

You can go home

BY PHILIP MCFEE, ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT EDITOR

With growing frequency and multiplying genres, a literary scene will overshadow its players, losing its characters behind labels. New York had Crane and Capote, the Bay Area the Beats, but, with the growing popularity of The Southern Author and the rise of a nationally accepted North Carolina school of writing, individual Tar Heel talents are often mired in ambiguity.

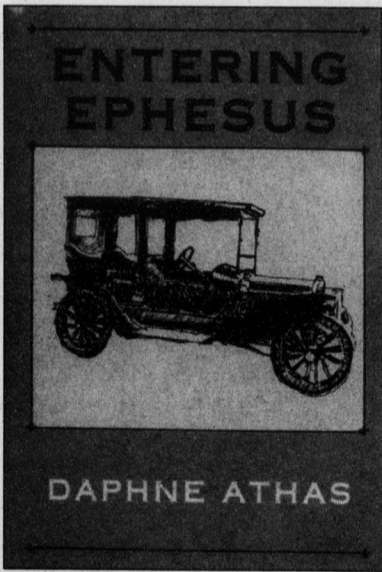
Thomas Wolfe was the progenitor, but the fame has since become a specter — inherent, taken for granted, but undefineable as the family tree's branches spread. This November, in the state's birth month, how many native readers could talk with authority about the current incarnation of North Carolina's ongoing tradition?

The maturation of the state's literary side has ensured not only the establishment of a Tar Heel brand, but a wealth of literature about specific sites within the state. Poets such as Robert Morgan and Kathryn Stripling Byer have captured the mountains while novelists Doris Betts and Clyde Edgerton capture the Piedmont. The state's scene is no longer a realm of assumed status and vague allusion. Familiar settings and engrained culture spring from the pages. A hazy locus has given way to an unfound wealth of works.

North Carolina on the page has become more acute and as a result, readers can now go home again. In multiple genres, generations of intrepid writers have sought to define this place where we live, bringing the craft and the tradition to readers' doorsteps.

By forging unique geographic and cultural identities within the state, its authors have managed to both enrich the cultural record and define what exactly it means to be a North Carolina author.

'Ephesus' offers a Piedmont outsider's perspective



The Chapel Hill area has a strong cultural history — thanks in large to the efforts of patron saint Charles Kuralt and "Light on the Hill" author William Snider. But what many longtime residents can overlook is the town's foreign aspects, its occasional lack of immediacy.

Daphne Athas approaches the Old Chapel Hill and Carrboro in this manner in her novel of childhood "Entering Ephesus," the college town's quintessential novel.

"It's the perfect formula — for a writer to be an outsider in a land that's excruciatingly backward and exciting," said Marianne Gingher, a creative writing professor at UNC and the former director of the program.

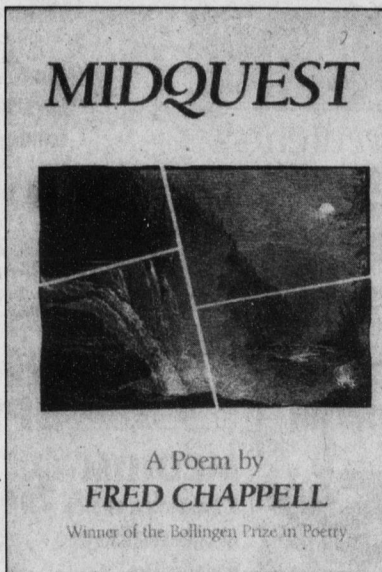
Originally published in the early '70s, the novel, which received high praise and even prompted a well-received British edition, vaulted Chapel Hill to a prominent place in the state's literary canon. Athas, whose roots also extend deep into UNC's creative writing program, examined the town on the hill through innocent eyes, which lent it a detached feel that elevated the quirks and trials of the old Piedmont.

"To me what makes that book so valuable for anyone to read," Gingher said, "is it's an outsider's viewpoint of North Carolina." She referred to its effect as like that of a different civilization, citing its mythic, fairy-tale qualities.

Athas offers a unique view of the state, a perspective all but forgotten by now. Before subdevelopers and big business homogenized the central part of the state, the Piedmont was a radically different place. "Ephesus" peers in on the social and racial stratification that once defined the Old South.

"Ephesus" both adds to the literary tradition and documents the history of the state, a double stab that many state writers also embrace. The wealth of authors both writing and teaching in the state continues the literary tradition and cuts through the generalities that define the Southern author.

Native son's verse encapsulates Tar Heel culture



Prolific North Carolina novelist and teacher Lee Smith once said, "Anybody who knows anything about Southern writing knows that Fred Chappell is our resident genius, the one truly great writer we have among us."

Chappell, former state poet laureate, whose almost four-decade career has produced notable works in both verse and prose, interwove characters and themes from his four early novels, building up to "Midquest," his poetic magnum opus. The four part work, "something like a verse novel" as he dubbed it, combines four elemental long poems in a work that approaches the natural while highlighting the autobiographical. It's a work that highlights the mountains and the entire state while delving into the consciousness of one of its most respected authors.

The sections blend, as do cultural influences and flashbacks, throughout the volume's duration. Chappell addresses topics from childhood to correspondence with eastern North Carolina poet James Applewhite.

Gingher emphasized the former laureate's deep connections to the imagery he invokes in his understated Tar Heel "Divine Comedy."

"(Chappell) writes from an insider's perspective of the state," she said.

Michael McFee, the father of this article's writer and the editor of an anthology about N.C. poetry, cites Chappell's poetry and his corresponding novels as prime examples of literature that embodies his home state.

"If anybody is reading N.C. poetry 300 years from now, 'Midquest' is the one great book that they'll hold up as an example," he said.

The dichotomy of perspective presented by Athas' viewpoint and Chappell's musings — visitor and native, Piedmont and mountains — is only a single pairing in the wealth of literature from and about the state.

As North Carolina's state song proclaims, "The Old North State forever," and, thanks to its authors' efforts, its literary longevity is unquestionable.

Edwin Alderman
A.R. Ammons
James Applewhite
Gerald Barrax
John Bassett
Richmond Beatty
Doris Betts



Daphne Athas
Jerry Bledsoe
John Boner
Lillian Jackson Braun
Poppy Brite
Kathryn Stripling Byer
Frances Calhoun
Orson Scott Card
Charles Chestnut
Max Childers
Michael Chitwood
Olive Dargan
Sarah Dessen
Thomas Dixon
Wilma Dykeman
Clyde Edgerton
Inglis Fletcher
Candace Flynt
John Hope Franklin
Charles Frazier
Edwin Wiley Fuller
Kaye Gibbons
Paul Green
Allan Gurganus
Bernice Harris
Carl Hines
George Horton
John Inman
Robert Inman
Randall Jarrell
Gerald Johnson
Jan Karon



Fred Chappell
Romulus Linney
Michael Malone
Margaret Maron
Jill McCorkle
Sharyn McCrumb
Tim McLaurin
John McNeil
Joan Medlicott
Heather Miller
Joseph Mitchell
Robert Morgan
Lawrence Naumoff
Kathy Reichs
Robert Ruark
Louis Rubin
O. Henry
Cathy Pickens
Charles Smith
Lee Smith
Elizabeth Spencer
Thad Stem
Anne Tyler
Richard Walser
Ashley Warlick
Richard Weaver
Manly Wellman
Robert Whitlow
Jonathan Williams
Thomas Wolfe