



## **The Oxford Book of the American South: Testimony, Memory, and Fiction**

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# The Oxford Book of the American South: Testimony, Memory, and Fiction

## The Oxford Book of the American South: Testimony, Memory, and Fiction

*The Oxford Book of the American South* resonates with the words of black people and white, women and men, the powerless as well as the powerful. The collection presents the most telling fiction and nonfiction produced in the South from the late eighteenth century to the present. Renowned authors such as James Agee, Richard Wright, Maya Angelou, Lee Smith, Eudora Welty, William Faulkner, and Flannery O'Connor appear in these pages, but so do people whose writing did not immediately reach a large audience. For example, Harriet A. Jacobs' book *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, which is now recognized as one of the most illuminating narratives of a former slave, was neglected for generations. And Sarah Morgan's powerful *Civil War Diary* has only recently come to widespread attention. The *Oxford Book of the American South* presents compelling autobiographies, diaries, memoirs, and journalism as well as stories and selections from novels, and runs the spectrum from the conservative to the radical, the traditional to the innovative. Editors Edward L. Ayers and Bradley C. Mittendorf have arranged these diverse readings so that they fit together into a rich mosaic of Southern life and history. The sections of the book *The Old South*, *The Civil War and Its Consequences*, *Hard Times*, and *The Turning* unfold a vivid record of life below the Mason Dixon line. We see the antebellum period both from the perspective of those who experienced it first-hand, such as Thomas Jefferson and former slaves Olaudah Equiano and Frederick Douglass, and then from the perspective of authors looking back on that era, including William Styron and Sherley Anne Williams. Likewise, we see the Civil War through the eyes of witnesses such as Sam Watkins, through the eyes of later writers trying to make sense of the conflict, such as Robert Penn Warren, and through the eyes of those using the war's intense passions to fuel their fiction, such as Margaret Mitchell and Barry Hannah. The classic authors of the Southern Renaissance in the 1920s and 1930s appear here in the context of the hard times in which they wrote. The years since World War II are chronicled in the powerful words of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "Letter from Birmingham Jail," George Garrett's "Good bye, Good bye, Be Always Kind and True," and Peter Taylor's "The Decline and Fall of the Episcopal Church, in the Year of Our Lord 1952." The editors have selected these readings, their Preface tells us, to convey "the passions that have surfaced time and again in more than two hundred years of Southern writing." Indeed, the struggles, defeats, and triumphs chronicled in *The Oxford Book of the American South* speak not just to the South, but to all of the American experience. They document and evoke some of the most dramatic episodes in the nation's life

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