THOMAS WOLFE AND LOST CHILDREN

in Southern Literature

PAULA GALLANT ECKARD

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PAULA GALLANT **ECKARD**

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To my family, especially my amazing granddaughters,
Julianna, Amelia, Daphne, Violet, and Samantha Eckard,
and
to Joseph M. Flora

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INTRODUCTION

> . . . poor child, life's stranger and life's exile, lost, like all of us, a cipher in blind mazes, long ago—my parent, friend, and brother, the lost boy, was gone forever and would not return.
>
> —EUGENE GANT in *The Lost Boy*

THOMAS WOLFE'S MOVING ACCOUNT OF HIS SEARCH for his lost older brother Grover in the novella *The Lost Boy* stands as a narrative jewel in the writer's oeuvre. Haunting and elegiac in its treatment of a sibling's life and death, *The Lost Boy* captures the lostness that informed much of Wolfe's fiction. The four-part novella, told through the perspectives of various family members, including Grover himself months before his death at the age of twelve, was one of the last works by Wolfe published during his lifetime. It reveals an acute sense of lost time and youth, perhaps his most pervasive theme. *The Lost Boy* first appeared in edited form in *Redbook Magazine* in November of 1937, just ten months before Wolfe's untimely death from tuberculous meningitis at Johns Hopkins Hospital. His rendering of loss and lostness provides a sensitive expression of human sympathy, stemming in part from the world in which he lived. *The Lost Boy* spans a thirty-year period marked by profound loss on many fronts—World War I; the 1918 influenza pandemic that claimed Grover's twin brother, Ben; the Great Depression; and the beginnings of another cataclysmic world war. These events contribute to the narrative backdrop against which personal suffering and loss are cast. In its artistic treatment of lostness, *The Lost Boy* creates a significant literary legacy. It gives name to the theme of lost children that has permeated much of southern literature and provides a template of sorts for telling their stories.

This study grows out of my years of teaching *The Lost Boy* and other works of southern literature, several of which are included here. As students would discuss the readings assigned for a particular course, they often found commonalties that linked the works to each other and that always seemed to circle back to *The Lost Boy.* For them, Wolfe's novella became a benchmark, a poignant exemplar, for understanding childhood loss and lostness. *The Lost Boy*'s exceptional aesthetic and narrative qualities make it a compelling, teachable text. I have found that students respond to its portrayal of family tragedy with a knowing sympathy that bridges Wolfe's generation and theirs. For many, the story hits close to home, its pervasive sense of loss mirroring their emotions following the death of a sibling, a parent, or other close family member.

During a recent class discussion of *The Lost Boy,* a student told about the loss of an older brother who, like Grover, became an idealized, absent figure at the core of their family. She explained that reading Wolfe's novella helped her to understand the terrible grief surrounding her brother's death, including her parents' sustained feelings of loss and their desire to hold onto his memory. For another student, *The Lost Boy* opened a door long closed and gave her the opportunity to discuss past trauma. I noticed that the student, who was older than her classmates, seemed quiet and, at times, sad. My efforts to draw her out during the semester fell short, but that changed when we met to discuss her paper on *The Lost Boy.* During our meeting, the student disclosed that, at age twelve, she had witnessed her father brutally murder her mother. The student had received counseling at the time but had not spoken about the event again until her meeting with me more than fifteen years later. Her essay topic—Wolfe's depiction of the role of time and memory in mourning—hinted at a deeper struggle to understand the workings of these elements in her own life. I thought about her similarities with Grover and how, at the same age as the lost boy, she must have experienced a death of self when her mother was killed. During our conversation, I suggested to the student that she might want to explore her loss more fully. I told her that it was never too late to deal with the past, adding that her adult perspective, along with a therapist in the counseling center, could be very useful in the process. Because the semester soon ended, I do not know if the student sought further help, but I am certain that *The Lost Boy* opened the door to that possibility and to telling her difficult story.

In a somewhat different encounter, another student tearfully described the grief he felt after reading *The Lost Boy.* He said the novella caused him to think about his grandmother and how much she had meant to him over his lifetime. Thinking this was a recent loss, I responded, "I am so sorry. When did you lose your grandmother?" The student replied, "Oh, she's not dead . . . she's fine. I was just thinking about how much I'll miss her when she *is* gone." As these responses affirm, *The Lost Boy* enables readers to explore complex dimensions of grief, including its physical and emotional effects, its recursive nature, and the role of time and memory in mourning lost loved ones. Through reading *The Lost Boy,* my students were able to consider the past, present, and future implications of loss in their lives, a feat that few books I have taught have accomplished so profoundly.

Unquestionably, the autobiographical underpinnings of *The Lost Boy* contribute to the work's realism and emotional resonance. Wolfe began writing the novella after a visit to St. Louis in September 1935, following a trip out west where he had spoken at the Writers' Conference at the University of Colorado. He also ventured to Hollywood, San Francisco, Reno, and Salt Lake City before heading to St. Louis. Wolfe planned from the outset of his western trip to locate the St. Louis boardinghouse that his mother had operated and where his brother Grover had died. His visit to the house, which he claimed to remember very well, was chronicled in an interview with the *St. Louis Star-Times.* Wolfe mentions finding the house at the corner of Cates (previously named Fairmount) and Academy avenues and speaking to a woman who lived there. According to *Star-Times* reporter Reed Hynds, Wolfe startled the woman by telling her "his brother had died in that room 'right there'" (46–47). The emotional impact of the visit was enormous and prompted "a seething" within him that resulted two years later in *The Lost Boy,* a work that scholar Richard Kennedy describes as Wolfe's "most intense treatment of the search for lost time" (290).

Although written as a novella, *The Lost Boy* was first published as a short story in *Redbook,* with the title character named Robert instead of Grover. Wolfe earned $1,500 from the magazine for this abridged version, the most he had ever received for a story (Clark x). He used some of the money to travel from New York to Asheville in the spring of 1937. It was his first time home after more than seven years of self-exile following the publication of *Look Homeward, Angel* in 1929, which had stirred hard feelings among

Asheville residents and Wolfe's own family. He returned to Asheville again later that summer for "a longer, working vacation" (x). A year later and three weeks shy of his thirty-eighth birthday, Wolfe was dead—an immense talent silenced too soon. After Wolfe's death, another short version of *The Lost Boy* appeared in *The Hills Beyond* (1941), a collection of stories edited by his last editor, Edward Aswell, to whom Wolfe had given a large body of unpublished material several months before his death. Decades later, Francis E. Skipp reprinted the *Redbook* story in *The Complete Short Stories of Thomas Wolfe* (1987).

The definitive version of *The Lost Boy* appeared with James W. Clark Jr.'s edition in 1992, the year that marked the centennial birthday of Grover Wolfe. Clark's search for the original text of *The Lost Boy* took him to the William B. Wisdom Collection of Wolfe papers at Harvard University's Houghton Library. In his edition, Clark returned *The Lost Boy* to the Gant cycle and restored important scenes that had been omitted in earlier versions. These included Grover's inventory of Garrett's grocery store on the square in part 1, his confrontation with Simpson Featherstone, the family's black retainer, on the train in part 2, and Eugene's[1] "dark evening of hot despair" in part 4 when he travels to St. Louis to visit the scene of Grover's death (Clark xiii). The restored passages yield a more complete and, to some degree, unsettling portrait of the lost boy and his family. They also demonstrate the complexity of memory, grief, and narrative within *The Lost Boy,* as well as the "concentrated sense of artistry" that defines the novella and Wolfe's other short novels (xiv).[1]

The restored passages involving Grover's reprimand of Simpson Featherstone for traveling in the whites-only train car when the family journeys to St. Louis are especially provocative. They create a unique form of public witnessing, a role Wolfe lately had been exploring. The encounter, filtered through Eliza Gant's racist perspective, shows the writer's growing awareness of the inhumanity of Jim Crow laws. Indeed, his sensibilities about

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[1] The name "Eugene" does not appear in the UNC Press version of *The Lost Boy*. However, the name "Gant" appears in part 3, when the sister is describing the family photograph to her unnamed brother. She also refers to her mother as "Eliza" and provides the first names of herself and all of her siblings, except Eugene. All the names mentioned are from the Gant family. In his introduction, James W. Clark Jr. confirms this association by stating that *The Lost Boy* is part of the Gant cycle. He refers to the family as the Gants and to the unnamed narrator of part 4 as Eugene.

equality and justice began evolving prior to writing *The Lost Boy.* While in Germany during the rise of fascism in the 1930s, Wolfe witnessed discriminatory incidents toward Jews that troubled him. He chronicled a particularly disturbing one that occurred on 8 September 1936, in the short story "I Have a Thing to Tell You," which was published by the *New Republic* in March 1937 (Magi and Walser 69). On a train bound for Paris, Wolfe witnessed the arrest of a fellow traveler, a Jew with whom he was sharing a compartment. The man, who was evidently fleeing Germany with more currency than Nazi law allowed, was taken into custody at the border crossing into Belgium at Aachen. Three days after arriving in Paris, Wolfe wrote his agent, Elizabeth Nowell, about the "good piece" he had written (qtd. in Nowell 335).

Despite his great literary success in Germany, Wolfe knew his story about the train incident would have consequences for his career. He told Nowell, "I'm afraid it may mean that I can't come back to the place where I'm liked best and have the most friends, but I've decided to publish it" (qtd. in Nowell 335). Taking his responsibility as a public witness to the event seriously, Wolfe wrote to Dixon Wecter several months later, "The story wrote itself. It was the truth as I could see it, and I decided that a man's own self-respect and integrity is worth more than his comfort or material advantage" (614). To some degree, Wolfe's fears about the story's repercussions proved true, though it is unclear how seriously its publication affected his status and reputation in Nazi Germany. In 1943 a bibliographer claimed that the story "caused [Wolfe's] books to be placed on the black list for several months" (Preston 71). Laurence Stokes, however, states that, "If such a measure was in fact even temporarily implemented, there is no record of it in the official tabulations of 'harmful and undesirable' books compiled by the Reich Chamber of Literature regularly between 1935 and 1943" ("Translation and Reception" 170–71). Stokes further indicates that the *New Republic* may have been considered by the authorities to be "an 'obscure' journal read only by intellectuals in far-away America," so Wolfe's "outspokenly anti-Nazi story did not result in the removal of his books from German libraries and stores[,] which only happened when all U.S. authors were so treated following the outbreak of war between the two countries in December 1941" ("Translation and Publication" 30).

Whatever the outcome of the story's publication, Wolfe no doubt had the incident on the train in mind when he penned the Jim Crow scene for

The Lost Boy a few months later. In both accounts, the image of the individual pitted against forces of injustice, oppression, and conflict in Germany and America shows Wolfe's growing social awareness of the world in which he lived.

The themes and techniques that Wolfe uses in *The Lost Boy* find counterparts in more recent novels depicting lost children. In *The Dialogic Imagination,* Mikhail Bakhtin reminds us of the diversity of voices and points of view within great novels and throughout literature. Wolfe, who is well known for the infusion of the autobiographical self into his fiction, departs somewhat from his customary practice by employing multiple points of view. By structuring the novella in such a manner, he opens the text and the subject of lostness to new possibilities. The connections between *The Lost Boy* and these contemporary novels suggest an intertexual dialogue that demonstrates Wolfe's thematic and narrative influence. The complex telling of Grover's story through the perspectives of his mother, sister, and brother, and even through the consciousness of the dead boy himself, establishes a strategy for remembering and for coming to terms with loss. Each account serves "to recreate or 'find' the lost boy in a new way" (Bentz 159).

In addition, Wolfe shows a close relationship between narrative and work. Human labor and enterprise appear in many forms throughout the text and are central to Grover's story. Work figures prominently in the family's history and the events leading up to Grover's death. It also functions as a trope, a means for managing grief and for creating art out of loss. The honesty of emotion elicited through the various narratives in *The Lost Boy* reflects little, if any, sentimentality. Wolfe is unflinching in his examination of family relationships, personal memories, and even societal attitudes. The pain of Grover's death, even years later, persists as a raw wound that time has done little to assuage.

Wolfe's novella can be taken as a touchstone for studying more contemporary southern novels that are comparably evocative in their treatment of lostness. I want to treat *The Lost Boy* imaginatively and heuristically, to let it serve as a starting point for tracing thematic connections among an array of southern writers. The authors included here—Fred Chappell, Mark Powell, Kaye Gibbons, Sue Monk Kidd, Bobbie Ann Mason, Robert Olmstead, and Lee Smith—perpetuate Wolfe's efforts as they also create or "find" the lost child in new ways. The lost children they depict take various forms, includ-

ing children who suffer the death of a parent, those with siblings who die too soon, and others who endure neglect and abuse that forever alter their sense of self and their place in the world. As in Wolfe's fiction, lostness is a complex state of being with multiple root causes, such as losing one's way, losing something or someone important, or losing out on life opportunities due to change, conflict, or war. In each instance, a sense of displacement propels the young character on a quest for self, for the missing parent or sibling, or to resolve the grief and loss associated with his or her life situation. Although many southern writers, including William Faulkner, Carson McCullers, and Flannery O'Connor, write about lost children in their fiction, the intent here is to show the relevance of Wolfe's writings across time, as well as the manifestation of his great theme of lostness in contemporary texts that also speak to each other in their portrayal of lost children. The connections they share are thematic, stylistic, and even geographic, and, because of their intertextuality with Wolfe and one another, these novels offer an opportunity to look at the dynamics of lostness in southern life and literature.

Chappell's *I Am One of You Forever* (1985), Powell's *Prodigals* (2002), Gibbons's *Ellen Foster* (1987), Kidd's *The Secret Life of Bees* (2002), Mason's *In Country* (1985), Olmstead's *Coal Black Horse* (2007), and Smith's *On Agate Hill* (2006) are cast against the backdrop of the South during eras of conflict and change. Just as the Jim Crow era shaped Grover's understanding of race and society in *The Lost Boy,* the Civil War, World War II, the civil rights movement, and the Vietnam War shape the lost child's experience in these novels. Time and place come together to mirror the sense of upheaval that he or she perceives. This establishes an important connection between lost children and the South, a region that has been defined by loss and lostness. For many southern families, including Thomas Wolfe's, the sense of loss that accompanied the South's defeat in the Civil War had a lasting and pervasive effect. The war left the South battered and scarred for generations. The Lost Cause was written about, even championed, during the postwar era. Somewhat later, writers of Wolfe's generation, which included William Faulkner, Allen Tate, Robert Penn Warren, and other writers of the Southern Renascence, also wrote about the South's past but with a more critical eye. The burden of southern history, however, is not so oppressively felt in the novels of Chappell, Powell, Gibbons, Kidd, Mason, Olmstead, and Smith studied here, but functions more tangentially in the lives of characters in the

present. Even in the two novels that deal with the Civil War—*Coal Black Horse* and *On Agate Hill*—the past is the here and now, a living drama that shows the immediacy of history instead. In any event, the historical eras depicted in these novels provide young characters with opportunities for experience, growth, and self-empowerment in a region shaped by conflict and change.

Similarly to Wolfe, these contemporary writers incorporate narrative and work as tools to mitigate the sense of displacement that characterizes young lives. Wolfe's emphasis on telling the lost boy's story is reflected in the storytelling strategies used by Chappell, Powell, Gibbons, Kidd, Mason, Olmstead, and Smith. They adopt a variety of narrative stances and provide authentic renderings of young voices and points of view. Some allow the child protagonist to tell his or her own story, while others reveal it through the young person's consciousness, much like Wolfe's rendering of Grover's section of *The Lost Boy*. As Wolfe demonstrates, each character finds that narrative adds order and coherence to one's life. For some, the power of story—both the hearing and the telling of stories—provides healing and closure for the traumatic events they have witnessed or experienced. For other characters, it provides critical knowledge of self and others that enables them to survive and, in some instances, transform their lives.

Representations of human labor also appear in each novel, functioning as a means and metaphor for the psychological work involved in coming to terms with loss and lostness. Work is often presented as part of the individual's or family's ethos. It assumes comparable importance in the community and appears in the form of business, industry, and agriculture, creating a milieu that emphasizes responsibility and accomplishment. For child and adolescent characters, this message is not lost, as work gives purpose and direction to their lives when other aspects seem hopeless. Engaging in work allows young characters to cope with life's upheavals more effectively and to exert control over one's environment and, ultimately, one's destiny. Tasks such as carpentry, farming, cleaning, tending bees, and even tending the dead take on narrative and psychological significance. Physical labor helps to plumb the depths of grief and assuage it. It also leads to greater understanding of self; or, as essayist Hamilton Mabie wrote in 1898, "Work is sacred . . . because it uncovers the soul . . ." (22). The incorporation of work, along with the weaving of memory, story, and, eventually, reality helps individual narratives to unfold, enabling characters to better comprehend abuse, neglect,

violence, injustice, war, and death. This pattern results in complex portraits of individuals, families, and the South that link both inner and outer worlds of experience.

Not only do these novels reflect diverse eras of historical significance, they also represent different generations of contemporary fiction writers and novelistic production. Several are first novels, while others were written later in an author's career. The novels of Fred Chappell, Bobbie Ann Mason, and Kaye Gibbons included here appeared in the 1980s whereas the novels of Mark Powell, Sue Monk Kidd, Robert Olmstead, and Lee Smith were published after the year 2000. All have received critical acclaim for their rendering of childhood dramas and coming of age during uncertain times. By way of personal or familial experience, or by simply living in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, these writers possess knowledge about the turmoil of social change and the trauma of war. As with Wolfe's efforts in *The Lost Boy,* they provide cogent evidence of the intersections between individual lives and public history.

Fred Chappell's *I Am One of You Forever* is the first in a tetralogy of semi-autobiographical novels that chronicle Jess Kirkman's mountain boyhood on an Appalachian farm during World War II and, later, his development into a poet. Chappell, who grew up in Canton, North Carolina, only twenty miles from Wolfe's Asheville, studied under William Blackburn at Duke University and taught for many years at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. Unlike Wolfe's early life experience, which was "boomtown southern" and characterized by familial discord and fragmentation, Chappell's was "essentially rural and stable" (Hobson 83). His portrayal of family and home is suffused with nostalgia, a decided contrast to Wolfe's sardonic treatment of Asheville and his fractious family. Chappell depicts the past and Jess's boyhood home with "an elegiac pastoral vision," showing the mountains as an enduring but fragile environment threatened by the pulpwood and timber industries that proliferated in the first half of the twentieth century (Hovis, *Vale* 102). Chappell began his literary career in the 1960s by writing novels before shifting to poetry the following decade. Winner of both the Bollingen Prize in Poetry and the T. S. Eliot Award for Poetry, he did not read Wolfe as a young person, citing Faulkner, Eliot, Ezra Pound, and James Joyce among his influences instead (102). However, much of Chappell's work springs from the same mountain landscape as Wolfe's and demonstrates the same preoccupation with family, place, and memory.

Robert Gingher notes that the titles of the novels in the Kirkman tetralogy, which also includes *Brighten the Corner Where You Are* (1989), *Farewell, I'm Bound to Leave You* (1996), and *Look Back All the Green Valley* (1999), hint at "the primacy of love, loss, music, and memory" found throughout Chappell's work. As in *The Lost Boy,* memory provides a "refuge against loss," a condition that Jess comes to know early in life and which follows him throughout his quest to know the past and his family.

Mark Powell's novel *Prodigals* is set in Wolfe's hometown of Asheville and in the surrounding mountains. Like Wolfe and Chappell, Powell draws on family history for his novel, which was written when the writer was only twenty-six. As with Chappell, Powell admits to reading Wolfe after his formative years. By the time he read Wolfe's novels, he was already in graduate school and "under the sway of O'Connor, McCarthy, and Faulkner," whom he had been reading for years. Unlike Wolfe's wandering characters, he sees his protagonist, fifteen-year-old Ernest Cobb, as modeled on "the lost children who can't go home again" in Flannery O'Connor's "The River" (1955), Cormac McCarthy's *Outer Dark* (1968), and Faulkner's *The Unvanquished* (1938) (M. Powell, "Re: Question"). Nonetheless, Powell pays quiet homage to Wolfe by setting his protagonist on a course for Asheville and the nearby work camps following the shooting death of a girl that Ernest thinks he has gotten pregnant. A coming-of-age tale set in the fading corners of the South's past during World War II, *Prodigals* gathers up lost souls and weaves tenuous, tragic connections among the outsiders and drifters, including young Ernest, who make their way to the mountains and who end up living on the frayed, desperate edges of society in wartime America.

Powell, who teaches creative writing at Stetson University, won the Peter Taylor Prize for the Novel for his second novel, *Blood Kin* (2006), which examines the impact of war, addiction, and disillusionment on a southern family during the Vietnam War era. *Prodigals* contains significant parallels with Chappell's *I Am One of You Forever*. Both novels are set in the same geographic locale and 1940s time period. In addition, a sense of home, belonging, and embracing one's roots, or, in the case of Ernest Cobb, fleeing from them, creates dynamics that link both novels with Wolfe's *The Lost Boy.* Besides their Asheville-area connections and use of autobiography, the novels are also unified in that each involves "lost boys" of various types, including brothers, fathers, and friends. At the heart of each story lie issues of male identity and relationships, especially the lost quality of the latter.

Other novels to be discussed here involve daughters who suffer a profound sense of orphanhood brought about by maternal loss and the cruelty of emotionally distant fathers. Set during the civil rights era of the 1960s and 1970s, *Ellen Foster* and *The Secret Life of Bees* feature young white protagonists caught in the crossfire of social change involving political, educational, religious, and other institutions. Each girl's quest for self and to resolve the lostness affecting her life involves overcoming deeply held beliefs about race and difference. Cross-racial friendships, as well as black maternal substitutes, play major roles in aiding these characters, whose families have been fractured by maternal illness, both mental and physical, and paternal violence. Work becomes a means of psychological survival for each girl as they navigate the rough waters of both home and society. Their understanding of race and society shows a marked evolution from Grover's entrenched ideas about the color line in *The Lost Boy.*

Ellen Foster represents a notable achievement of child voice that established Kaye Gibbons's career as an important New South writer. The semiautobiographical novel presents the funny, sad, earnest voice of eleven-year-old Ellen, who embarks on a quest for a new family following her mother's suicide and the death of her abusive, alcoholic father. As in *The Lost Boy,* work and narrative prove pivotal in helping Ellen overcome the losses she experiences. Like Grover, she seems far more capable than most children her age, tackling responsibilities that the adults around are unable or unwilling to assume. Her independent-minded character has also led to comparisons with Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1885), J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951), and Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960). The hardships and rejections Ellen encounters parallel the difficulties that the family of her black friend Starletta has faced in a racially divided South, now undergoing transformation following the *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling on school desegregation. Her relationship with Starletta proves transformative, as Ellen comes to realize the prejudice that she herself has harbored. In contrast to Grover's unflinching acceptance of the Jim Crow laws, Ellen begins to question and then actively challenge the unjust rules that have kept whites and blacks apart.

Gibbons, who suffers from bipolar disorder, wrote *Ellen Foster* at the age of twenty-six in only six weeks while a student of Louis Rubin's at the University of North Carolina. She completed the novel during what she describes as "one of the creative loops of the manic-depressive cycle" (qtd. in D. Powell

123). After winning the Sue Kaufman Prize for First Fiction for the novel, she went on to write seven additional novels. Her novels, which evoke a strong sense of place and demonstrate the oppressiveness of white male patriarchy in the South, feature female characters that narrate their own stories and claim their own autonomy. This clearly defines Ellen's character, as she undertakes labors far beyond her years and makes her way from place to place in search of a home. Her optimism and pluck carry her through the most difficult of circumstances and enable her to take, quite literally, a new identity.

Sue Monk Kidd's first novel, *The Secret Life of Bees,* chronicles the racial tensions that fourteen-year-old Lily Owens, who has been motherless most of her life, encounters after she runs away with her black housekeeper, Rosaleen Daise, in the summer of 1964. Fleeing her abusive father and local racists, Lily and Rosaleen find sanctuary with three beekeeping sisters, who are also black, in the fictional town of Tiburon, South Carolina.

Much like *Ellen Foster, The Secret Life of Bees* further challenges racial attitudes that Grover in *The Lost Boy* does not understand. The novel, which has sold more than six million copies in thirty-five countries and was made into a feature film, draws on Kidd's experience growing up in the small town of Sylvester, Georgia, during the turbulent 1960s. The era, with "its voter registration drives, boiling racial tensions, and the erupting awareness of the cruelty of racism," affected the writer greatly; "I was never the same after that summer," she explains (Kidd, "Conversation"). Kidd, who has also authored spiritual writings, memoirs, and additional novels, including *The Mermaid Chair* (2005) and *The Invention of Wings* (2014)*,* immerses her protagonist in that environment as well. Family dysfunction drives events and shapes Lily's quest for self and the mother she has lost. The broken mother-daughter relationship constitutes the emotional core of the novel. Lily's crushing grief links Kidd's novel with *The Lost Boy* and shows the devastating effects of maternal loss on a child. While Eliza Gant deeply mourns her lost son and feels the ache of his death anew in Wolfe's novella, *The Secret Life of Bees* portrays the rupture of the mother-child relationship from the child's perspective. Lily's grief over losing her mother is raw and palpable. As in *The Lost Boy,* work and narrative alleviate the grief and lostness caused by the death of a loved one. Through learning the art of beekeeping, Lily discovers the truth about the past, including her role in the shooting death of her mother. At the same time, she becomes more aware of the injustices of racism as she endures

her own hardships. Cross-racial relationships prove instrumental in granting Lily self-knowledge and insight into a changing southern society.

The final three novels to be discussed involve the impact of war and lost fathers on children left behind. Mason's *In Country,* Olmstead's *Coal Black Horse,* and Smith's *On Agate Hill* provide glimpses into the historical past and show how war interrupts young lives and changes life trajectories. Mason's and Olmstead's novels are most alike in that children undertake psychological and physical journeys to locate fathers lost to war. Each writer's concern for paternal experience mirrors Wolfe's fascination with his father's experience of the Civil War around his Pennsylvania home near Gettysburg, which he hints at in *The Lost Boy.* In Mason's novel, Sam Hughes searches through her father's diary to learn about his Vietnam War experience and later attempts to replicate it by embarking on an "in country" experience of her own. Her desire to understand her father's involvement in the war is met with resistance as she tries to reconcile official patriarchal history with her family's experience of it. Sam also attempts to understand her uncle Emmett's experience of war. A Vietnam vet plagued by the lingering effects of Agent Orange, Emmett represents another lost figure struggling to adapt to life in the present.

Throughout her fiction, Mason examines cultural changes at work in the modern South. She uses the small towns and rural landscapes of her native Kentucky to provide the settings for many of her novels and short stories. Besides *In Country,* she portrays in such works as *Shiloh and Other Stories* (1982), *Spence + Lila* (1988), and *Feather Crowns* (1993) how small Kentucky towns and farms are in a state of flux, threatened by the rise of suburbs, shopping malls, and fast-food restaurants. These changes represent "a metaphor for profound shifts in the contemporary social terrain and for a transient American culture" (V. Smith 134). Mason's characters often have difficulty contending with the changing landscapes of their lives and region. Generational differences, divorce, unemployment, and illness undermine the moorings of family and community. This gives rise to a restless, unidentifiable unease that further exacerbates the problems brought about by contemporary life. For characters burdened by their present circumstances, the past, especially the distant history, seems irrelevant and largely unknown.

Robert Olmstead's *Coal Black Horse,* on the other hand, plunges headlong into history when fourteen-year-old Robey Childs leaves his West Virginia home to find his father who is off fighting for the Confederacy. He

makes his way to the Gettysburg Battlefield, carried by a magnificent black horse that someone has loaned him. During his journey, he witnesses horrors both on and off the battlefield before returning home to provide a "powerful, redemptive narrative" about what he has seen (Review of *Coal*). Unlike Grover in *The Lost Boy,* who studies the Gettysburg dead only through images in a stereoscope, Robey tends the dying and the dead on the battlefield. Robert Olmstead is not a southern writer by birth, but his tale of leaving home and trying to return, along with its Appalachian setting and focus on the Civil War, gives *Coal Black Horse* much in common with the other novels here. The interplay of work and narrative to resolve lostness is pivotal in Robey's coming of age. Olmstead sees *Coal Black Horse* and the novels that follow it, *Far Bright Star* (2009) and *The Coldest Night* (2012), as being about "the inheritance of war," specifically how it applies to generations of the Childs family. He elaborates on the familial significance of war: "We often look at war globally, but war is the legacy of families as well as of countries. In all countries, there are family histories in which it is a heritage to be a solider—a warrior. War is often passed down through a family" (qtd. in Hirsch).

Olmstead, who grew up on a New Hampshire farm, studied briefly at Davidson College in North Carolina before earning undergraduate and graduate degrees at Syracuse University, where he worked with Tobias Wolff and Raymond Carver. An English professor at Ohio Wesleyan University, he has earned numerous accolades for his writing, including the *Chicago Tribune*'s Heartland Prize and the Ohioana Book Award for Fiction, both for *Coal Black Horse.* Loss, indignities, and shocking violence fill his novels and short stories. In a review of Olmstead's short-story collection, *River Dogs* (1987), Christopher Zenowich writes, "There is a paradoxical tension between the enduring landscape of these stories, so tangibly imagined, and the vulnerability of the people and creatures who inhabit it." An identical tension between inner and outer worlds also characterizes *Coal Black Horse,* as Robey is tested by tragedy and suffering during his journey to Gettysburg and back. He comes to learn not only the brutality of war but also the innate strength of people tested by circumstance.

Lee Smith's *On Agate Hill* brings us full circle from the Civil War, through Reconstruction, and to the Roaring Twenties, coincidentally when Thomas Wolfe's career began. Orphaned by the war, Molly Petree becomes a ward of her Uncle Junius, living at his now-ruined plantation home on Agate Hill in the North Carolina Piedmont. She acknowledges her orphanhood and