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**HEADLINE: BOOKS: READING THE SOUTH: THE BEST OF 2003:
Novels tap into the richness of region**

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Why are people drawn to Southern novels? Some look for novels set in a particular time and place. Others have acquired a taste for the Southern literary tradition and enjoy seeing how the new generation of writers works in the fields originally plowed by the Big Three: Faulkner, Welty and O'Connor.

But perhaps most readers are simply looking for a great story --- a sympathetic character who endures tons of conflict before emerging, hopefully, wiser and stronger at the end.

These eight books, most of them selected from this year's Reading the South column, were among the standouts this year:

* Approximately Heaven by James Whorton Jr. (Free Press, \$23). When a good ol' boy from Tennessee can't face his wife's leaving him, one thing leads to another, and somehow he ends up on a road trip to Alabama with a scheming old codger. These two resemble a hard-drinking, working-class version of Don Quixote and Sancho Panza. Hilarious and poignant.

* The Clearing by Tim Gautreaux (Knopf, \$24). In the 1920s, two brothers from a wealthy Pennsylvania family are reunited in a hellish Louisiana sawmill camp after a long separation. The younger brother is an efficiency-minded manager; his sibling has become a violent, mentally unstable constable. Their problems mount when they try to force out a gang of Sicilian bootleggers. A dark, action-driven story illuminated by lyrical prose.

* Eden by Olympia Vernon (Grove Press, \$23). In 1960s Mississippi, a 14-year-old African-American girl grows up in a household that reeks of poverty, violence and sexual energy. What saves Mattie from this harsh world are the deeply rooted poetic sensibilities that she (smartly) keeps to herself. This coming-of-age story has the rich, luscious rhythms of a jazz ballad by Coltrane.

* Hell at the Breech by Tom Franklin (William Morrow, \$23.95). A good, classic western set in 1890s Alabama. The old sheriff must saddle up, perhaps for the last time, to put down a gang of murdering outlaws. Every character is fully developed, as are the descriptions of frontier life. A powerful, blood-soaked epic.

*** Slow Way Home by Michael Morris (HarperSanFrancisco, \$22.95). A young boy in 1970s North Carolina is torn between the mother he needs and the grandparents who nurture him. When the grandparents disobey a court order and take the child into hiding, the youngster begins an odyssey into a very uncertain world. A heartwarming story about family sacrifice.**

* Tyrus by Patrick Creevy (Tom Doherty Associates, \$25.95). This account of Tyrus Cobb, the meanest ballplayer who ever lived, portrays his first days in the big leagues with the Detroit Tigers in the early 1900s. An intense athlete to begin with, Cobb was playing under a black cloud --- only months earlier, his mother had killed his father with a shotgun in their hometown of Royston, Ga. A dark, fascinating portrait of an athlete pursued by more demons than you can shake a bat at.

* Until That Good Day by Marjorie Kemper (Thomas Dunne Books, \$24.95). In 1920s Louisiana, the life of a traveling salesman becomes complicated after the death of his wife, leaving him with two young daughters and a few well-kept family secrets. When he remarries "the whitest woman he can find," his daughters suffer, and he finds more pleasure with his mistress, a young woman from a sharecroppers' settlement. Beneath the Southern gothic veneer is a large cast of interesting, well-drawn characters.

* When the Finch Rises by Jack Riggs (Ballantine Books, \$23.95). A North Carolina mill town in 1968 is seen through the eyes of an observant 12-year-old boy. Raybert endures his mother's mental illness and his father's frequent absences thanks to his close friendship with another young refuge from a messed-up family. The boys share adventures, moments of tenderness and a dream of escaping to Myrtle Beach. A darkly upbeat story that mirrors the spirit of instability and violence of the late 1960s.

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