episode in the feed room.

However, the other two messages are not so obvious. The first is that "the book caricatured part of the Body of Christ," that is, that the book belittled Free Will Baptists and their belief structure. Edgerton was aware that this was a trap into which he could fall, and avoiding it was another of his concerns during revision. In an early letter to his editor Shannon Ravenel, he suggested that two major concerns are "balance in Raney" and "balance in the book." In his notes, he wrote that he would try to avoid satirizing Raney--"to show the overall 'try' inside Raney and get the book less 'one-sided.'" Certainly, much of the humor in the book does derive from the provincial attitudes of Raney and her family. Raney's consistent use of malapropisms was a problem for at least one critic while others, such as George Core, claim that Edgerton "has not only learned the English language but mastered its conversational idioms" (11). In fact, critics note the positive aspects of Raney's character as often as the laughable. A review in Publishers Weekly claims that the

novel makes readers smile "at the artful innocence of the bride and the smart-aleck liberalism of the groom" (60). Certainly Raney appears at least as admirable as Charles in this description. And Raney is no caricature, for the same review reports that "the two central characters perceptibly develop and the other members of the small cast are given dimension and personality" (60). Carol Verderese concurs, "Raney grows during her first year of marriage and many of her views soften. . . . We are both appalled by Raney's provincial attitudes and awed by her simple wisdom. . . . Her exploration of life's limitations and possibilities is as poignant as it is funny" (21). Perhaps the strongest statement along these lines comes from Chuck Moss of the Detroit News:

What really distinguishes this novel is its warmth and amused tolerance. This could easily be a wicked satire, slashing at ignorant Crackers or the primly liberal bourgeoisie. Instead, Edgerton draws all his people with sympathy, acceptance and comic affection. (149)

Thus, that the novel caricatures a part of the body of Christ is problematic; while much of the humor does derive from Raney's provincial attitudes, she is a complex and dynamic character and even her family members are "given dimension and personality."

The final message, that "there was a clash between the

old and the new, with the former being laid aside and replaced by the latter," is not supported by the novel, not to mention being a curious reason to withhold a contract, even at a religious institution such as Campbell University. Yes, Raney does change during the novel; her views moderate and she begins to imagine viewpoints which were foreign to her before. However, very little or none of her "former" world is "laid aside." She still lives in a small community, relies heavily on her family who live nearby, and attends a Free Will Baptist Church. She changes, but so does Charles. He begins to adapt to life in Bethel, taking great pride in his own Southern cooking and learning to enjoy the stories of Aunt Flossie. He even learns to enjoy his visits with Raney's family on Sundays, playing music and helping teach Norris to play banjo. One of Edgerton's goals in revision was to create more balance in the book, and he succeeded. In the end, it is clear that the answer for Charles and Raney is not for her to accede to him on every point, but that the two learn to compromise, sharing the strengths of the old and the new. The announcement of the birth of their child on the final page of the novel is filled with evidence that the two have learned to compromise, not that Charles and the "new" have won out.

Edgerton's second novel, Walking Across Egypt, also has a religious theme. In fact, the book's title is

derived from a hymn, also by Edgerton. The central metaphor of the hymn is that contemporary believers, like the Israelites of the Old Testament, are on a journey across an alien land, albeit with Christ's constant presence as a guide and help. When Mattie learns about Wesley Benfield, a sixteen-year old boy who is in the YMRC (Young Men's Rehabilitation Center), she decides to feed him, fulfilling Christ's admonition in Matthew 25:40 to care for "the least of these my brethren." Later, when Wesley escapes from the YMRC, he comes to her house for food and shelter. She takes him to church, hoping "This could be the first step on his road to salvation" (131). However, at Sunday school he is recognized as an escapee by someone in Mattie's Sunday school class. He tries to escape again, stealing a car from the church parking lot. However, before he leaves for good, he drives to Mattie's for Sunday lunch, and it is there that he is caught by the sheriff and his deputy.

After Wesley is taken away by the sheriff, Mattie and her son Robert, whom Mattie had once hoped would become a preacher, argue about what she has done. Mattie argues that church was the best place for Wesley, and Robert asks, "What's that going to do for him?" (184). Mattie starts to quote a verse from Matthew--"Whatso ye do not to one of the least of these ye do not do unto me"--and Robert tells her that he had "listened to what Matthew said for twenty-three

years" (185). When Robert asks if Matthew says when to stop, Mattie answers, "No. Not that I know of" (185). This disagreement between Mattie and her son is typical of Edgerton's fiction, where the younger generation often questions the values, spiritual and otherwise, of their parents. In Raney, it is Charles who questions the spiritual values of Raney and her family. In Walking Across Egypt, it is Mattie's son who questions these values.

While Mattie may be the representative of traditional Southern religion in the novel, Edgerton also depicts her as someone who can think for herself. When Alora, Mattie's next-door neighbor, is explaining to Mattie why she keeps a gun under her pillow, Edgerton takes a swipe at conservative religion and at the same time allows Mattie to escape as someone with simple good sense. Alora says she is afraid that a secular humanist will break in her bedroom and start doing some secular things. Neither Mattie nor Alora understands secular humanism, and to Mattie's credit, she decides, "I'm not going to worry about them" (204). This simple statement is reminiscent of Raney's observation that if Charles thinks skin color doesn't matter, he must not have been paying attention to the low condition that black people live in. Of Raney and Mattie's ability to occasionally cut through the arguments of their better-educated foes with simple common sense, Edgerton

suggests,

I think [they] probably [have] a lack of fear in the world. I think if I had to write the history of both of these people, they were loved when they were growing up in ways that they felt secure, so they feel secure in a way that they can be creative in their thinking. (Clyde Edgerton, Personal Interview, 5 April 1993)

As a foil to Mattie's ministry-centered religion, Edgerton portrays the hypocrisy of her church when it decides that Mattie should be relieved of her duties as vice-president of the Sunday School class and coordinator of the Lottie Moon drive because of the scandal that she becomes involved in with Wesley. Clarence Vernon, the head deacon, thinks,

It would be best for her to give up the Lottie Moon until the whole business blew over--until all charges of wrong doing had settled down appropriately. . . . He'd be sure to ask her opinion about the whole thing. But his calling was not to Mattie Rigsbee, it was to higher offices; Duty, the Church, God. (214)

Mattie is not to be sanctioned for any spiritual failing; rather, she is punished for causing a stir. Mr. Vernon wants the scandal to die. While he intends to consult Mattie, he has already made his decision in the name of his

trinity: "Duty, the Church, God."

Ironically, it is Mattie, in many ways the stereotype of the aging Southern woman, who is the source of much of the tension between old and new in this novel. She decides to adopt a juvenile delinquent, for the Bible doesn't say when to stop "doing unto the least of these." Her insistence on helping Wesley Benfield flies in the face of opposition from her children and friends who believe she is losing her mind, and her church, who consider taking the Lottie Moon drive away from her because of her questionable dealing with Wesley. As in Raney, the novel generates many laughs at the expense of Mattie and her type, but Edgerton also champions Mattie. She may be set in her ways, but she is more admirable than her opinionated children and sanctimonious church members. Indeed, in her thinking she is perhaps younger and more progressive than her younger neighbors and fellow church-goers, perhaps even younger than her liberated daughter Elaine. It is Mattie, after all, who is the most free to do what she wants.

Religion is important in both Raney and Walking Across Egypt, but a close study of these books reveals that social norms are often as important or more important to the primary spokesmen for Southern religion in these two books, Raney and Mattie Rigsbee, as spiritual values are. Several scholars have noted the existence of a Southern civil religion. Dennis E. Owen proclaims that "Southern

Protestantism and southern culture are as inseparable as bourbon and fruitcake" (4:63). Glenn T. Miller links this civil religion to the defeat of the South in the Civil War. He believes that, after the war, Southerners sought new ways to express loyalty to their cause, and a civil religion was the result: "An amalgamation of sentimentality, conservatism, and southern identity took place--a southern civil religion--that inhibited intellectual change and adventure" (4:51). Charles Reagan Wilson agrees in Baptized in Blood: the Religion of the Lost Cause, 1865-1920. He writes, "In the post-Civil War and twentieth century South, a set of values existed which could be designated a Southern Way of Life. These values constituted the basis for a Southern civil religion" (12). It often seems that this civil religion, and not a set of spiritual values, is what motivates Raney and Mattie.

Religion is a strong force in Raney's life; however, the way she responds to religious questions reveals that her religion is at least as grounded in cultural norms as it is in any spiritual values. When Charles' mother comes to visit, she decides to attend a local Episcopal Church and invites Raney and Charles to accompany her. Raney says she doesn't think she could go to an Episcopal church, citing their use of wine at the Lord's supper as one reason. When Mrs. Shepherd reminds her that Jesus drank and turned water into wine, Raney responds, "I don't think

so. . . . That was grape juice," and argues that the men in her church, who have "probably studied the Bible over a hundred years," have decided that it was grape juice (65-66). This episode reveals that community norms appear to be more sacrosanct than scripture itself to Raney. Raney and her church have managed to create a God in their own image, one that certainly would not drink. Raney even indirectly questions Jesus's power: "It had to be grape juice because it didn't have time to ferment" (65). This exchange is reminiscent of Raney's reaction when Charles claimed that Christ forgave a prostitute. It says a great deal about Raney's culture and about her church that she could go to church her entire life without hearing that Christ forgave a prostitute. This seems to support Wesley Benfield's assertion in Killer Diller that "there are two Bibles--the one in church and the one between the covers" (182-3). These episodes reveal that while Raney often refers to what the Bible says, it is not the ultimate source of authority in her life--social norms are at least as important.

Later, when Raney asks Charles why he is not more amicable with her friends, Charles suggests that Raney's friends "are not interested in anything outside their kitchen, living room, and bedroom" (70). In a wonderful non sequitur, Raney responds that "Madora and Larry go to Bethel Free Will Baptist Church. Don't tell me that Jesus

Christ is only in their kitchen, living room, and bedroom" (70). Charles tries to reason with her: "The whole problem is just that: Jesus wouldn't have a kitchen, living room, and bedroom" (70). Raney responds by referring to community norms: "He would if he lived in Bethel" (70). Again we see that Raney does not understand the radical nature of Christ's ministry; instead, she worships a cultural norm, transmuting Christ into an ideal citizen of Bethel.

When Raney becomes pregnant, Charles suggests that when the child is born they should get it baptized. Raney is once again taken aback. Her first misgivings are theological: "A baby can't think, so how in the world could a baby make a decision about Jesus?" (222). However, she soon reaffirms that cultural norms and defined absolutes take precedence even over theological matters, reasoning that "the main reason not to have our baby baptized is that Free Will Baptists do not have babies baptized" (222). Raney repeatedly refers to the primacy of her experience with Christ and of her loyalty to her church; however, when she is faced with ideological questions, she reverts quickly to the way things are in her community or to answers she has blindly accepted from authorities rather than referring to any spiritual or theological principle.

Mattie Rigsbee's overriding concern for social norms takes the form of a profound respect for correct

appearances. When she falls through a bottomless chair and finds herself trapped, she is more concerned with being found watching the soap opera than with getting free: "What if Alora comes in the back door and sees me watching this program?" (11). Then a greater fear yet strikes her: she sees her unwashed dishes and thinks, "I've got to get up. She will know I came over here to sit down before I did my dishes" (11). And, in fact, when the dogcatcher arrives and hears her cries for help, she makes him wash the dishes before he frees her from the chair. In a transformation of the admonition not to go out of the house with dirty underwear, Mattie makes an important decision while she is stuck in the chair: she decides to change her routine lest "she *died* one day during the hour her dishes were dirty" (12).

When Mattie considers whether Wesley and Lamar Benfield are Christians, she decides that Wesley isn't, for she has previously found a letter written by him which includes the word Shits. She also has her doubts about Lamar, for "the way he kept his hat on in the house indicated something, a lack of something" (86). Mattie's respect for cultural norms is reinforced when Mattie first meets Wesley. She tells him to be careful about his language, then decides to let the "hells" and "damns" go. "They let them go on television" (97). Mattie defers not to some set of religious guidelines, but to the nebulous

"they" who decide what is acceptable and what is not. Mattie soon decides that Wesley needs religion, but this is based at least partly on his appearance. He is a "pale boy with rotten teeth" (130). Mattie believes he needs to be around "clean people," who would help old people up stairs.

On the problem of which is stronger in the lives of Raney and Mattie, spiritual values or cultural norms, Edgerton states,

How do and when do spiritual values split off away from cultural norms? My guess is that Mattie and Raney would have made really good communists if they were raised in Russia, . . . but whatever they were . . . they would have been pretty strong about it, pretty outspoken, probably. . . . They are very concerned about appearances, I think. (Clyde Edgerton, Personal Interview, 5 April 1993).

Of course, appearance has little to do with true Christianity, but both Mattie and Raney confuse Christianity and behaving in accordance with community norms from time to time. To be "Christian" to them is more than to be a follower of Christ; it means to accept and behave by a certain set of cultural guidelines. In the religion of Mattie and Raney it is always as important to look and act properly as to hold certain beliefs.

Religion is also an important issue in Edgerton's

third novel, The Floatplane Notebooks. Edgerton reveals the tension between generations in the dynamic that occurs between Mark Oakley and his mother, Esther. Bliss, who is to marry Mark's cousin, Thatcher, states early in the novel that "Esther is a well-known upholding block of the community" (8). Esther is uncomfortable around the rougher characters in the novel who curse, tell lies, and brag about cheating people. She is also trying to suppress rumors that her husband cheated on her when he was overseas during wartime. After Meredith is injured in Vietnam, he captures her essence in the novel: "Aunt Esther. Corncob up her ass like always" (222). Meredith wonders where God has been during Vietnam. He suggests that Aunt Esther may have him "locked up somewhere, afraid to let him out--afraid he might hear somebody cussing" (223).

Esther wants her son Mark to follow in her footsteps, growing up to be a pianist and dedicating his "body and mind and soul to Christ. Clean living and performing for the glory of God" (150-151). Mark struggles with the weight of his mother's expectations throughout his childhood, adolescence, and young adult years. Mark tries to live up to his mother's high standards, but to preserve his own myth of innocence, he often avoids blame that he deserves or passes it along to his cousin Meredith. When he lies about a "nigger" starting a welldigger even though he knows Meredith did it, Mark rationalizes, "The other time when

Meredith lied was when he started the welldigger and got me to lie too. It was all his fault" (28). His prayer not only reveals his need to believe in his own innocence but also is an accurate portrayal of the historical connection between religion and attitudes about race in the South.

As a teenager, Mark accepts a beer in a bar, even though he hears the voice of his mother and the voices of his entire community telling him not to accept it (150-151), and, as the novel progresses, Mark appears to overcome the influence of his mother's religion. However, Edgerton reveals that he achieves this only at a great price. In the Air Force, Mark has easy access to alcohol and prostitutes and takes advantage of both, linking him to his father. As a fighter pilot, he tries to block out the knowledge that he is killing human beings; he tries to understand his job solely in terms of its technical elements. After Meredith is injured, Mark visits him in the hospital but cannot stand to confront the enormity of what has happened to Meredith or the enormity of what he does each day as a fighter pilot. He walks out of the hospital without speaking a word to Meredith. After Meredith returns to North Carolina, Rhonda, his wife, deserts him and their young son. Mark is sent to Florida to find out what Rhonda's plans are and, in his ultimate act of rejecting the religious, family, and community values under which he was raised, he sleeps with Rhonda.

He decides, "I mean if I'm thinking it, and she's thinking it, *that's* the *sin*, as they say. Why the hell deprive yourself, and in this case, nobody gets hurt. That's the real situation. Nobody is getting hurt. That's more obvious than anything" (246). Mark's insistence on maintaining his myth of innocence as a child and an adolescent becomes something far more sinister in his young adult life. He has overcome the stifling influence of his mother's religion but has become amoral in the process.

A third character in the novel to whom religion is central is Bliss, Thatcher's wife. Before she marries Thatcher, she identifies most closely with the values of Aunt Esther. When the family makes its annual trip to Florida, she insists that she is comfortable with the sleeping arrangements under which the women and men sleep in separate quarters: "I, of course, did not visit Thatcher in those quarters, nor did I wish to" (11). When Aunt Esther decides to go to bed after Dan Braddock begins to curse, Bliss does the same: "I also stood, knowing the language was getting too rough for my ears" (21-22). However, Bliss begins to soften as the novel progresses. Even though she marries Thatcher, she loves Meredith at least as much. When she sees Meredith and Rhonda together on a later family trip, she confesses, "I realized that I wanted to be Rhonda for a night. Just one night" (129). After Meredith is injured in Vietnam, she announces that

she needs a stiff drink and rationalizes, "For everything there is a season" (196). Finally, after Rhonda deserts Meredith, Bliss sleeps with him, providing him with sexual release that Rhonda had refused him (248-249).

Thus, Edgerton provides a number of responses to the traditional religion of the South in The Floatplane Notebooks. Aunt Esther represents the petty moralism that insists on maintaining proper decorum and behaving according to a strict set of rules. Her son, Mark, and Bliss provide two responses to Aunt Esther's type of religion. Bliss gradually softens, becoming more human and less dogmatic. Mark, on the other hand, overcomes the influence of his mother, but only at the expense of his own morality. It is interesting that the event that signals the extent of the transformation of both Mark and Bliss is an act of sexual infidelity. However, Edgerton portrays these in significantly different manners. Mark's tryst with Rhonda is an act of rejecting the family; he is literally sleeping with the enemy, for Rhonda has deserted Meredith when he needs her most. His rationale that he is hurting no one is a thinly-veiled attempt to ignore his perfidy. While Bliss is certainly unfaithful to her husband Thatcher, Edgerton portrays the scene where she sleeps with Meredith much more positively. Meredith has been deserted by his wife and needs human contact. Bliss provides this in the way that Meredith needs most and must

reject her earlier dogmatic approach to do so.

Religion, especially institutionalized religion, is central to Edgerton's fourth novel, Killer Diller. In this novel Edgerton lampoons the fictional Ballard University. The themes developed in this novel include the institution's oppression of the individuals who work for it and the attempt of certain religious figures to connect Christianity to conservative politics and capitalism. Edgerton describes the twins who run Ballard University, Ned and Ted Sears, as insecure, manipulative leaders who confuse issues of education, religion, and patriotism and who are ruled primarily by the need to generate good press and avoid negative press. They are, in fact, caricatures of the type of leadership that Edgerton encountered at Campbell University. As a foil to their version of Christianity, Edgerton provides Wesley Benfield as a young adult, struggling to understand Christianity and the Bible on his own terms.

Ted Sears is the president of Ballard University, and Edgerton goes to great length to illustrate Ted's superficiality. Ted is constantly concerned about how things look and how he looks. He writes with a \$200 Parker ink pen (7), wears seven-hundred-dollar suits (12), inspects himself "in the full-length mirror he recently had maintenance install" (125) in his restroom, and is constantly on the alert for photo opportunities. Ted had

some misgivings about the college's relationship with BOTA House; however, his reticence "was greatly diminished when the university attorneys determined that the college was not legally liable for any actions committed by halfway house residents" (8-9). This is Ted's method of operating; anything that will bring publicity to the school with no risk of liability or negative publicity is good. Ned Sears, Ted's twin brother, is the university's provost, and he is similarly superficial. He is pleased with his rapid rise from pastor of a local church, to the college classroom, to dean of the college, and, most recently, to provost. It is interesting that each of his successive calls have taken him farther away from a position of ministry to people.

Therefore, Ted and Ned are both somewhat superficial in their approach to religion and often appear as humorous characters. However, Edgerton also describes how they hurt the people who work for the university. Stan Laurence is a new employee who is forced to use food stamps because his salary is so low. When they learn of Wesley's association with Mattie Rigsbee, they try to convince her to join the Ballard University family, in hopes that when she dies, which will probably be soon since she is eighty-six years old, she will leave the university money or property. Most importantly, when marijuana is discovered in the sock drawer of Ben, a young black man at BOTA House, Ted and Ned

decide to end the university's association with the halfway house and break up the band. At the same time, they try to concoct a method of making Wesley, Ben's roommate, escape with his good reputation and capitalize on the university's effect on Wesley.

As a foil to the shenanigans of Ted and Ned, Edgerton depicts Wesley Benfield, now twenty-four years old and a Christian, struggling with what it means to be a Christian. Wesley is by no means a clone of Mattie Rigsbee, whose influence on him has been great. In fact, Wesley is torn between two different images of himself. On the one hand, he wants to be a Christian, living as Mattie has taught him; on the other hand, he wants to be a rock star, make love to women, and see himself as a worldly man. While dreaming about his band's future, he imagines "a future that includes long nights of playing the blues to hot, dancing crowds, playing till they drop, sleeping late, making albums and videos, and getting rich. Wesley figures he can work all this in together with being a Christian" (24).

When Wesley tries to reconcile his desire to live as a Christian with his equally strong desire to make love to Phoebe, he turns to the Bible for help. He is shocked by what he finds there. As he searches his Bible for answers to his questions about sex, he finds that there are two Bibles, the one from which he has heard stories at church

and the rest of it, which is often risque and ambiguous. He finds that David had a son with another man's wife and that Saul had a concubine. Reading farther, he discovers Song of Solomon. He draws two conclusions. One is that "it didn't make any difference whether you were married or not" (48). The other is that "*the people at Sunday school were just reading what they wanted to*" (48). He can't believe that the people at church have read all of this and decides to tell them; he takes up a new hobby, preaching. He tells Mattie about this, and she thinks that it would be wonderful if Wesley became a preacher. However, Wesley worries about the institutional aspect of such a career. He tells Mattie, "I'd have to get ordained. I'm not sure I'd like the ordainers" (167). He also worries about the type of preaching he has been hearing: "I don't think I could preach the stuff I been hearing. And the Sears twins are always bringing up America and stuff like that at the same time they bring up Jesus. It's like they think Jesus was an American or something. Which he won't" (167).

While Wesley may have some confusion and misgivings about doctrinal matters, he seems to quickly adapt to the Christian call to minister to others. He has become a cook, like Mattie, and willingly cooks for others whenever he can. His reading of the Bible teaches him that God is often associated with the oppressed and he learns to apply this to the racial oppression he encounters in the South.

Finally, when Ben is caught with marijuana, Wesley cannot simply allow the university to turn its back on Ben while portraying him as a model of what Christian education can be. Instead, he flees from Ballard University, paying a great personal price--he has only a few months of probation remaining--to escape Ballard's hypocrisy and even its approbation.

Religion never becomes a central issue in Edgerton's most recent novel, In Memory of Junior. However, he does include a couple of characters who question God's goodness in the face of personal tragedy as Meredith did in The Floatplane Notebooks when he wonders what has happened to God (223). Uncle Grove wonders if God would set up a perfect world for him and then "jerk it all right out from under [him] by killing off [his] old man when [he] was a boy, for no reason in the world, except that diseases had been allowed, diseases that wiped out men and women in their strongest days" (49). Likewise, June Lee questions why her son had to die in an automobile accident: "If God reasons out things that happen, like they say at church, He didn't have no reason to let that happen to us, Junior getting killed in a car wreck, with me driving. No God could have a reason for letting that happen" (59).

Therefore, Edgerton provides in his fiction both a portrayal of the distinctive religion of the American South and characters who are no longer served by that religion.

Raney Bell Shepherd, Mattie Rigsbee, and Esther Oakley all represent a distinctive Southern religion that places a high priority on personal salvation, is overly concerned with petty morality, and often confuses cultural norms and spiritual values. Esther is perhaps the least likeable of these characters, representing only the moralistic and stifling nature of religion in the South. At the beginning of Raney, Raney is similar to Esther. However, as the novel develops and she becomes involved in a dialogue with her husband Charles over religious matter, she gradually softens and becomes more flexible. Mattie Rigsbee is perhaps the best example of what is good about a distinctive Southern religious style. Even though she is quick to equate proper appearance with religious virtue, she spends her time ministering to people. She is eager to cook and care for others and takes seriously the Biblical admonition to care "for the least of these my brethren." Ballard University, in Killer Diller, is an example of how the worst aspects of religion in the South can become institutionalized. Ballard values only appearances, providing no ministry to those associated with it and, in fact, punishing those who cannot readily adapt to its standards.

Edgerton also provides a number of characters--such as Charles Shepherd, Robert Rigsbee, Mark Oakley, and Wesley Benfield--who challenge the distinctive religion of the

South. Charles represents a modernist approach to religion, repeatedly confronting his wife, Raney, with his assertion that religious values are conditioned by the cultures that hold them. Charles believes that religion should be concerned with the issues of society, especially Southern racism, while Raney sees religion as a personal and individual matter and only a societal matter in terms of providing punishment for sins such as prostitution. Robert Rigsbee harbors bitterness about his religious training, telling his mother that he has spent too many years listening to the Bible. Mark Oakley is able to overcome the stifling influence of his mother's religion but only at the price of losing his own sense of morality. Wesley Benfield is a new convert to Christianity, who can draw his own conclusions about what the Bible says about right and wrong. However, he is confronted by an institutionalized version of religion at Ballard University and rejects it, finding it overly concerned with appearances while providing little ministry to those associated with it. Finally, Mattie Rigsbee, who in many ways is an exponent of traditional Southern religion, also challenges the expectations of her church and community by feeding and caring for Wesley Benfield.

Edgerton seems as ambivalent about changes in the religion of the South as he has been toward changes in other areas of Southern life. He certainly portrays the

oppressive nature of that religion as characters such as Charles, Robert, and Mark struggle to overcome its effects on their lives and as Ballard University systematically ignores the needs of those associated with it. At the same time, he provides Mattie Rigsbee as an example of how powerful that religion can be. She provides nurture for friends and strangers alike and challenges the cultural expectations of her society by feeding and providing shelter for a juvenile delinquent who has escaped custody. Finally, Mark Oakley struggles against the moralistic religion of his mother only to become a person with no moral center as a young adult.

In conclusion, religion is another important aspect of Southern distinctiveness. The religion of the South is not only almost uniformly Protestant but the nature of the Protestantism in the South is also distinct from that in other areas of the country. Southern religion is characterized by a belief in the inerrancy of scripture and a concern for individual morality and salvation as opposed to societal matters. This religion serves as a source of great strength for many Southerners but is an obstacle to be overcome for others. Edgerton's ambivalence about Southern religious practice is typical of his description of most facets of Southern distinctiveness, including the importance of storytelling.

Chapter VI

Storytelling

Another aspect of life in the South that has made it distinctive is Southerners' penchant for storytelling. John A. Burrison, in Storytellers: Folktales and Legends from the South, posits that "Nowhere in the United States is storytelling more vital than in the South, where skill with the spoken word has always been emphasized" (1-2). Southern families have often sat down together and shared stories about different family members. These stories, seldom written down, serve to give families a sense of their own identity and history and to preserve the family history for generations. The importance of storytelling in the South perhaps began with its frontier origins. In an area isolated from the rest of the world, stories often served as the only source of news. At the same time, stories functioned as entertainment for a people who worked very hard and were, for the most part, illiterate.

Of course, the South's identity as a storytelling region is closely related to its oral tradition. Southerners have depended primarily on word-of-mouth for their family histories, as well as for important parts of the history of their region. In the past, a single member of the family often became either the official or unofficial receptacle for these stories. These stories were passed down from generation to generation and were

modified as they passed from one teller to another. In spite of important advances in literacy and in access to the rest of the world by both travel and rapid communication, the oral tradition has remained strong in the South.

Southern writers have always recognized the wealth of material to be gleaned from the oral tradition, and storytelling has often served as either the content or the form--or both--for Southern novels. Much of the early literature of the South takes the form of written stories which attempt to capture stories which had been circulated in oral form for generations. Thomas Bangs Thorpe draws on the tall-tale tradition and rural myths for his stories such as "The Big Bear of Arkansas." In the twentieth century, William Faulkner allows his characters to tell stories about themselves, their families, and the South; the interplay between the narratives of different characters is often central in his novels. Contemporary Southern novelists often rely heavily on the South's oral tradition for both content and form; in fact, among Lee Smith's most popular novels is Oral History.

It is perhaps important that the two main groups of people who have inhabited the South come from two areas also known for the importance of their oral traditions: northern Europe and western Africa. Burrison writes,

Strong traditions of storytelling from such Old

World source areas of the southern population as Ulster, West Africa, and southern England, reinforced by the physical isolation of dispersed settlement and a conservative mindset that valued the old ways, certainly contributed to this [storytelling] tendency. (2)

In northern Europe, the first pieces of literature were written versions of stories that had long existed as oral tales. These stories were often told by scop, or court singers. Jess B. Bessinger, in his entry on the scop in Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics, defines the scop as "a professional entertainer, a harpist and poet-singer, normally a member of a royal household, who was the shaper and conservator in England of Old Germanic poetic tradition" (753). The scop was more than simply a singer or storyteller; he was a conservator of history and a spokesman of his people's ideology. Bessinger adds, "He was also a folk historian" (753). L. F. Anderson, in his work The Anglo-Saxon Scop, defines the scop as a court singer, teacher, original composer, historian of his time, impromptu speaker, traveller, imparter of news, and sometimes warrior (15-28).

The mythology that evolved in northern Europe is considerably different from either classical mythology or Christian ideology, both of which express a view that, ultimately, good is more powerful than evil and will

eventually overcome evil. The Norse did not believe this. In Edith Hamilton's Mythology: Timeless Tales of Gods and Heroes, she reports that the Norse gods know that "Sometime they will meet their enemies and go down beneath them to defeat and death" (300). As this is true, the Norse heroes wage their heroic battles with the knowledge that they must finally fail. They are all Sisyphus, rolling their rocks uphill, with the knowledge that it is useless. Hamilton writes, "To live is to suffer and the only solution of the problem of life is to suffer with courage" (306). Why an ideology so different from that found in Greece and the Middle East should evolve in northern Europe is an interesting question, but the harsh, cold climate which people could perhaps learn to bear but never hope to overcome played a part.

Western Africa also has a strong oral tradition. Their griots fulfill the same roles as the the northern European scops. Thomas A. Hale, in Scribe, Griot, and Novelist: Narrative Interpreters of the Songhay Empire, reports that griots "conveyed their words by voice, not by writing. They too witnessed the events marking the rise and fall of their rulers. Their words have survived many centuries, passed on to modern descendants of the peoples of the empires" (9). Hale lists "entertainer, musician, singer, genealogist, spokesman, historian, and teacher" (36), as well as "inciting listeners to action" (37) and

advising patrons (40), among the functions associated with the term griot. Furthermore, the griot is known for playing "the twenty-one-stringed *kora*" (38). Therefore, griots are almost identical in function to the northern European scop. Indeed, western African griots also have a grim view of the cycle of history. Again, this may be linked to the area's climate. Like northern Europe, western Africa is an area known for its harsh climate, with overbearing heat and frequent drought and famine.

C. Vann Woodward argues that the most distinctive element of the South is its history. The United States as a whole has experienced unparalleled economic and social success. Furthermore, one of the most popular images in American literature has been that of the American Adam, an innocent protagonist who is free from the bonds of history and can attain success by relying on his own instincts and abilities. On the contrary, the prevailing American myths of innocence, plenty, and success hardly apply to the South. The South has experienced great poverty before, during, and after the Civil War. Contrary to the history of the country as a whole, the South's history identifies it as a defeated nation, one that brought all of its resources to bear on a problem and, nevertheless, failed. Furthermore, the South is separated from the American myth of innocence. Southern states held on to the institution of slavery far longer than did their northern counterparts

and this difference was, in fact, the primary cause of the Civil War (16-21). Furthermore, white hatred of black men intensified after the war. Thus, a Southern understanding of history has been significantly different than that of the nation as a whole. Allen Tate, in his essay "The New Provincialism," has attributed the Southern Literary Renaissance to the South's identity as a defeated people. Unlike such spokesmen of the prevailing American myths of success and innocence as Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman, the great Southern writers have begun with the facts of guilt and defeat. Tate attributes the Southern Literary Renaissance to a tension between the present and the past; he believes that the South reentered the world with a look backward at the past, which "gave us the Southern renaissance, a literature conscious of the past in the present" (292). Therefore, the South's identity as a defeated people allies it closely with the traditions of the people who have settled there from northern Europe and western Africa. These peoples' view of history was that evil would overcome good, and the history of the South includes a defeat that is central to its history and its understanding of itself.

Fred Hobson has argued that the most distinctive element of Southern Literature in recent times has been that it has not embraced principles of postmodernism. While many American writers have questioned the

relationship between the written word and meaning, as well as the ability of the written word to depict the physical world, and have begun to write works which are increasingly self-referential and nihilistic, Southern writers have, for the most part, not questioned the relationship between the word and the world. They have continued to write about the physical world as they see it and about relationships among people and have been content that the world, and not the word itself, is their subject matter. This is not to say that Southern writers have not experimented with certain techniques shared by postmodern writers. A number of contemporary Southern writers use fragmented narratives, multiple narrators, and non-linear chronology in their works; however, the effect of these techniques in Southern novels has rarely been to question the entire relationship between words and meaning. Rather, these techniques in the hands of Southern writers have often been used to emphasize the importance of the word and of the relationship of the word to the physical world. Faulkner uses multiple narrators and fragmented narratives in The Sound and the Fury and Absalom, Absalom not to question the importance of the word, but to allow characters to search for the meaning in their lives that, far from being unimportant, is vital, and stories and words are the only tools they have in this search. Fred Chappell's I Am One of You Forever employs multiple narrators and magical realism; however, Chappell's

use of magical realism does not serve to question the centrality of the physical world. Rather, Chappell's use of magical realism serves to create metaphors about the frailty of the human condition.

Storytelling is important throughout the novels of Clyde Edgerton. In his essay, "Stories to Ease the Tension: Clyde Edgerton's Fiction," Michael Pearson writes, "Storytelling is at the center of Clyde Edgerton's fictive world, intricately connected to a sense of history, the importance of family, the debate over race, and the idioms of tradition" (2). Edgerton's novels Raney, Walking Across Egypt, and Killer Diller feature characters who often tell stories about themselves, their families, and their friends. In The Floatplane Notebooks and In Memory of Junior storytelling is absolutely central. These books both have multiple narrators, and it is in the interplay between the stories of different characters, which are often contradictory, that much of the tension in these novels is found.

The importance of storytelling to Southern families is underscored in Clyde Edgerton's first novel, Raney. Charles has trouble adapting to Raney's family's love of visiting and storytelling. Whenever Charles and Raney visit any of Raney's family, she begins to wonder how soon Charles will start acting bored. Raney and her family like to sit and tell stories about themselves and the people

they know. Charles is from a family that does not do this. Furthermore, Charles is an outsider both to the stories and the people whom they are about. He does not know these people, so the stories are not nearly so interesting to him as to everyone else. Charles would rather stay home and read books than visit with people, and Raney thinks that this is unnatural. She laments, "He'd rather read a book, written by someone he don't know, than to sit down and talk to a live human being who's his neighbor" (97).

Storytelling continues to be a positive force for Raney, for when her family returns to storytelling after an argument with Charles about religion and politics, she reports, "The stories eased the tension some. For me anyway" (81). Michael Pearson takes the title of his essay "Stories to Ease the Tension" from this episode and suggests, "Storytelling becomes a stay against confusion, a bridge between individuals, and a way to account for the disparity between appearance and reality" (3). Near the end of the novel, Charles adapts a strategy that allows him to enjoy his visits with Raney's family; while Raney visits, he helps Raney's brother learn to play banjo. In conclusion, Edgerton depicts storytelling as another element in the clash between old and new South as manifested by the sensibilities of Charles and Raney.

Storytelling is also important in Edgerton's second novel, Walking Across Egypt. In this novel, Mattie Rigsbee

falls through a seat-less chair and is caught there. After she finally gets free and has time to reflect on the episode, she thinks, "Now, who in the world can I tell?" (21). Mattie needs to tell someone of her misadventure as if to verify that it really happened. She needs to establish that what happens to her has some importance in the larger community and not just in her own mind. Storytelling is her way of doing this. She originally thinks that she will keep it a secret. However, after she mistakenly puts chili powder in her potato salad instead of paprika, she decides that "She would tell Pearl. Pearl would die laughing. She would tell Pearl--tell her that first and then about the chair" (25).

Mattie visualizes what she must have looked like in the chair and begins to laugh out loud. The image of herself with her feet and arms sticking straight up reminds her of a story that Pearl's husband once told about two men boiling a sea heron with "his long stick-legs sticking straight up out of the pot" (26). Mattie thinks about "the sea heron's legs sticking up out of that pot, about herself in the chair" (26). Mattie understands her own experience in terms of a story she has heard about someone else. Mattie soon tells the story to her sister Pearl, acting out her movements and including all of the details she can remember. After she stops laughing, Pearl's first response is, "I don't think I've ever heard of such a thing . . .

since Alfred or some of them tied little Durk's foot to the fence that time" (40). Both Mattie and Pearl immediately refer to other stories to frame Mattie's experience. Storytelling is so important to them that events in the present are almost immediately catalogued alongside stories that they know from the past.

In The Floatplane Notebooks, Edgerton's third novel, storytelling serves as both content and form. The novel has multiple narrators, all of whom supply their own versions of the events that happen to the Copeland family. Edgerton had experimented in small ways with different voices as narrators prior to The Floatplane Notebooks. Raney is framed by newspaper accounts of the engagement of Raney and Charles and the baptism of their son over two years later. The official and sterile prose of the newspaper accounts lends dramatic irony when opposed to Raney's highly-subjective first-person narration. Furthermore, the account of Raney's child's baptism is important because it reveals that Raney and Charles have been able to compromise not only on the issue of the baptism, but also on other important issues such as family, religion, and attitudes about race. Providing this information in the form of a newspaper entry allows Edgerton to show Raney's emerging flexibility without having her rationalize it. Walking Across Egypt ends with the lyrics and music for the song "Walking Across Egypt,"

also written by Edgerton. The text of the song compares contemporary Christians to the Israelites fleeing Egypt--both are on journeys across an alien land. When juxtaposed with the novel's plot, the hymn reinforces Mattie's role as the touchstone for Christianity in the novel.

However, the degree to which Edgerton uses multiple narrators in The Floatplane Notebooks is quite a departure from the tentative experiments with voice in his first two novels. The entire novel is narrated by five different characters, as well as a vine, and it is only by taking into account what each of these narrators tells us--and does not tell us--that we can begin to form any comprehensible whole from the novel. The first narrator is Noralee. Her narration is characterized by earthiness. In fact, her first words are "The dogs breathe in my face" (5). Noralee is the youngest member of the Copeland family, and she questions some of the family's attitudes about race, sex, and patriotism in her narrative. The second narrator is Bliss, a member of the Copeland family by virtue of her marriage to Thatcher. Bliss's narration includes a great deal of sophomoric description. She idealizes the Copeland family and her emerging role within it. When her mother complains about the baseness of the Copelands and their friends on Bliss's wedding day, Bliss complains, "Mother tends to find the least distinguished

aspect of a situation and then focus on it for one to two hours" (56). Bliss does just the opposite; she ignores all that is bad, thinking, "I must not be deflected when such an exciting new, additional family is in my grasp" (38-39). The third character to narrate is Thatcher. He is a hard-nosed character who presents things objectively. He presents the adventures of his younger brother Meredith as the exploits of a spoiled brat. The fourth character to narrate is Mark, Meredith's cousin, who is the same age as Meredith. Mark's narrative is self-serving. He insists on his own innocence in every situation, constantly comparing himself favorably to Meredith. The final human narrator, Meredith himself, is not allowed to narrate until Page 210. Up to this point, the reader's view of Meredith has been negatively affected by Thatcher's depiction of him as a spoiled younger brother and Mark's insistence that all of the problems that they encounter together are Meredith's fault. When Meredith is finally allowed to narrate, he is the funniest and most-likable character in the novel. Ironically, he is not allowed to narrate until he has lost his ability to speak and has problems maintaining a clear line of reasoning because of injuries sustained when he tripped a land mine in Vietnam. In spite of his sometimes muddled thoughts, Meredith provides the clearest statements of character in the novel.

Even though she is not the identified narrator of any

chapter in the novel, Aunt Scrap is another important storyteller. She seems to be the unofficial family historian. During the family's annual gravecleanings, Aunt Scrap tells stories about the various inhabitants of the graveyard. Edgerton provides only brief physical description of Aunt Scrap, and she is hardly involved at all in the plot of the novel; she is simply a voice talking, telling the stories associated with the family. She is especially important to Bliss, a newcomer to the family, who is trying to absorb all of the family history that she can. While Aunt Scrap may be the family's oral historian, Albert Copeland keeps its written records. He keeps important family records in his floatplane notebooks, which are ostensibly a record of the experimental runs of the floatplane he is attempting to build. His records are highly subjective. He tells only what is good about the building of the floatplane and only what is good about the family.

Another voice in the novel is the official prose of the military. Before his injury, Meredith sends Noralee a copy of two notices he has recently received. On both, Meredith has written in the margins, mocking the assumptions that they contain. For example, one notice tells the soldiers to apply insect repellant to all uncovered portions of the body. According to Noralee, "Meredith had written in: 'What insect repellant?'" (191).

When the family receives the notice of Meredith's injury, Bliss reports, "It had extra numbers and dates and so forth and you couldn't tell who had sent it. It was said in such a way--like a menu or church bulletin--that made me hate the paper it was on" (194).

Both of these episodes reveal the Copelands' disdain for the official prose of the military. However, Mark Oakley learns to take refuge in it. One day as he is flying reconnaissance, he notices a person on a road below. Mark has tried hard to repress this truth: "No humans are down there. Rather, some nonhuman, piranha-like force lies, swarms, sits, breeds, broods beneath the green canopy, waiting for me to fall" (184-185). However, once he sees a single person, his mind makes the jump to his own home: "The road is a dirt road that I know with a man I know walking on it, walking on the dirt road along which he lives somewhere and the person is Meredith, Uncle Albert, Tyree, Ross, an American man from The Grapes of Wrath" (185). When the truth of this becomes too much for Mark, his mind retreats to the official prose of the military in mid-sentence: "The road grader has worked on it, and then, gentlemen, the body of the BLU-1/A is a hollow shell which is hinged at the base of the conical tail finassemble" (185). Mark continues to explain how the bomb works, but it is all in the official, passive-voice prose of the military which excuses him for the consequences of his

actions. The cold, passive prose serves both to obscure who sent the telegram telling of Meredith's death and to excuse Mark for killing Vietnamese civilians.

The novel also features a vine as a narrator. The vine provides an objective account of the history of the Copeland family graveyard, from its beginning with the burial of the field hand Thomas Pittman about the time of the Civil War into the present. Furthermore, the vine gives us much of the early history of the Copeland family. The vine also reports an interesting phenomenon associated with blue moons, the second full moon in a given month. On each blue moon, the vine can see and hear the inhabitants of the graveyard sitting in rocking chairs and telling stories. In fact, it is from the grave that we get much valuable information about the early history of the Copeland family. From the grave we are presented the definitive version of certain stories that are told in different form by the living. However, even the dead storytellers occasionally argue about the authenticity of certain details in one another's stories (235).

Therefore, Edgerton employs a number of characters and voices to narrate his story. Inevitably, the details of these stories are changed by different tellers of the stories. One such story is the tale of one boy's handing another a hot piece of coal and pretending that it is a piece of chocolate. The first time we encounter this story

it is told by Thomas Pittman during one of the blue-moon sessions. He claims that Walker, the oldest member of the Copeland family chronicled in the novel, gave the piece of coal to his brother Julius (105). Later, Meredith alludes to the same story while on a frog-gigging expedition with his cousin Mark. However, in his version it is Walker's son Ross who offers the coal to somebody (120). When Uncle Hawk tells the story, it is pushed forward by another generation. He claims that Ross's son Tyree offered the coal to his half-brother Dink. Albert challenges Uncle Hawk's version, arguing, "I always thought that was Walker and one of his brothers" (131). However, Uncle Hawk insists that he remembers it happening. Since Uncle Hawk is three generations removed from Thomas Pittman, who also tells this story, it is very unlikely that his version of the story is accurate. This attribution of a single tale to a number of different characters is typical of the oral tradition where details are often confused. Joseph Campbell and others have, of course, shown that the same stories are often told in many different cultures and attributed to the heroes of each culture. Moreover, there is a truth to the story about the piece of coal that transcends the details. A strain of mischief does permeate the Copeland family, from Walker all the way to Meredith. Moreover, each version of the story highlights an animosity between brothers, linking all of the pairs of

brothers to the first brothers, Cain and Abel.

Another story which is often retold in the Copeland family is about Caroline's throwing hot water on intruding Union soldiers and Ross's threatening to shoot them. The first version is told by the vine and may be assumed to be accurate. The vine tells that, while Walker was away in the war, Caroline--Walker's wife--and her family came in from the fields to find Union soldiers drinking their water and eating hams from their smokehouse. Caroline threw a pot of boiling water on them and said, "I wish you were red hot in the belly and in the middle of hell" (102). One of the men grabbed her before another warned him that Ross, her son, was standing on the porch with a shotgun aimed at the man holding his mother. Caroline finally convinced Ross to put the gun down. Uncle Hawk tells the same story. However, in his story the incident moves from the backyard to the front yard. More importantly, he claims that Ross waited until the day after his mother poured water on the soldiers before climbing up inside of a hollow tree and actually shooting at the soldiers (123-124). Ross himself tells the story from beyond the grave. In his version the events happened in the backyard. He claims that it was a good thing he wasn't allowed to fight in the war because he was able to protect the family from the Yankees (188-189). Again, while the details of the story change as different narrators tell it, the story does contain the popular myth

of a Southern family's defiance of the Union soldiers. Furthermore, it points to a general discontent on the part of Southerners to the Union soldiers using their land.

While the changes in details in these two stories are relatively unimportant, in another story that the family tells--or does not tell--the changes in details serve to hide the family's guilt in the lynching of a black sharecropper. Early in the novel Bliss asks Thatcher about Zuba. Thatcher responds, "Nigger man used to live on the place. He got hung with a stretch of wisteria vine for murdering a little girl" (50). However, as the novel progresses, we learn that the story is not that simple. In one of the blue-moon sessions Ross attributes some of the peculiarities of his sister Vera to worrying "a lot about Zuba after he got strung up with the wisteria" (174). Furthermore, Ross claims that "They hung Zuba . . . and we couldn't stop them. I tried" (174). It is interesting that Zuba, while present in the graveyard during this blue-moon session, does not participate in the storytelling session. His version of the story is silenced even beyond the grave. It is only in the vine's narration that we learn the extent of the Copeland family's complicity in Zuba's hanging. The vine first tells of the general cruelty of William, Ross's brother and Walker's son. William had brought rabbits home in a potato sack and killed them against the smokehouse (206), pulled the front

teeth from a rabbit (207), and skinned a fox while it was alive (207). After William moved into town he returned one morning with a big sack which he pushed under the smokehouse. Ross, who was returning from the corn field, watched him do this. That night William returned with two wagonloads of men who found a dead girl in the sack. The men took Zuba and lynched him with some of the wisteria vine (207-209). Contrary to Ross's earlier assertion that he tried to stop the lynching, the vine reports only that "Ross dug at his thumb nails with his middle fingernails. Blood came" (208). Thatcher's simple assertion, and perhaps even belief, that Zuba was hanged for murdering a little girl is much more than simply an erroneous detail. The family's silence regarding this story, both during the hanging and a hundred years later, serves to hide its own guilt in the killing of the girl and the scapegoating of Zuba for its own sins. In fact, Southern history is filled with such silences. The history of the South has been written primarily by white men and contains great silences and even inaccuracies with regard to the South's historical treatment of its black inhabitants.

That the silences in family stories and the transformations that occur in family stories are important in the novel is reinforced by its title, The Floatplane Notebooks. Albert's notebooks become the central metaphor for the novel. Ostensibly, the notebooks are the log for

the building and experimental runs of the plane. He tells Aunt Sybil, "I got me a notebook to keep up with all I'm doing right now, what I do to it, and the test runs. That's required by law--the FAA. It's an experimental aircraft" (12). However, the notebooks deviate from this in two important ways. First, Albert embellishes the accounts of the plane's flights. Thatcher tells Aunt Sybil, "He don't write it accurate about what happened though" (12). Noralee describes how, on the plane's first test run, Meredith jumps out because only one engine starts, causing the plane to turn in big circles, almost hitting the pier and finally running aground (15-16). Albert's account of the test reads, "THE AIRCRAFT FLOATED LEVEL IN THE WATER AND WAS RUN SUCCESSFUL OUT ON THE WATER AND BACK IN. THIS WAS THE FIRST TEST RUN. PASSENGERS WERE THE OWNER AND SON MEREDITH. ALL PARTS WORKED" (18). Albert's entries continue to be questionable. When Albert records, "First successful in-air operation today. Aircraft lifted into air on eight separate occasions" (66), Thatcher complains, "What happened was he run it across this speed boat wake twice and it bounced eight times. I told him that didn't count but he wouldn't talk about it" (66). Later, Albert writes "Dropped engine" to indicate that, while experimenting with different engine positions, a rafter holding an engine broke and the engine fell on the floor (171). Thatcher complains again about Albert's

description of the experimental runs: "He'll write a three-or-four-page notebook entry--about each one--which you can't even recognize as what happened" (172).

The other important deviation from the purpose of the notebooks is that Albert begins to keep a family history in them. After the very first experimental run, Albert records the heights and weights of Meredith, Mark, and Noralee (18). We later learn that the notebooks contain family trees (66), newspaper clippings about the family (97), an account of the elopement of Meredith and Rhonda (172), accounts of Meredith's injuries in Vietnam (215), and a map of the family graveyard (234). Bliss is unconcerned about the notebooks' errors and even treasures the notebooks as a source of family history: "The thing will fly or not fly regardless of what's in the notebooks. Except I guess the notebook would be a fun thing for Taylor to read once he's grown" (124). Even in his description of family history, Albert molds the facts to fit his own purposes. After Meredith falls through the kitchen floor which Albert has not built sturdily enough, Thatcher suggests, "Why don't you write *this* up in the notebook?" (74). Albert's only reply is, "I ain't studying no notebook" (74).

Another way in which the floatplane becomes central to an understanding of the novel is that the plans for building it are incomplete. Albert has a set of plans to

build the floatplane; however, some pages are missing. Early in the novel Mildred tells Uncle Hawk that "Mr. Hoover said all the pages to the plans weren't there" (12). When Aunt Scrap asks Albert about this, he simply responds, "I'll find them" (12). Meredith takes the picture of the finished product out of the plans and displays it on his wall, but this doesn't bother Albert. As Thatcher complains, "Papa don't seem to be too interested in the instructions anyway. He's more interested in the notebook" (66). After Meredith returns home from Vietnam, he decides to collect instructions for home-built aircraft. He reports, "It's sort of a joke because Papa has never had all the instructions to the floatplane. . . . I sure as hell can't get instructions for our floatplane--not a full set, not from the shop" (230).

Albert tries to extrapolate what the missing pages must say by the pages that he does have. Thatcher states, "One problem is that some of the kit is missing, which Papa says is okay because he can tell from the parts already there how to make the missing parts" (66). This, in fact, may be the key to reading Edgerton's novel. We have several characters' versions of what has happened in the Copeland family, both in the recent and distant past. As readers, we must decide which part of each story is true and attempt to extrapolate some sort of comprehensible whole out of these parts. Meredith himself has to engage

in this sort of piecing together after he returns from Vietnam. He has forgotten much of his past and has trouble maintaining any line of reasoning for very long. He thinks,

Every morning when I wake up I try to remember the day it happened and I can't, so I try to remember one day in my life at home. I get a piece of it, like me and Mark frog-gigging, or hunting at Uncle Hawk's, or playing ball, and I try to remember everything in that piece of day. I put it all together, little piece by little piece. I hold it there and get the pieces together like a puzzle, then I run my fingers smooth over the pieces four or five times. (213)

This recreation of his past is important to Meredith. He later thinks, "I want to remember and feel it all, to dream it up, to see me and Mark sawing some shape out of plywood or making our own kite" (228) and "I want them to get out of the shop, to leave me alone and let me put together one of those days like it happened, like a puzzle and run my fingers over it" (229).

The last half-page of the novel is in the italic print that has been Edgerton's convention for the blue-moon storytelling sessions throughout the novel. In this page we learn three important things. First, Meredith, the speaker, is obviously dead. Moreover, he is speaking

clearly as he has been unable to do since his accident in Vietnam. Second, we see that he has been buried, according to his wishes, in the family graveyard that has not been used for years. Finally, we learn that the floatplane which Albert, Meredith's father, has been building for years has finally flown, for Meredith is telling the story of its first flight.

Fred Hobson argues, in The Southern Writer in the Postmodern World, that, for the most part, Southern novelists have not been postmodern writers. He explains that Southern writers have accepted the world as it is as their subject matter, do not question the relationship between narrator and narrative, and do not question the nature of fiction itself (9). Instead, most contemporary Southern writers possess "the power of telling the truth (concrete, tangible small truths of the kind associated with Welty's fiction)" (10). The Floatplane Notebooks may on the surface seem to be an exception to Hobson's assertion. After all, the novel employs fragmented narratives, multiple narrators who often contradict each other, and a nonlinear chronology, all of which are techniques often used by postmodern writers to challenge linear modes of thought. Furthermore, Meredith Copeland is a victim of the Vietnam War, and several writers have depicted the violence and immorality often associated with this war as the ultimate postmodern absurdity. Indeed,

Meredith does return from Vietnam without the ability to reason clearly. However, Edgerton's purpose in employing these techniques which are often employed by postmodern writers is not to question the validity of the word as a vehicle for knowing the truth. It is just the opposite. Meredith's thoughts at the end of the novel are not of the absurdity of his situation, but of the necessity to make sense of the fragments that he has been given. By extension, the readers of The Floatplane Notebooks are not to assume that Edgerton's experiments with multiple narrators point to the subjectivity of all knowledge. Rather, we are encouraged to make sense of these fragments to complete a larger, more comprehensive whole from them than could be achieved through the voice of a single narrator.

While storytelling is not central to Killer Diller, it does play a small role. When Wesley Benfield becomes troubled about the relationship between his new identity as a Christian and his sexual urges, he turns to stories in the Bible for answers. What he finds there surprises him. He finds out that David had a child by a woman who wasn't his wife and that Saul had concubines (45-48). These selections only reinforce his sexual urges. However, when Wesley encounters the story of Noah and the flood, he immediately understands it as a story about having the right family connections. Noah and his family are saved

from the flood, and Wesley is constantly aware that he does not have these kinds of connections, having been abandoned by his parents soon after birth.

An incident near the end of the novel reveals how stories can be used to distort the truth. When Wesley learns that Mattie Rigsbee is in the hospital, he feels compelled to visit her, even though it is after his curfew at BOTA House, the halfway house where he lives. He attempts to leave the halfway house by climbing down the gutter. However, the gutter soon becomes separated from the house, and Wesley falls to the ground three stories below (194-200). To keep Wesley out of trouble, another resident of BOTA House, Carla, creates a story about Wesley's trying to rescue a stranded cat (205). This story soon becomes the official version of the incident. When Wesley's girlfriend visits him the next day, she sympathizes, "After a cat. That sounds just like something he'd do" (205). And when Ted Sears, the university president comes to see Wesley, he praises him: "I think the fact that you were trying to save a cat makes the event all the more meaningful" (208). In fact, Sears has already called the local newspaper to do a story on the incident.

In Edgerton's most recent novel, In Memory of Junior, Edgerton returns to the experimental style that he had employed in The Floatplane Notebooks. He again uses multiple narrators who tell different versions of the same

stories. However, while The Floatplane Notebooks employed five narrators, In Memory of Junior uses nineteen. In addition to these nineteen narrators, the novel also contains a news bulletin on a local radio station and the journals of a dead child. In spite of the large number of narrators that Edgerton uses, he is still able to tell a comprehensible story. As in The Floatplane Notebooks, the different versions of the stories provided by multiple narrators combine to form a more fully-realized story than could be provided by a single narrator.

While all of the narrators in the novel are, in a sense, storytellers, one character achieves most of his identity with others from the stories that he tells. Uncle Grove McCord is related to the Bales by virtue of his sister's short-lived marriage to Glenn Bales. His sister, Evelyn, deserted Glenn and their two children. Because of Evelyn's desertion of Glenn and the children, most of the family hate Uncle Grove. However, he is accepted by Evelyn's children, Faison and Tate. In fact, Faison runs away to live with Uncle Grove when he is old enough. Throughout the novel, Uncle Grove entertains anyone who will listen to him with his stories. He tells stories about a gun fight in a liquor store, performing mouth-to-mouth resuscitation on dead dogs, cheating people while working a gambling wheel for a carnival, smuggling alcohol, ice fishing, fighting over a cow with a pitchfork, and

playing golf at Pinehurst. Even though he is treated as an outcast by most of the Bales family, Uncle Grove and his storytelling play an important role in helping Morgan Bales, Tate's son, to value his identity in the family.

As in The Floatplane Notebooks, different narrators provide different versions of several family stories. These stories are, nevertheless, vital to understanding the family's history and the role of that history in the current dynamics that exist in the family. Perhaps the most important of these stories is the story of Evelyn's desertion of Glenn and her children. As Glenn lies in bed dying he remembers the pain and shame associated with Evelyn's desertion and thinks, "I wouldn't tell this to anybody" (12), and, in fact, there are aspects of the story that have never been told or have only been whispered about. Part Two of the book, "I Wouldn't Tell This to Anybody," takes its name from Glenn's attitude about concealing the truth of Evelyn's desertion. Later, Bette, Glenn's sister reports, "When I found out why she *did* leave, or what I heard, I was sick to my stomach, except nobody else ever found out. As far as I know" (15). Later Bette hints at what she knows when she considers Morgan, Tate's son: "He seems . . . well, he seems . . . kind of queer. Some of Evelyn's blood? Me and Ansie have talked about it. But that was all a secret, so we decided long ago never to mention it except to ourselves" (71). What

Bette and Ansie have heard is true as we discover when Evelyn is allowed to tell her own story. She explains how she fell in love with a woman, Honour Walters, who took her away from the Bales family that had begun to smother her. As she explains, "Honour was life away from the thicket" (104). Grove, Evelyn's brother, knows exactly what happened but does not know if her children do or not: "I ain't ever been sure what all them boys know, what they don't know about their mama" (125). Near the end of the novel, Uncle Grove does reveal the truth to both boys and to Morgan during a fishing trip. However, he also provides a revised version for those outside the family, for Wilma Fuller, a neighbor of the Bales reports that, "Grove finally spilled the beans, and told the boys, Tate and Faison, all about how she had this fatal disease and decided she couldn't put Glenn and her boys through it, that she could face it only if she was off somewhere by herself" (213). Wilma reports, "I was glad to get the truth on it, because there had been rumors. Grove told all this before he finally went on back to Arkansas" (213). Donna Lee Frega, in her review of the novel in The Southern Quarterly, argues that characters in the novel learn "that by telling stories, they create a new history that replaces speculation" (187), and this seems to be exactly what Uncle Grove has accomplished, at least for those outside of the Bales family.

Another important story which Grove attempts to revise is that of his own life. At the story's beginning, Grove is living with his daughter and son-in-law in Arkansas. He is afraid that they will soon put him in a nursing home and then bury him in Arkansas. He decides to travel to North Carolina, the site of his most pleasant memories, to commit suicide and be buried there. It is important to Grove that his grave be in North Carolina, for he considers, "You are history longer than you are fact" (47). Part Three of the novel gets its title from this revisionist philosophy. Uncle Grove repeats this idea later on, as he is making all of the arrangements for his own burial:

It seemed like if I didn't handle all the carrying-ons about dying then I'd go to my grave unfinished. In other words, I myself, Grove McCord, wouldn't have finished it all, and it would haunt me the whole time I was history, which would be a long, long time--forever as a matter of fact. (150)

In the end, Grove does not carry through with his drastic plan to revise his own history. Lying locked up inside his own coffin, he shoots the latch off to free himself rather than killing himself.

The stories circulated about the events in the graveyard soon become filled with inaccurate details. A local news bulletin from WRBR radio assumes that Grove is,

in fact, dead. It reports that "The suicide motive was apparently related to the deaths from natural causes of Mr. McCord's relatives, Mr. and Mrs. Glenn Bales of Listre" (159). When the bullet hole in the coffin is found, the station speculates that "the victim may have been shot after he was dead and then taken to another location away from the cemetery" (159). As wild as these stories are, the one told by Wilma Fuller is wilder: "They say Grove shut himself up in the coffin . . . and got buried alive, and then Faye walked up on it, and somebody shot a gun" (160). Grove, in his attempt to revise his own history, has been the catalyst for a number of wild and inaccurate stories about himself. However, at the end of the novel, Grove himself seems to be resolved to let history take its course, for Wilma Fuller speaks of his return to Arkansas (213).

The title of this novel has epistemological overtones just as The Floatplane Notebooks did. If being history longer than fact is important to Uncle Grove, it is equally important to Faison Bales. Faison has no child of his own and worries, "And who do I leave my part when I'm dead and gone" (145). When his step-son dies in an automobile accident, Faison removes the footstone from his grave and replaces it with one with his own last name. He later tells his friend Jimmy, "I knew Junior was this other guy's son. . . . But I figured by the time I got him fishing and

hunting with me enough, a good bit of me would wear off on him. Enough for a name change, at least. It'd be like he really was my son" (199). The journals which Junior kept before he died seem to support Faison's claim on the child, for Junior refers to Faison as "daddy" and brags that his daddy had taken him fishing and hunting" (208-211). Donna Lee Frega suggests that each of the disputes in the novel "reveals the inability of language--written or oral--to do justice to what characters consider fact or truth" (187). Faison feels that the fact of the child's heredity is not as important as what he perceives as the truth of the child's connection with himself. Faison and his wife, June Lee, fight over the name that is to appear on the footstone throughout the novel. They finally compromise, choosing simply, "In Memory of Junior." While the name on the footstone represents an important reconciliation between Faison and his wife, the implication of this act is also to muddy the actual record of the child's lineage.

Another important story is of Tate's participation in the Vietnam war. The first allusion to this story is by Morgan, Tate's son, who has never heard the story and is jealous. His mother, from whom Tate is divorced, has told Morgan that Tate told her a story about winning a Silver Star in Vietnam. The story is the reason she decided to marry him. Morgan thinks, "So I don't know why the hell he won't tell me. Then maybe *I'd* feel like marrying him or

something. He won't tell it to me, probably never will. I'm not *old* enough, he said. It must be a hell of a story, but I'm not holding my breath" (40). Tate finally tells Morgan the story, or part of it, near the end of the novel. He tells Morgan about a mission during which a friend had been shot down. Tate does not tell exactly what he did, only that he acted automatically, without thinking. He concludes, "What I got out of it was a dead buddy and a medal" (167). He tells Morgan that this story had been the poor basis of his marriage to Morgan's mother. Morgan responds that he doesn't understand, and Tate replies that he isn't sure that he understands either (167-168). Perhaps one reason that Morgan doesn't understand is that the story is still incomplete, for Faison tells his friend Jimmy that Tate "got right down there with them and fought it out. Killed a whole bunch of Vietcong. But he won't, you know, talk about it a whole lot" (172).

Even though the story of his own father's bravery in Vietnam doesn't do much to bring Morgan closer to his father or the family as a whole, the stories of Uncle Grove do serve this purpose. When Morgan first meets Uncle Grove, he reports, "Man he's been through a lot. He's a good storyteller. He makes these really old stories seem like they just happened--right outside somewhere. . . . I can see why Uncle Faison ran away to go live with him" (139). Morgan has kept his distance from the Bales family

throughout the novel, referring to them as "all these generations or something" (67). Rather than reaching out to his relatives, he tries to explain his fascination with computers to his father: "I tried to explain to him about bulletin boards creating a world community--global network and such as that" (69). However, his fascination with Uncle Grove and his storytelling--combined with a fishing trip with his father, Faison, and Uncle Grove--gives Morgan a new interest in his family.

By the end of the novel, Morgan is starting to follow in Uncle Grove's footsteps, becoming a storyteller himself. He accompanies his father and Uncle Grove on an airplane flight in which they are transporting rattlesnakes for Faison's friend Jimmy. The plane crashes, and the rattlesnakes are freed. Morgan, with Uncle Grove's coaching, must shoot one of the snakes. Morgan later describes parking at the lake with his girlfriend Teresa and telling her the story of the plane flight and the snakes. He explains, "It was in me like an explosion waiting to get out. The story" (201). Morgan is delighted with the effect that his story has on Teresa and treats his story as a concrete object: "I'm glad I've got that story, now. The snake story. It'll last me my whole life" (206).

At the very end of In Memory of Junior, Edgerton carries his experimentation with the unreliability of stories and storytellers to its most extreme point. Wilma

Fuller has just told Miss Ivy Terrell the story that Uncle Grove concocted about Evelyn's deserting Glenn and his children because she had a fatal disease. Wilma remains appalled that anyone could leave a child who was still at her breast. Miss Ivy uses this as a catalyst for her own story: "You know my little brother, Fred, was so long breast-feeding that my mama finally told him that if he'd just stop, for gracious sakes, she'd let him start smoking" (214). In The Floatplane Notebooks, Albert Copeland tells exactly the same story about Uncle Hawk (50). The implication of these two stories, attributed to different characters in different books, is that neither may be true. The joke is likely a regional one told in many families about whoever is readily available as the butt of a joke.

Therefore, storytelling and its relation to truth is important throughout In Memory of Junior. Donna Lee Frega calls the novel "a poignantly disturbing consideration of the politics of history, the process of exclusion and validation that allows certain 'facts' to be remembered, repeated and, finally, considered relevant enough to be recorded as objective truth (history)" (187). As in The Floatplane Notebooks, the reader must assemble a comprehensible story from the many fragments, which sometimes contradict each other, provided by the different narrators. Stories which are important to family identity, such as the reason for Evelyn's desertion of Glenn and her

children and Tate's heroics in Vietnam, are revealed piece by piece as the novel progresses. Furthermore, storytelling--like attitudes about family, food, race, and religion--serves as a source of tension between different generations of Southerners. Early in the novel, Morgan Bales has little use for all of the family's stories about itself. However, as the novel progresses and he meets his Uncle Grove, Morgan becomes hooked on these stories and even becomes a storyteller himself.

Storytelling is another element in Edgerton's depiction of a South in transition. Several characters who are representative of the South as it has been--Raney Bell Shepherd and her family, Mattie Rigsbee, Albert Copeland, and Grove McCord--enjoy storytelling. However, others--Charles Shepherd, Robert Rigsbee, and Rhonda Copeland--see storytelling as a part of a Southern upbringing that they are trying to overcome. Charles does not enjoy his visits with Raney's family, which consist primarily of family stories. Robert Rigsbee expresses his disdain at hearing the same stories over and over. After Rhonda deserts Meredith and the Copeland family, she lists storytelling as one of the things from which she has fled. However, Morgan Bales, in In Memory of Junior, provides a link between these two groups of characters. At first he is uninterested in his family and its stories; however, as the novel progresses, he learns to appreciate them and even

becomes a storyteller himself.

In conclusion, storytelling is another important aspect of Southern distinctiveness. Since the South's frontier days, Southerners have valued the spoken word. In a culture where people were isolated from one another and were, for the most part, illiterate, stories provided both news and entertainment. Much family and regional history was passed along from generation to generation by storytellers. This oral tradition has proved a strength for family cohesiveness and for Southern writers who have relied heavily on it for their stories and novels. At the same time, the South's storytelling has often served to perpetuate a version of Southern history that either modifies or overlooks the experiences of a large portion of its population, namely those of black people. Edgerton captures the complexity of the South's storytelling tradition in his novels, and his ambivalence toward this topic is typical of his treatment of most aspects of Southern distinctiveness.

Chapter VII

Conclusion

In her 1988 essay, "A Disappearing Subject Called the South," Josephine Humphreys states, "To tell the truth, the South is once again in ruin" (214). Several contemporary Southern writers echo this sentiment as they portray a South that has experienced sweeping changes that make it less distinctive from the rest of the nation than it has been in the past. These changes include, but are certainly not limited to, a diminished importance of family and community, changes in the nature and significance of food and cooking, moderation of attitudes about religion and race, and a diminished importance of storytelling. Focusing on these changes, one might be tempted to suggest that any distinctiveness that the South may have once had is gone or is disappearing. However, it is difficult to say when this period of change began: the concern for a disappearing culture has been a primary concern of Southerners and Southern writers for over a hundred and fifty years. In Louis Rubin's essay in The Prevailing South, "Changing, Enduring, Forever Still in the South," he argues that the tension between the South's past and present has always been the defining characteristic of the South and of Southern Literature: "It may well be that it is the impact of change itself . . . upon a society aspiring to permanence that has most of all characterized

the Southern literary imagination." (229). Indeed, in The Yemassee by William Gilmore Simms, published in 1835 and arguably the first Southern novel, a defense of the status quo is central to the novel. When a slave is freed by his master, he argues that his master has always taken good care of him and that he wouldn't know what to do with freedom if he had it (400). Of course, the Civil War and the subsequent reconstruction did bring lasting change to the South and reinforced in the minds of many Southerners the notion that change was to be avoided at all costs. In fact, much of the mythology of the "Old South" was created after the war by those who attempted to create a version of the antebellum South that never existed in order to contrast it with what they saw as the fallen state of the South after the war. In the early twentieth century, the focus of this obsession with change turned to the loss of an agrarian way of life. Twelve Southern writers published I'll Take My Stand, arguing that the South should maintain its agrarian identity in the face of changes being brought about by technology and industry. Allen Tate suggests that the South entered the twentieth century with a backward glance, at least as interested in its past as its future. As the twentieth century has progressed, these changes have continued and accelerated. The Civil Rights movement of the later twentieth century has brought significant changes to the region in terms of the treatment of and attitudes about

its black population.

In Clyde Edgerton's five novels, he captures the changes in all of these facets of Southern life during the recent past, as well as the South's resistance to change. He consistently portrays the contemporary South in transition. The older characters and those representative of traditional Southern values often look back in fond remembrance of simpler times when people worked the land and took care of one another in small, closely-knit communities and large, closely-knit families. These people have a strong connection to the places that they live and the land that either they or their descendants have farmed.

Edgerton also depicts a younger generation that represents a newer Southern sensibility. This generation rejects many of the values of the older generation. They believe that the values of their parents represent an idealized version of a South that never existed, a South that, in reality, was responsible for great social evils and individual repression. Edgerton consistently depicts the tension between these two sensibilities. Edgerton handles the tension so adeptly that it is difficult to determine what Edgerton himself feels about the changes that have occurred and continue to occur in the South. In fact, Edgerton's depiction reveals a deep-seated ambivalence about these changes.

Edgerton portrays close-knit families and communities

as a source of great strength and comfort for characters such as Raney Bell Shepherd, Mattie Rigsbee, Bliss Copeland, and Glenn Bales. Raney represents a traditional Southern mindset. She is from a small community, she is from a large, close-knit family who visit one another on a regular basis, and she readily adopts the values of her community as her own and rejects those that come from outside her community. Raney's family and community are a constant source of support for her. In Walking Across Egypt, Mattie Rigsbee places great importance on family. In fact, she has achieved much of her identity in life by caring for her children--feeding them, clothing them, and helping them with homework. When her children become adults, Mattie is eager to have grandchildren. In The Floatplane Notebooks, Bliss Copeland is from a family quite different from those of Raney and Mattie. However, she marries Thatcher Copeland, who is from a large, closely-knit family. She is eager to leave behind her own family and take her position in a new one that represents more traditional Southern ways. Bliss idealizes the family and relishes its traditions and stories. In In Memory of Junior, Glenn Bales lies on his deathbed thinking about his ancestors and descendants and lamenting that the younger generation will not have the same sort of support system he has had.

While family and community serve as important sources

of support for these characters, they are obstacles to be overcome by another set of characters which includes Charles Shepherd, Elaine Rigsbee, Rhonda Copeland, and Evelyn McCord. Charles Shepherd, unlike his wife Raney, is from Atlanta, is an only child who rarely sees anyone from his family except his parents, and values the information he can read in books more than that available in his community. He does not appreciate most of Raney's family and dreads family gatherings. In Walking Across Egypt, Elaine Rigsbee is not eager to start a family of her own. She is thirty-eight years old and resents her mother's constant queries regarding her social life. In The Floatplane Notebooks, Rhonda Copeland is a foil to Bliss. While Bliss readily assimilates the customs of the Copelands, Rhonda rejects them and finally flees the family which she feels stifles her individuality. In In Memory of Junior, it is Glenn Bales's wife, Evelyn, who flees. She had married Glenn thinking that one day she could convince him to move away from his family. When she finds that this is not the case, she leaves, having fallen in love with a woman.

Therefore, Edgerton's treatment of Southern families and communities reveals his ambivalence about change in the South. To many characters, the traditional, close-knit families and communities are an invaluable source of support; to others they are agents of oppression and forces

to be overcome. The same can be said of Edgerton's treatment of food and cooking in the South. Southern cooking and food can be either a source of both nutrition and family and community building or an unwanted female responsibility.

Those for whom cooking is important include Charles Shepherd, Mattie Rigsbee, Bliss Copeland, and Wesley Benfield. While Charles rejects many of the values of Raney, Southern cooking is a value which he readily adopts.

He learns from Raney's Aunt Flossie how to cook apple pies and also learns to like fried okra, which near the beginning of the novel he is forced to eat against his will. In fact, near the end of the novel, he prepares a home-cooked Southern meal for some friends of his who have recently moved to North Carolina from New York. In Walking Across Egypt, Mattie Rigsbee achieves her self-esteem from her ability to care for others, especially through her cooking. She not only feeds her family and friends but also goes to the local juvenile prison to feed a teenager whom she has heard about. Her cooking serves the dual roles of ministering to others and reinforcing her own independence. In The Floatplane Notebooks, Bliss Copeland readily adopts her role of cook within the Copeland family, reporting that she brought brownies to one of the family's gravecleanings as her contribution to the effort. In Killer Diller, Wesley Benfield has learned cooking from his

surrogate grandmother, Mattie Rigsbee. Whenever he finds himself in a kitchen, he prepares a home-cooked meal for himself and others.

On the other hand, characters such as Elaine Rigsbee and Rhonda Copeland see cooking as an unwanted female responsibility. Elaine Rigsbee asks her mother why career goals cannot be as important as kitchen goals to a woman, a question which her mother can hardly understand. However, Elaine does find herself at one point in the story wishing that she could cook like her mother. In The Floatplane Novels, Rhonda Copeland is once again a foil to Bliss. While Bliss enjoys taking care of family members, Rhonda lists cooking as one of the reasons that she flees from the family. She does not believe that, as a woman, she should be relegated to the kitchen. She would rather be on the road with a band, singing.

Edgerton's ambivalence about change in the South extends into the realm of religion as well. A conservative, Protestant religion with an emphasis on personal salvation is a great source of support for Raney Bell Shepherd, Mattie Rigsbee, and Esther Oakley. Raney is a Free Will Baptist who vehemently argues for the practices of her church and against any that are foreign to her. She often refers to her personal relationship with Jesus as central to her life. Mattie Rigsbee also places great importance on church. She is the vice-president of her

Sunday school class and coordinator of the Lottie Moon giving drive. When she goes to feed Wesley Benfield at the juvenile prison, she does so with the purpose of fulfilling the Biblical admonition to "do unto the least of these my brethren." Before she goes to bed at night, she often plays hymns at her piano. In The Floatplane Notebooks, Esther Oakley is an upright Christian who encourages her son Mark to become a Christian musician.

However, each of these characters tries to impose her beliefs on a husband or child who rejects this type of religion. Charles Shepherd believes that his wife's unquestioning faith is naive, and he seeks a religion that is less involved with petty morality and more involved with social issues. Robert Rigsbee tells his mother that he is tired of hearing her quote scripture. Mark Oakley spends his childhood and younger adolescence trying to live up to his mother's strict expectations. However, he eventually rebels, drinking and buying the services of prostitutes. As a result of his experiences in Vietnam and his rejection of his mother's values, he seems, at the end of the novel, to have completely lost his sense of morality.

While Edgerton never espouses racist views, he does portray the tension over race that permeates many social issues in the South, and he expresses the fears of many white Southerners that their base of power is eroding and that many other social evils are a result of the loss of

this base of power. Edgerton depicts the social evils of slavery and racism, revealing how a black man could be lynched without a trial in the nineteenth century and how many contemporary Southerners still believe themselves to be superior by virtue of their white skin. Raney Shepherd and her family often use the word "nigger" to refer to black people and argue that black people should know their place. In The Floatplane Notebooks, William Copeland blames a black sharecropper for a murder that he had committed and allows the man to be hanged. Three generations later, Meredith Copeland concocts a story about a prowling "nigger" to avoid blame for starting a well-digger, and his cousin Mark prays for forgiveness, sincerely believing that "Jesus would still love [him] if the nigger had been there" (33). In Killer Diller, Ted Sears, president of Ballard University, is constantly worried about the public relations liability of being associated with a half-way house that includes black criminals. In In Memory of Junior, several members of the Bales family express the belief that many societal problems are the result of integration. Jimmy, a friend of Faison, rails against the colleges, whom he has recently read are trying to kill all of the dead white males. He believes that, if colleges stop teaching the works of dead white males, his own base of power will be eroded.

At the same time, Edgerton depicts characters such as

Charles Shepherd, Noralee Copeland, Wesley Benfield, and Morgan Copeland, who reject the racism they see around them, even risking family arguments to state their opinions. Charles engages Raney's family in several arguments about what he perceives as their racist views and, in the end, even convinces Raney to allow Johnny Dobbs, a black man and one of Charles's friends from the army, to be their child's godfather. As an adolescent, Noralee Copeland flirts with a young black man at her school and even considers dating him although she knows that this would make her family very angry. In Killer Diller, when Wesley Benfield learns that Ted Sears is going to end its relationship with halfway house where he lives and file charges against Wesley's black roommate Ben, who has been caught with marijuana, Wesley decides to arrange for the escape of both himself and Ben, even though he is only months away from finishing his own sentence. In In Memory of Junior, Morgan challenges the values of his family, objecting to Uncle Grove's use of the word "nigger" in his stories.

Edgerton depicts family stories as an important source of identity for Raney Bell Shepherd, Mattie Riggsbee, Bliss Copeland, and Uncle Grove McCord. Raney enjoys her visits with her family, which center around family stories and gossip about community members. Her Aunt Flossie and Uncle Nate are two family members whom she admires for their

storytelling abilities. In Walking Across Egypt, Mattie Rigsbee enjoys sharing stories with her sister Pearl. After she is freed from a chair in which she has been trapped, her first impulse is to share the story with someone. Furthermore, both she and her sister Pearl understand Mattie's episode in terms of other stories that they have heard. In The Floatplane Notebooks, Bliss Copeland is eager to absorb as much of the Copeland family history as she can through the stories that they tell, especially those of Aunt Scrap. She views Albert's notebooks as a valuable tool in preserving this family history for her son. In In Memory of Junior, Uncle Grove McCord tells stories whenever possible, and his stories are a major factor in initiating Morgan Bales to the male rituals in the family.

At the same time, others, such as Charles Shepherd, Robert Rigsbee, and Rhonda Copeland find these stories tiresome. Charles Shepherd does not enjoy the weekly visits that he and Raney make to her parent's home, and Raney worries how soon he will start acting bored during each visit. Charles thinks that the family's talk is trivial and would much rather read books. Robert Rigsbee makes light of his mother's stories, telling her that he has heard them before. Rhonda Copeland lists the Copeland family's stories as another of the reasons that she flees from the family and argues that the happy family stories

are in such contrast to those of her own family that they make her feel bad. Moreover, Edgerton shows how these stories can serve to conceal ugly truths about the past as well as conserve important family history. In The Floatplane Notebooks, the only story that remains about Zuba is that he was hanged for murdering a little girl. This story serves to hide the truth of the family's guilt in both the girl's death and in the hanging.

Thus, in these important areas of Southern distinctiveness, Edgerton describes change in both positive and negative terms. In In Memory of Junior, Glenn Bales wonders, "What would that boy of Tate's--I can't remember his name--what would that boy remember? (95), and this is a central question in Edgerton's work. Edgerton presents a South that is, in reality, changing. Charles Shepherd holds meeting to protest nuclear power plants, women like Elaine Rigsbee and Faye prefer careers to cooking, Ballard University begins innovative halfway house and nutrition programs, industries like TechComm Commons build large glass buildings, and boys like Meredith Copeland and Mark fight not to protect the South but in Vietnam, where they lose their legs or sense of morality. Certainly, Edgerton laments some of this change and presents a Southern culture worthy of being preserved. With his description of Caroline and Ross Copeland's brave defiance of Yankee soldiers, with the strong families and close-knit

communities that provide security for Raney Bell Shepherd and Mattie Rigsbee, with the careful descriptions of Southern cooking and the central role of those who cook, with the tradition of storytelling present in all of the novels and which Morgan Bales enters, with Meredith Copeland's insistence that he be the first Copeland buried in the family graveyard after a thirty-year hiatus, Edgerton seems to champion an old South. At the same time, he presents the flaws of the old South. Zuba, a black sharecropper is hanged for a crime committed by a white man; Charles Shepherd, Rhonda Copeland, and Evelyn Bales feel smothered by close-knit families into which they marry; Mattie Rigsbee and Wesley Benfield are ostracized by religious institutions. In his treatment of the contemporary South, Edgerton carefully balances the advantages and disadvantages of attempting to preserve a culture that is rapidly disappearing and presents a few characters like Charles Shepherd and Morgan Bales who are learning to bridge the gap between past and present. The tension between generations and the values that they hold permeates all of Edgerton's work and identifies him with the tradition of the Southern novel for which a resistance to change has always been an underlying theme.

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