

# Coming Home in North Carolina

---

Alan T. Belsches

CLARK, JAMES W., JR., ed. *The Lost Boy: A Novella by Thomas Wolfe*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992). 95 pp., illus.; \$9.95 paper.

GINGHER, ROBERT, ed. *The Rough Road Home: Stories by North Carolina Writers*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992). xviii, 332 pp.; \$24.95 cloth, \$14.95 paper.

During the decades between the two world wars, a time now referred to as the Southern Literary Renaissance by scholars of American literature, the state of North Carolina could tout its Thomas Wolfe as a native son equal to the magnificence achieved by William Faulkner, Robert Penn Warren, and Eudora Welty. But since that time as scholars argue whether the Southern Renaissance has continued, whether the South still produces a greater share of the United States' major writers, a shift has occurred from the Deep South to North Carolina as the home of the contemporary South's best writers. As shown in Robert Gingher's *The Rough Road Home*, North Carolina is home to many of the South's best, and the themes and narrative techniques early developed by Thomas Wolfe in his novels like *Look Homeward, Angel* and the novella *The Lost Boy* continue to be important during the last thirty years for the writers selected for this volume.

James W. Clark, of the English Department of North Carolina State University, has edited for the first time the text of Wolfe's *The Lost Boy*, which is in the William B. Wisdom Collection of Thomas Wolfe Papers in the Houghton Library at Harvard University. Although this work was first published in 1937 by *Redbook Maga-*

zine and then included in a posthumous collection of Wolfe's works in *The Hills Beyond* (1941) and in Francis Skipp's *The Complete Short Stories of Thomas Wolfe* (1987), Clark's version is the unexpurgated typescript of the story that Wolfe completed in March 1937. This version retains the Gant family names and emphasizes how it should be read as a continuation of the Gant family saga that Wolfe began in 1929 with his first novel *Look Homeward, Angel* about his fictional North Carolina mountain town of Altamont. That work describes quite closely Wolfe's own family life in Asheville, North Carolina, and his matriculation to the university in Chapel Hill, the fictional Pulpit Hill of his novel.

In *The Lost Boy*, Wolfe recounts the return of his narrator to St. Louis over thirty years after having lived there at the time of the 1904 World's Fair. The mature Eugene Gant attempts to recapture through his memories a sense of his past relationship with his older brother Grover who died there from typhoid fever. Like Faulkner's achievement in *The Sound and the Fury*, Wolfe presents in the four sections of the novella first-person perspectives on Grover Gant. Part I is seen through eleven-year-old Grover's eyes when he experiences a fusion of present and future on the town square of Altamont in 1904, Part II through the mother's eyes as she remembers their train ride to St. Louis, Part III through the sister's eyes as she remembers Grover becoming sick, and Part IV through the eyes of the youngest son Eugene who returns to St. Louis in the 1930s seeking the house they had lived in and attempting to reconstruct memories of his lost brother.

Throughout this novella Wolfe develops fully the common Southern literary themes of the importance of family, class and caste, history, the past, and memory. Throughout each Gant's memories Wolfe explores how the family unit provided a basis of security, a sense of identity, and a means of passing on a sense of tradition and ties to the past. Grover finds security in realizing that he and the town square exist together in the fullness of the present. The strong-willed Mrs. Gant stresses the importance of her son and of all of her family in response to the questions of the doctors. The sister when looking at a photograph of the family has difficulty reconciling her idealistic view of the world as a child with her more realistic view as an adult. And in the final section Wolfe has Eugene Gant realize that the past need not be lost, that through

memory his brother can live on, affecting Eugene's life even after his death more than three decades ago.

Clark has provided scholars and general readers with a valuable version of Wolfe's work that shows his mastery of the short novel form. His careful research and unobtrusive documentation provide an enjoyable version of Wolfe's *The Lost Boy* for all readers.

The biographical ties to North Carolina of the twenty-two contemporary writers included in Gingher's *The Rough Road Home* are not always as strong as those of Thomas Wolfe. Only ten were born in North Carolina, although eighteen live there now. But each has spent considerable time in the Old Catawba state, and its Southern flavor resonates throughout each of the stories, even those not set within its boundaries.

The fifteen short stories and seven excerpts from novels were published from 1964 to 1992, but even those stories written more than fifty years after the publication of Wolfe's first version of *The Lost Boy* retain many of the themes dominant in Wolfe and other writers of the Southern Renaissance. The earliest story, Elizabeth Spencer's "The Fishing Lake" from the 1960s, examines the processes of change, of growing up, and of realizing that home is not the same now as then. In this story a young woman returns home to Mississippi with her alcoholic husband and remembers the lazy afternoons as a youth fishing and stuffing herself at supper with her catch. But in harsh contrast to the sense of family unity and security remembered from her youth, the husband now argues with her mother, and the wife must steal the family's bourbon to satisfy her husband's cravings. Yet all of her youth was not peaceful. She remembers once attempting to make friends with a wild dog who had killed calves. When she was unsuccessful, she recalls that she told the community's hunters where it lived. When the family-made bench collapses on which she and her husband reminisce, Spencer shows that the past cannot be relived in the present. Only memory remains, memories that the main character can only accept now but never change.

Selections from the 1970s are best represented by Doris Betts's "This Is the Only Time I'll Tell It." Betts recounts the violent end of a child abuser whose death comes at the hands of the first-person narrator, a Presbyterian leader and storekeeper in a mountain community. In the 1930s he had helped rescue a nine-month-

old girl from her abusive father by encouraging the Presbyterian congregation to lie to the authorities by saying that a single woman in the community was related to the infant and should raise her. Throughout the decades as the child matured, the storekeeper was responsible for secretly helping the two financially and also for monitoring the father's presence in jail. When the abusive father returns to the community and attempts to contact his daughter, the storekeeper murders him. Throughout the story Betts plays with the themes of religion and community, and through her use of first-person narration, she echoes Wolfe's *The Lost Boy* by having her adult narrator attempt to come to grips with a dreadful moment from his past.

The stories collected from the 1980s include Louis D. Rubin, Jr.'s "The St. Anthony Chorale," another first-person retrospective narrative concerning a young newspaperman's first major job in the small mountainous town of Staunton, Virginia. Like Wolfe's return of the mature Eugene Gant to St. Louis in his attempts to recapture events from his family's past, Rubin has his mature narrator recount his memories of coping with rejection from his fiancée. Only now as an adult does the narrator begin to understand the peace and assurance that hearing Johannes Brahms's variation on a theme by Joseph Haydn, the *St. Anthony Chorale*, was able to bring him then.

Over half of the selections in Gingher's collection were published in the 1990s and here especially one sees the continuance of Southern themes. In Lee Smith's "The Bubba Stories," the first-person narrator from rural McKenney, Virginia, struggles with memories of the stories she concocted in college of a fictitious older brother to assure her acceptance among her upper-class, genteel roommates at her exclusive Virginia women's college. In Kaye Gibbons's "Trudy Woodlief," the first-person narrator recounts experiences from her youth in 1937 when she became friends with Trudy Woodlief, eleven years her senior. Trudy is a would-be flapper who resents the mores of the closed community she moves to, and the narrator's mother, like the storekeeper in Betts's story, takes responsibility to provide for the Woodlief family. Gibbons suggests the closed quality of the community and the narrator's admiration for Trudy, who rejects the community at every step and yet succeeds in winning help from them. And in Elizabeth Cox's "Bargains in the Real World" a father and son search in the

woods for a runaway teen and experience a spiritual awakening that leads them to acknowledge that the old bones they are called to bury are symbolic of their own past that each must bury, the father as he chooses a new wife and the son as he accepts his parents' divorce.

A quotation from T. S. Eliot's "Little Gidding" from *Four Quartets* opens Robert Gingher's collection: "We shall not cease from exploration / And the end of all our exploring / Will be to arrive where we started / And know the place for the first time" (XVIII). In both Thomas Wolfe's novella and Robert Gingher's collection, the authors return home, sometimes literally and sometimes figuratively through memory, to moments from their past in order to achieve a brief epiphany, a time of comfort and solace through which they can return to cope with the present.