

From the ***Atlanta Journal Constitution*** February 20, 2000

**THE REEL SOUTH: FILM TRILOGY TRACES
LITERARY RENAISSANCE FROM 1915 TO
PRESENT** by Don O'Briant

If H.L. Mencken were alive to see Ross Spears's documentary film trilogy on Southern literature, the ascerbic journalist would change his mind about the region he described in 1917 as "the Sahara of the Bozart."

Lambasting the South as a "gargantuan paradise of the fourth-rate," Mencken observed: "Once you have counted James Branch Cabell you will not find a single Southern prose writer who can actually write."

Those comments were mostly true in 1917, Spears says, but shortly after World War I the South underwent an amazing literary renaissance.

Spears' three feature films trace this resurgence and bring to life William Faulkner's famous line, "The past is never dead; it isn't even past," through an effective use of narration, author interviews, archival photographs, dramatic recreations, and the writers' own words. Former U.S. Poet Laureate Rita Dove's narration connects the accounts of individual writers.

The first film in the *Tell About the South* series covers 1915 until 1940 and includes segments on Jean Toomer, the Fugitive Poets of Vanderbilt, the Mississippi Delta Blues Poets, William Faulkner, Thomas Wolfe, Zora Neale Hurston, Margaret Mitchell, Erskine Caldwell and others. Blues composers such as Robert Johnson were included in the film because, as novelist Shelby Foote says in the film, the blues is

"real poetry. It has terrific emotion to it."

By comparing the blues poets to the Fugitive poets of Vanderbilt, Spears emphasizes his point that Southern literature was a partnership of blacks and whites.

"If the Fugitive poets epitomized the cutting edge of high art, the blues poets raised African-American folk culture to the level of genius," Rita Dove notes in the film. "Two rich cultures on parallel tracks, often hidden from one another, but never completely out of view."

The second film, *Prophets and Poets*, tells the stories of Richard Wright, Eudora Welty, Robert Penn Warren, Flannery O'Connor, Ralph Ellison, and other writers in the 1941-1962 period. The third film, *Let Freedom Ring*, covers 1963 until the present and includes interviews with Alice Walker, William Styron, Ernest Gaines, Reynolds Price, Pat Conroy, Lee Smith, Larry Brown and others.

Recently completed, *Let Freedom Ring* will have its world premiere Saturday at a screening of the trilogy at the Rialto Center for the Performing Arts. Plans are to air all three parts of the series on PBS stations late this year or early 2001, Spears says.

"It was quite an undertaking," says Spears, whose 1980 documentary on author James Agee is the only film biography of a major American writer ever to be nominated for an Academy Award.

Spears and company began working on the project, funded primarily by the National Endowment for the Humanities, in 1990. Kenton Coe composed the original score for each film.

"One of the first things we did," Spears says, "was assemble a fine group of consultants, including Lewis Simpson, Louis Rubin, Robert Coles and Henry Louis Gates."

After that it was a matter of convincing some often reclusive writers to agree to on-camera interviews. Cormac McCarthy turned them down, but nearly every other major Southern writer agreed. Alice Walker consented only after two years of communication.

The next challenge was creating a visually interesting film.

"I wanted to use a lot of the authors' own words, of course, and I tried very hard to find the perfect voice to read for each one. The actors' voices combined with the words of the writer create the presence."

One of Spears' goals was to show how Southern literature was really an African-American and European-American creation. "I tried to stress that in each of the three films by pairing a black writer and a white writer. Each presented a portrait of the 20th-century South from a somewhat different angle."

In addition to comparing the Fugitive poets and the blues poets in Part I, Spears pairs Thomas Wolfe and Zora Neale Hurston because they had much in common. Both were larger-than-life characters, they were born around the same time, both moved to New York, and both went back to their roots in order to create their work.

"If there was ever a genius," Alice Walker says in the film, "Hurston was it. She came out of Florida with one dress and one pair of shoes, and created this whole

world, which is not there anymore."

In *Prophets and Poets*, Spears compares Ralph Ellison and Robert Penn Warren "because both were Southerners who moved to the North and became friends. Both were highly intellectual, well-read, extremely ambitious men of letters. And each is known for one big, big novel."

In *Let Freedom Ring*, William Styron is juxtaposed with Ernest Gaines to highlight the differences and similarities in their lives and the ways their careers evolved. Styron's grandfather was a slave owner, and Gaines' grandfather was a slave.

The films have garnered many positive reviews. Lewis Simpson, emeritus editor of the prestigious *Southern Review*, praised *Tell About the South* as "a great story about a remarkable group of storytellers told by another remarkable storyteller."

And, at Georgia State University, Faulkner scholar Thomas McHaney lauded the series as a "unique history of the great literature of the South not only because it makes so many voices visible, but it lets us see and hear the writers and then the writers who talk about the writers. It's unique because it presents together, better than any book I know, more of the great Southern voices, black and white, that made and remade the literature."

Although he was reluctant to tackle such a complex subject at first, Spears acknowledges that it was an ideal project for him. A native of Tennessee, Spears has maintained an interest in Southern literature ever since his days as a student of Reynolds Price's at Duke University. After graduating from film school at

California Institute for the Arts, Spears produced a documentary in 1980 on the life and work of his favorite writer James Agee. Other films followed on the legacy of the Civil War, the Tennessee Valley Authority, and one family living in poverty in America.

His main purpose, he adds, is spreading the word about the South and its writers. And despite the increased homogenization of the region, Spears and the scholars he interviewed predict a bright future. "The consensus is that the South is still a very distinctive place and there are many great Southern writers out there. I don't know if there's anyone on the level of Faulkner, but maybe so. Time will tell."