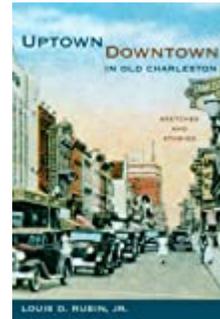




Louis D. Rubin, Jr. *Uptown/Downtown in Old Charleston: Sketches and Stories.* Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2010. x + 114 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-57003-909-6.



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Rubin Returns to Charleston

Louis D. Rubin Jr. contributed to the invention of the modern academic study of southern literature. He coedited the groundbreaking book, *Southern Renaissance* (1953), contributed to such influential studies as *South: Modern Southern Literature in Its Cultural Setting* (1961) and *Southern Literary Study: Problems and Possibilities* (1975), was on the faculty at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill for decades, and cofounded Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill. Rubin not only presided over but also actively shaped the trajectory of southern studies in the second half of the twentieth century. His new book, *Uptown/Downtown in Old Charleston*, returns to Rubin's memories of the sights, sounds, and people that formed his earliest understanding of southern culture and his own sense of southern identity.

Though *Uptown/Downtown in Old Charleston* presents itself as "Sketches and Stories" of Rubin's boyhood in that iconic city, before he had begun his professional life, the enormous shadows cast by Rubin's career make it difficult to read this slim little volume entirely on its own terms. On the back cover, popu-

lar southern writers Pat Conroy, Lee Smith, and Clyde Edgerton testify to its warm, honest charms (Edgerton calls it "among the best nine innings of history you'll ever read"), but teachers and scholars of southern literature will find deeper meaning in Rubin's stories than nostalgic evocations of old-time wharves, harbors, and pickup baseball games. In his "Author's Note," Rubin returns to an old conversation about competing literary claims to "authenticity" by admitting that "by no means everything in what follows actually took place, and, of what did, not necessarily as described—or even to me." He terms the stories "genre fiction," and notes that the "authenticity being aimed at was not that of the recording historian" (p. ix). Such warnings are nothing new in literature, of course—though they sometimes become less innocuous at important intersections of history and personality (think the reception to William Styron's *The Confessions of Nat Turner* in 1966). Because Rubin carries the enormous gravitas of more than fifty years of helping students, scholars, and writers articulate the notion of southern "authenticity," however, thoughtful readers

of southern literature might perk up their ears at Rubin's willingness to announce the word on the very first page of his book.

Such scholars as Martyn Bone and Michael Kreyling have seen in Rubin's career not only the guiding intelligence behind southern studies but also fundamental political assumptions about where the value of such a discipline might lie. Bone (*The Postsouthern Sense of Place in Contemporary Fiction* [2005]) and Kreyling (*Inventing Southern Literature* [1998]) identify Rubin's initial formulations of a southern literary canon as indebted to an agrarian ideal of "image" and "sense of place," marked by a resistance to political and material realities that might trouble such abstractions. As the past fifty years have dramatically increased where we look to find southern culture—consider recent recognitions of Central American and Caribbean "Souths"—Rubin's focus has expanded, but contemporary critics often claim that the source of his interest has not changed significantly. As Bone notes, "throughout his career Rubin has tended to emphasize the 'continuity' of, rather than 'changes' in, 'the South' and 'Southern literature.'" [1]. Kreyling articulates this quality of Rubin's career by claiming that Rubin's work "strives toward the establishment of the South as an 'image' ... or mode of being immune to historical contingency and the call to action." [2] Bone and Kreyling are interested in Rubin's role as a critic—and primarily in how he played that role in the crucial decades of the 1950s through the 1970s—but their emphasis on Rubin's investment in the "South-as-image" provides a compelling vantage point from which to begin a reading of this new collection of stories.

Uptown/Downtown in Old Charleston consists of a prologue, nine short stories (or "sketches"), and an epilogue; together they capture a series of scenes in the narrator's life in Charleston from the second grade (in the early 1930s) to his first days as a journalist in 1950. The prologue maps the following stories by establishing a distinction between downtown Charleston (historical, cultural, and genteel) and uptown Charleston (middle class and unromantic). It then focuses on a loving examination of Adger's Wharf and its boats, which the narrator cherishes in his memory for "the unique fusion, geographical, psychological, and cultural, of the two Charlestons that they offered to my imagination" (p. 6). From its opening pages, then, *Uptown/Downtown* does what literary scholars might expect from Rubin—it focuses on images weighted down with presumed imaginative significance, while claiming that those images are memorable because they are the most visual signs of material conditions and

historical dividing lines. The initial difference between downtown and uptown presages further distinctions: between Orthodox and Reform Judaism, between the generation that had been through the First World War and the one that would fight the Second, and between work and leisure.

Like the early stories from James Joyce's *Dubliners* (1914), married with the American boyhood escapades in an E. L. Doctorow novel, the images in *Uptown/Downtown* range from the archetypal to the idiosyncratically personal. In "Riddle Me This," the narrator is haunted by the song of a Jewish cantor and the gradual awareness of his own Jewishness. "The Left-Handed Glove" helps transform baseball from a pastime to a statement of personal identity, while the narrator builds a homemade boat and dares himself to venture out into the Cooper River in "Finisterre." Though complex, the stories are brief enough to ensure that the meanings underlying the images are suggested more than exhorted. Rubin's "memories" are stark and naturalistic, but they avoid Joycean epiphanies; the most engaging episodes suggest not that memory allows access to profound issues but that the process of recalling memory is itself an important issue. Rubin's narrator rarely reveals what his memories mean—for him or for the larger social fabric in which they occur. Instead, he dwells on what it feels like to remember in the present that peculiar sense of import when the event first occurred.

In one subdued episode, the narrator's family meets a strangely overdramatic man at the beach near the treasured Ferris wheel, who entertains the children with tales of piloting derring-do. When the family visits what they believe to be the man's house to deliver a message to his family, Rubin captures an austere combination of scene and feeling that avoids a resolution of either: "I took it all in—the weatherworn look of the small house, the coming storm, the absence of the man at the beach, the presence of the woman and little girl waiting for him to come home—as with a terrible dreariness. Why did what I now saw appear so wretched?" (p. 41). The narrator and his sister speculate about whether the missing man might have been drunk, about whether he had really been a pilot at all. The man's identity and relationship to the family in the battered bungalow are never resolved, but the memory of witness and the ability "to see objects off in the distance" (via Ferris wheel, family car headlights, or memory) remain to be treasured (p. 43).

The book's most fully developed images are associated with trains and baseball. The tiny "Boll Wee-

vilâ train carries Charlestonâs black population between Georgia and North Carolina, and the narrator bides his time at local baseball games hoping to see the train on the move. He remains frustrated, however: "And just as I never saw it arrive, but only looked up to see it there, so I never saw it leave. The ball game would reclaim my attention, and later when I would look again it would be gone" (p. 48). He sees the tiny engine in the station, and feels its absence when it has pulled away, but can never catch a glimpse of it either coming or going. The potential richness of such an image—with its suggestions of stunted racial progress and guilt on the part of the writer-to-be who wants to see but cannot—never quite comes to the forefront of Rubinâs narrative. Like the little Boll Weevil itself, connections between material conditions and the memories that might reveal them remain tantalizingly out of reach. When the narrator takes his first adventurous train ride to Richmond to see a real professional baseball game, the quality of the play and of the "full-fledged passenger trains with strings of day coaches and Pullmans and diners" mark his growing awareness of a larger world (p. 56). That larger world momentarily intrudes into his own Charleston backyard one day when a spectacular and unprecedented play in the local ballpark momentarily eclipses the glory of the big leagues. The sight of the Boll Weevil sitting in its accustomed place, however, reminds the narrator that he is "back in my own country again" (p. 57).

By the end of the collection, Rubinâs narrator is taking his first steps toward his literary career by writing for a newspaper in Staunton, Virginia. Nevertheless, the trains still come and go, and his determination to watch and hear them, to experience them for no purpose but for the emotional pleasure they provide, becomes a part of his developing selfhood: "I felt a measure of pride in

my separateness, a sense of resolution in being as I was, alone in the nighttime in a mountain town where I knew almost nobody" (p. 96). Though Rubin almost never comments on any traditionally "southern" elements of his character—and indeed, Charlestonâs own status as a site of southern cultural identity fades as the book develops—Rubinâs narrative tableaux are reminiscent of the South that he has taught and studied for so many years: independent, transcendent, and sparkling with a significance that is deeply felt but not entirely revealed. Rubin admits as much in the "Authorâs Note"—on the very page on which he confesses his fondness for an "authenticity" that evades historicism: "Some of what I failed to see when it lay all around me is difficult to credit. I am thinking in particular to matters of civil rights and economics" (p. ix). Conscientious readers and teachers of southern literature will likely find themselves more than willing to enjoy Rubinâs tales—but they will also find ways to "credit" these omissions and take it upon themselves to see vividly what Rubinâs narrator so often finds himself unable to say.

Rubinâs stories thus embody one of the most conspicuous problems of writing and teaching about a culture as continually in flux as the American South. In the course of a lifetime, such a gifted writer and thinker as Rubin must account for his professional understanding of the regionâs limitations—but he must also account for the personal blindness that comes with having lived them.

Notes

[1]. Martyn Bone, *The Postsouthern Sense of Place in Contemporary Fiction* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2005), 34.

[2]. Michael Kreyling, *Inventing Southern Literature* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1998), 45.

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