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Regional

War between north and south — in literature

The very idea of North and South has played a large role in American history and politics. Yet few people realize the impact that literature has had in this national discussion and debate.

A scholar who understands the cultural importance of literature is Catherine Seltzer. Born in Detroit, Mich., Seltzer grew up in northern Virginia, outside the District of Columbia. All of her higher education took place below the Mason-Dixie line.

Her bachelor's degree is from the College of William and Mary in Virginia. She has a master's degree from the University of Georgia and her doctorate is from the University of North Carolina. Today she is an assistant professor in the department of English language and literature at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville.

"Growing up in northern Virginia was a real experience for me," Seltzer said. "On one hand I was fascinated by the accents, on the other hand, while at the College of William and Mary, I took a history course about how the Civil War was labeled as 'the Northern aggression.' In many ways it really captivated me in a way that captivates non-Southerners."

One of the areas of her research is "Southern renaissance," a period between the 1920s and 1930s when a great number of writers from the South, such as William Faulkner and Tennessee Williams, appeared

Aldemaro Romero College Talk

on the American literary scene.

She has also been looking at the connections between Irish literature and American Southern literature, an interest that began while staying in Dublin, Ireland, and seeing the many associations between the two.

"We can see ourselves as a culture tied to the world because of immigration," Seltzer said.

An important point that Seltzer has learned from her studies is just how large the divide is between the literature and the intellectuals of the North and the South.

"There are real and profound differences between the two with real differences of opinion, from simple things such as making barbecue sauce to conflicting views on literary history," she explained. "Southern literature like 'Gone with the Wind' has addressed questions of race more brutally and directly. At times, they call into question their own understanding of issues of race."

Not only does the vision of race differ between North and South, Seltzer said, but also that of gender. "The role of gender between North and South in literature has been different. The iconoclastic Southern Belle image is still happening in the Southern literature," she said.



Catherine Seltzer at work; photo by Kristine Hildebrandt.

Seltzer is currently working on a book about Southern author Pat Conroy, who wrote "The Great Santini," the film version of which starred Robert Duvall as the abusive father and Marine.

"He (Conroy) is a very autobiographical

writer, so it was based on his own family experience," said Seltzer. "In fact, the novel was used as evidence in the divorce trial between his parents. He has a rich personal history with a painful past that he addresses."

Another of Conroy's books is "The Lords of Discipline," in which he addresses issues of harsh discipline, racism and sexism in a Southern military academy. "One of the questions of my research is how a male author tackles issues that affect women," said Seltzer.

Another famous book by Conroy is "The Prince of Tides," whose cinematic version with Barbra Streisand and Nick Nolte was highly acclaimed. "You can get disappointed when you see a movie based on a novel you have read, but the movie creates a wider audience that's good for literature," she said.

Since Conroy is still alive, one wonders what are the advantages and disadvantages of writing a book about an author who is still around.

"The main advantage is that he or she is there to answer your questions. The main disadvantage is that you are always afraid of hurting that person's feelings," Seltzer said. "Conroy has been very open with me."

At SIUE, Seltzer researches and teaches feminist literature, which she defines as that which "depicts women's experiences in

ways that respond to and often reject expectations of a larger society."

By teaching how literature conveys issues of race and gender, she hopes that students will open their minds. "We are now more aware of listening to all voices, whether gender, immigration, or class differences," Seltzer said.

"I think we are moving in the right direction. Yet, sometimes literature is ahead and sometimes it is behind the reality of our times."

How does she see her work affecting her students at SIUE?

"I don't know how many of them will become writers or scholars, but I hope that they will see the world as a more complicated place than what they initially thought, regardless of what they do," said Seltzer.

And what about the future of reading? Will new generations, with their fascination with electronic devices, stop reading books on paper? Seltzer said she doesn't think so.

"A large part of the population will continue wanting to experience the feeling of having a book in their hands," she said.

Aldemaro Romero is the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. His show, "Segue," can be heard every Sunday morning at 9 a.m. on WSIE, 88.7 FM. He can be reached at College_Arts_Sciences@siue.edu.