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"But This Is the *South*": Ambivalent Regionalism in Jan Karon's Mitford Novels

The novels in Jan Karon's best-selling Mitford series—from *At Home in Mitford* (1994) to *Light from Heaven* (2005)—focus on a small town in North Carolina and its Episcopal priest, Father Tim Kavanagh. While the books have been read by millions, they represent a strange twist on the genre of southern literature. Mitford is a bucolic town with streets named Lilac Road and Wisteria Lane, resembling nineteenth-century British fiction more than present-day North Carolina. Yet Karon occasionally insists on the southern nature of her stories, even suggesting that a very common term or practice is unique to the South. For example, when Father Tim claims that Anglican burial tradition does not include talking about the departed person's life, Olivia Harper responds: "'But this is the *South*!'" (*These High* 289). Of course, everyone talks about the deceased during funerals. Olivia's comment seems like an over-compensation for the books' departure from regional conventions—or perhaps a hint that southerners have a unique talent for mourning. In fact, the South that Karon tends to affirm is also passing away, the victim of consumerism, bad taste, and urban sprawl. At first glance, Karon seems to be ambivalent both about being understood as a regional writer and about whether the South can be celebrated. Yet the Mitford novels ultimately betray this ambivalence by revealing a southern worldview that is all too familiar, filled with nostalgia for a lost world of white southern gentility while portraying poor white and black characters as caricatures of Confederate pride and devoted servitude.

In the South, But Not of It?

In the essay "Making Mitford Real," Karon describes her decision to return to her native North Carolina after years of living in New York City. Her nostalgia for the South includes many regional characteristics such as lower-class dialect: "I longed to return to the uncommon music of common speech in our foothills and mountains, to hear 'ain't' for *aren't*, and 'tote' for *carry*" (*Mitford Bedside* 30). Yet she goes on to insist that "I've found Mitford in Milford (Michigan), in Manteo (North Carolina), in Montrose (California), and even in certain neighborhoods of Manhattan. There are Mitfords everywhere!" (31). When I surveyed thirty-six devoted Mitford readers from around the country, they often reminded me that Mitford is a state of mind rather than a specific location. All but three readers knew that Mitford is in North Carolina, but one respondent called my question about its location "sneaky," since "I have heard Ms. Karon say, and would agree, that the spirit of Mitford, of loving and caring about our neighbors and friends, is alive and well all over the place." When readers were asked to rank eight possible reasons for enjoying the books, the southern setting came out next to last, placing well below Christian values and "the chance to experience a simpler, more caring world."[1]

Critics of southern literature have been quick to agree with Karon that she is not really a "southern writer." She is not mentioned in the massive volume *The History of Southern Women's Literature* edited by Carolyn Perry and Mary Louise Weaks. Sharon Monteith begins her discussion of contemporary southern women writers by eliminating those who do not fit her criteria: "Karon's novels are popular with readers who seek a soft-focus South; the narratives exemplify a white housewives' utopia that exudes bland and sweet didacticism and lacks the irony that peppers Southern fiction" ("Recent" 537). Ted Olson includes Karon in a list of best-selling authors who write about Appalachia, but claims that the novels "hold little pretense of being anything other than popular page-turners" (177). Christopher D. Geist distinguishes Karon from the mainstream of southern writers: "Old southern issues of the burdens of history, racial tensions, and poverty seem far away in this new popular literature coming from the region" (124). While Scott Romine devotes several pages to the Mitford novels, he uses them as a point of contrast to texts that he considers "more complex"

(157). His astute observation that the series "preserves its pastoral integrity by marginalizing African American characters" is relegated to a footnote (257).

Yet Karon's denial that she is a "southern writer" may be her most southern quality, since Richard Gray reminds us that "denying regional affiliation is in itself a venerable Southern tradition" (399). Karon's work echoes many literary traditions—from plantation fiction to Agrarianism—that claim to uphold universal values and ideals but contain prejudices about class and race that are deeply rooted in the South. Like the writers of plantation fiction, Karon cloaks profoundly racist representations with nostalgia for a past era in which privileged whites reigned peacefully. This type of literature "posits a world innocent of politics—because innocent of the conflicts that generate politics—but continually endangered by a surrounding world of political and economic corruption" (Grammer 58). In Mitford, these dangers still come from Yankees and liberals, as well as ruthless Florida developers who would destroy the village's close-knit community. Rather than chivalric masters and contented slaves, we have benevolent employers and loving African American servants who speak in dialect, for example when Louella Marshall insists on down-home cooking: "'Low-fat? Pass it on by, honey, you can *skip* this chile!'" (*Out* 194). Lisa Cohen Minnick advises readers to pay close attention to an author's motives for using black dialect, but she also notes that "there seem to be far fewer examples today of white-authored representation of African American speech. Perhaps this is the result of increased sensitivity to the complications inherent in attempting to render black voices authentically, given the troubling history of these renderings" (27). Karon's decision to use black dialect as comic relief—whether it stems from an attempt to celebrate black voices or a failure to recognize the dialect's "troubling history"—has the unfortunate effect of contributing to a racist literary tradition.

Karon's small-town Christian fiction also upholds the values of the Agrarian movement that formed at Vanderbilt University in the 1920s and 1930s and remained a source of lively debate among southern critics during the time of the publication of the Mitford novels. Religious faith was deeply important to Agrarians such as John Crowe Ransom, the son of a Methodist minister, and Allen Tate, a convert to Catholicism. Tate's ideal of a modern world "that included England, France, and Italy as well as the American

South" (Bryant 50) also foreshadows the central role that all three countries play in the Mitford series as repositories of high culture. Even Karon's denial that Mitford is uniquely southern finds its counterpart in the New Criticism that followed the Agrarian movement, with its doctrine that literature should transcend its region and "constitute an extension of reality rather than a reflection of it" (Bryant 61). In the words of contemporary Agrarian defender Mark Royden Winchell, "they decided to construct an ideal of what the South might become from an image of what they imagined it to have been" (109). Readers who told me that they strive to recreate Mitford in their own towns suggest that Karon has succeeded in representing the South to them as a model for the nation.

Michael Kreyling's *Inventing Southern Literature* analyzes the methods of "keeping history at bay" (xii) in southern conservative thought, providing a context for the sense of timelessness that causes many readers to think that the Mitford novels are set in the distant past. Kreyling's arguments about other conservative southern writers could easily apply to Karon, who appears to view the South as the world's "cultural salvation" (23), while "New York is the familiar image of the place where the nefarious forces of destruction nest" (47). Kreyling reminds us that despite the move toward parody and irony in much contemporary southern literature, "a strongly conservative minority still dedicates itself to preserving the South as a cultural refuge from the excesses and wrong turns of modern life" (166). Gray describes a broader trend in which we can place the Mitford novels: recent movies and advertisements often present the South as "a desirable other, one potential, purchasable release from the pressures of living and working in a world governed by the new technologies and international capital" (356). Karon is not the only writer who has marketed the South as an escape from the supposedly more fast-paced and heartless states, although her popularity with southern readers proves that the South is not immune to the same stresses.

Feminist critics also describe the traditions of southern women's literature in ways that resonate with Karon's work, even if her conservatism makes other popular novels—Bobbie Ann Mason's *In Country*, Fannie Flagg's *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Café*, Rebecca Wells' *Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood*—seem remarkably progressive. Published in the same year as the first Mitford novel, Linda Tate's *A South-*

ern Weave of Women argues: "Only when all southern women's voices are heard do we begin to understand the South itself" (6). While Karon has little in common with the more counter-cultural writers that Tate discusses, she shares their "points of connection—family, race, history, sense of place, and women's voice" (6). In their introduction to *Haunted Bodies: Gender and Southern Texts*, Anne Goodwyn Jones and Susan V. Donaldson acknowledge: "The stories of southern bodies have been structured in large part by the interlocking logics of dichotomy—masculine and feminine, white and black, master and slave, planter and 'white trash,' Cavalier and Yankee—that have characterized the dominant public written discourse of the South" (2). While these dichotomies remain fairly solid in Mitford, underlying tensions such as Tim's anxious memories of his Mississippi childhood remind us that despite the powerful ideologies that Jones and Donaldson describe, "Leftover areas of ambiguities always threaten to reassert themselves" (6). If we read Karon carefully, even the life of a middle-class white male preacher turns out to be filled with fear and identity crisis. Karon's immense popularity also seems to demand a closer look. Though her politics may not be appealing to many academics, our refusal to engage them makes it impossible for us to recognize the full range of writing that millions of Americans use to imagine "the South."

"Morbid Decline": Ruins of the Old South

There are two mansions in Mitford, both falling into ruins at the beginning of the series, which represent the ongoing decline and reinvention of the Old South: built with Victorian architecture in the 1920s, they are renovated to serve the needs of the white middle class of the twenty-first century. The old Porter Place—located downtown on Main Street—was once the pride of the village, but now its "stone benches with carved angels' heads were crumbling to dust. Many of the shutters lay in the grass where they had fallen" (*At Home* 35). The current owner is the elderly Miss Rose, a vicious schizophrenic whose bizarre outfits deconstruct the styles of a southern belle, for example "a green taffeta evening gown, a moth-eaten plaid velvet cummerbund, elbow-length satin gloves, a World War II officer's cape, and saddle oxfords without laces" (*At Home* 144). Her husband Billy is a lower-class character who speaks in dialect and seems

incapable of keeping up the house. They finally agree to donate it for a Town Museum, giving Tim a chance to reverse its "morbid decline" (*At Home* 286) and to infuse it with a generic spirit of patriotism. When Rose requests a statue of her brother that looks "'like Sherman or Grant or one of them'" (*At Home* 379), Tim sidesteps this unexpected reference to Northern Civil War generals and hands the project over to the Daughters of the American Revolution. The public unveiling of the statue in *A Light in the Window* focuses on Willard Porter's service in World War Two, with a brass band playing "God Bless America" (371). Both the statue and the Town Museum, which features artifacts like a jukebox from the local diner, mask the eccentric southern reality of Rose and Billy, who are still living in the back rooms of the house, surrounded by stacks of old newspapers that seem to represent the weight of forgotten history.

Miss Sadie Baxter's mansion Fernbank has a more rural setting, located among apple orchards on the edge of town, and more clearly represents nostalgia for an era when devoted black servants ministered to their white employers. In the first novel, the elderly, unmarried Sadie tells Tim a long story of her childhood, in which her descriptions of another local mansion seem like a modern version of plantation fiction: "'Oh, we all loved Boxwood! It had so many servants hurrying about, and they all seemed so happy in their work. Miss Lureen was good to her people. Why, when her Packard wore out, do you know who she gave it to? Her chauffeur!'" (305). The narrative does not invite the reader to question Sadie's assertion that "'Life was better in those days, Father, it really was'" (307). Like the Porter Place, Fernbank eventually ends up in public hands, as Sadie becomes too feeble to maintain the property and donates it to the church. When the Miami Development Group offers to convert it into a spa, Tim tries to convince himself to do the practical thing: "Surely he was trying to hold on to what was vanished and gone, to another way of life that had been vibrantly preserved in Miss Sadie's engrossing stories" (*Out* 94). But the narrative affirms Tim's nostalgia when he has the opportunity to sell the property to Andrew Gregory, who makes it into an expensive Italian restaurant. Tim acknowledges that Sadie would not like Lucera's yuppie atmosphere, but he seems to accept it as a reasonable substitute for the Old South that she remembers—perhaps because it is also inaccessible to most people in town.

A third crumbling southern mansion reinforces the image of the Old South as "vanished and gone," with the power to generate nostalgia despite elements of the bizarre and grotesque. When Tim and his wife Cynthia spend a year living on Whitecap Island on the North Carolina coast in *A New Song*, they venture into the overgrown yard of a nearby mansion called *Nouvelle Chanson*. The sole inhabitant is a nasty, reclusive, childless cripple named Morris Love, who suffers from the chronic hereditary disorder of Tourette's syndrome. Yet Morris turns out to be redeemable, ultimately becoming the organist at the local Episcopal church. Even his house is not entirely ruined:

> There was definitely a musty smell, but everything looked clean and orderly. Ornately carved armchairs stood on either side of a heavy mirror in which he was startled to see himself. On the floor, a pattern of black and white tiles, and to the right, a curving stairwell and a vast, lighted oil painting on the high wall. The painting was of rolling countryside, somewhere in Europe, perhaps, with a church spire and a procession of people in a lane. (287)

Tim is startled to see his reflection, perhaps recognizing that he has been searching for his own southern identity in these old houses all along. The painting with "a church spire and a procession of people in a lane" also mirrors the cover of this book, an illustration of a small white church with a line of parishioners moving toward the door. By reading *A New Song*, Karon suggests that we can inhabit the carefully guarded space of southern wealth represented by *Nouvelle Chanson*. Her clear investment in restoring the mansions of these privileged white families contradicts her claim that Mitford can be found just as easily in Manhattan or California. The books turn out to be vehicles for appreciating a uniquely southern past that might appear repellent on the surface, but which always turns out to be valuable enough to preserve.

"It Ain't Dollywood": Poor White Characters and Spaces

Throughout the series, Karon undercuts the more educated characters' sentimental language with humor about working-class southern pride, whether Percy Mosely is complaining about Yankee tourists or Dora Pugh

calls someone a "cracker." A more elaborate example takes place in a subplot about Coot Hendrick, the hillbilly descendent of the town's founder, who claims that his great-great-granpaw shot and buried five Yankees who had run away from their regiment during the Civil War (*New Song* 23). Even before the graves are located, the townspeople argue about whether they should become a source of local pride and should be preserved in a museum. A local college professor exemplifies the language of historical preservation: "'We wish to see this valuable site preserved. . . so that residents and visitors can understand and enjoy our mountain frontier heritage'" (*New Song* 199). This frontier heritage is embellished in a folk song that Mrs. Beulah Mae Hendrick sings to the Town Council:

> Shot five Yankees
> a-runnin' from th' war
> Caught 'em in a cornfield
> Sleepin' by a f'ar
> Now they'll not run no more, oh
> *They'll not run no more!* (*New Song* 255)

The graves are found at the end of *In This Mountain* and made into a historical site, including a marker and a walking trail (378-79). While Karon rarely mentions the Civil War, this satirical subplot exemplifies her tendency to use poor white characters to express Confederate pride, thus disassociating herself from a historically white supremacist ideology while also suggesting that it is harmless.

References to food in *At Home in Mitford* also associate the poorer characters with uniquely southern tastes. Whereas Tim and Cynthia eat lamb stew and bouillabaisse and buy expensive cabernet, Russell Jacks likes to "'cook me a mess of greens and fry out some side meat'" (108), church members bring Homeless Hobbes a Thanksgiving meal of ham biscuits, collards, grits, and sausage dressing (157), and Coot Hendrick dumps a pack of peanuts in his bottled Coke (205). The novels imply that upper- and middle-class whites have more cosmopolitan and sophisticated tastes as a way of reinforcing their overall superiority to the redneck characters. Ironically, *Jan Karon's Mitford Cookbook & Kitchen Reader* reverses this trend as part of the publishers' attempt to capitalize on the popularity of the novels and allow every reader to recreate Mitford in her own community. The cookbook represents wealthy and middle-class white women as the authentic regional cooks and southern food as exotic and desirable.

Karon describes editor Martha McIntosh's southern credentials, including the fact that she was born in Mississippi: "A classic Southern ambrosia? She grew up on it. A totally scrumptious chicken pie? She learned this secret at her grandmother's knee'" (xi). The recipes represent a combination of southern dishes (sweet tea, cornbread, ham biscuits, livermush, grits, spoon bread, fried chicken, sweet potato pie, fried okra) and dishes that would be served anywhere in America (apple pie, pork roast, green beans, scalloped potatoes). Yet the recipe credits show that most contributors are from the South, including Mississippi, Tennessee, South Carolina, Georgia, Virginia, North Carolina, and Alabama.

This listing of states invokes a kinship of southerners throughout the region, but the novels' symbolic geography privileges middle-class Mitford over poor areas of town and many other southern states. Every book contains a detailed map of the town in which the top right corner is covered by the word "Mitford." Readers know this to be the location of the Creek, an impoverished community usually associated with crime. When Tim's dog is stolen by drug dealers from the Creek in the first novel, police officers call them "'low-down snakes'" (358) and "'scumheads'" (376). Tim does not actually see the Creek until the third novel, from the distance of a private airplane: "Then he saw the open sore on the breast of the creek bank—ramshackle, unpainted houses, tin-roofed sheds, houses that had burned and stood in their rubble, rusted trailers and vehicles abandoned in the weeds or sitting on blocks" (*These High* 112). Tim converts the Creek's poverty to a natural metaphor, an "open sore on the breast of the creek," as a way of removing himself from responsibility. When his pilot points out: "'It ain't Dollywood!'" (112), he invokes the country music attraction as the epitome of high class. Yet the reader senses the irony, since we assume that both Dollywood and the Creek appear at the bottom of Tim's hierarchy of southern spaces. Despite some attempts at ministry to the people of the Creek by Tim and other pastors, this area is finally converted into a shopping center and erased from the Mitford landscape, just as it has always been erased from the map.

Appalachian states do not fare any better. A *Mitford Muse* newspaper article lists the recipients of charitable gifts raised at a church rummage sale as "'Bosnia, Croatia, Ruwanda'" and "'Harlan County, Kentucky'" (*Out* 300). The needs of entire countries are equated with the imagined

need of a single Kentucky county. Tennessee always seems to be associated with lowbrow comic relief or the nameless terrors of poverty. Joe Ivey moves to Memphis to work security at Graceland, but decides to return after he has a vision of Elvis mowing his lawn (*New Song* 12-13). The owner of a diner in Whitecap responds viscerally to her husband's suggestion that they could retire there: "'Tennessee! The very thought gave her the shivers. All those log cabins, all those grizzlies stumbling around in the dark, plus moonshine out the kazoo'" (*New Song* 383). When Tim and Cynthia plan to move to Tennessee for a missions trip in *In This Mountain*, Tim has a nightmare that links his fear of this environment to his own buried Mississippi childhood: "He sat in a straight-back chair in a small, empty room with a dirt floor. It was the same cool, hard-packed floor of his grandmother's potato cellar" (80). The nightmare room fills with silent children who "looked at him, searching for something he had no ability to name or to deliver" (80-81). Soon after, he goes into a diabetic coma that nearly kills him, closing off any possibility of mission work. This portrayal of Appalachia as nightmarish and potentially fatal to the visitor belies Karon's claim that "There are Mitfords everywhere" and implies that Mitford is an elite space surrounded by the horrors of most southern life.

"Slavery Done Been Over All These Years": Black Servants in the Mitford World

In the same year that Karon published *At Home in Mitford*, Patricia A. Turner published *Ceramic Uncles & Celluloid Mammies*, describing a resurgence of popular interest in the smiling, overweight black mammy who faithfully serves a white family. Turner asks: "What does the present fascination with mammy images reveal about contemporary society? What price has been exacted from the real black women who have been forced to make their way in a culture that pays homage to a distorted icon?" (43). The only African American character in Mitford, Louella Baxter Marshall, clearly embodies the classic mammy stereotype, with her dark skin, buxom figure, broad dialect, fabulous cooking, and passionate devotion to her mistress. She was born on the Baxter family estate as the illegitimate daughter of a black servant and has lived and worked there for much of her life,

apparently without pay. At the beginning of the series, Louella returns to Fernbank after living with her grandson in Georgia. Tim's first response to her skin color reveals his fantasy that she will nurture the white church community: "It was inspiring to see Louella's broad, mahogany face smiling at him these days from the gospel side. Her presence brought something nourishing to the spirit of the congregation, like raisins added to bread" (*At Home* 214). Louella quickly falls into a role of domestic servitude, despite Sadie's claim that Louella is her friend and not her maid. When Tim visits Sadie, Louella rings a bell to say that lunch is ready and refuses to join them: "'I'm eatin' right here in this kitchen'" (*At Home* 310). At different times in the series, she sleeps in the sewing room, on a sofa at the foot of Sadie's bed, and in the kitchen, reinforcing Monteith's claim in *Advancing Sisterhood?* that "black women characters have not yet been liberated from the kitchens of white women in contemporary fiction" (102-103), despite a lot of utopian and therapeutic language from the white authors.

Numerous symbolic episodes reinforce Louella's role in the community. When Sadie and Olivia Harper are trying on the late Mrs. Baxter's hats, classic southern belle styles with wide brims and organdy sashes, they force Louella to take part in their informal fashion show. No one understands why Louella resists this act of reverse minstrelsy, in which she must dress up in her white employer's clothes just as Sadie used to dress her up as a baby. In a rare moment of protest, Louella refuses to play her role: "'Slavery done been over all these years. . . an' some folks act like it still goin' on'" (*Window* 56). Yet the narrative invokes a classic mammy stereotype to put her back in her place. When the male audience members tell her she looks terrific in the hat, she breaks "into one of her huge smiles" (56). By the end of the series, Louella spends her days in a nursing home watching soap operas, reminding Tim that "'I never liked to fool with money'" (*Heaven* 129) to explain why she did not care to inherit Sadie's millions.

In *A New Song*, Karon introduces another black domestic servant who devoted her life to her mother's white employers—this time with the unsubtle name of Mamie. In superficial ways, Morris Love's housekeeper defies the buxom, overweight, unintelligent mammy stereotype. Before learning her identity, Tim notices that she is slender, graceful, elegant, and genteel, with a tidy house and a husband. Yet as soon as he learns who she is, the stereotypes come flooding in: "'You're Mamie,' he said, noting her

carefully braided hair and the printed scarf tied round like a headband" (360). Tim feels so drawn to this woman that he finds himself haunting the area around her house "as if he'd found someone who'd been lost to him for many years" (361). When Mamie tells Tim about her education, she admits that she did not intend to devote her life to servitude, but she quickly assures Tim that she has no regrets: "'Noah and I raised a fine son. He's a doctor in Philadelphia'" (364). Like Louella, Mamie chooses to live near her white employer in an all-white town rather than with her own relative. When Tim asks if she was born on the island, she responds: "'My people washed up on shore like timbers from the old ships. We think our wreck happened sometime around 1860'" (365). This story of a shipwreck right before the Civil War erases the entire history of slavery, suggesting that black people simply "washed up on shore" just in time to be liberated by the North. Although Mamie is slender, married, and articulate, she does not conflict with Karon's other portraits of black women.

We finally discover why Tim has such a powerful reaction to Mamie when we learn about his own mammy in a flashback in *Shepherds Abiding*. As with Louella, Peggy's dialect signals her race before there is an explicit reference to her skin color. Her first words are rendered in eye dialect: "'Miz Kavanagh, is it all right t' give Timothy some of this candy fruit?'" (88). Her skin is then compared to food, "exactly the color of gingerbread" (90). Ironically, Peggy uses her dialectical speech to teach Tim the correct pronunciation of *bûche de Noël*, raising the question of how she can pronounce perfect French but says "yo" instead of "your." Peggy reappears in flashbacks later in the novel, beginning with the day that Tim's mother is taken to the hospital in Memphis. Here we receive our first glimpses of the Kavanaghs' "big white house in the stand of oaks" and Peggy's cottage where she feeds him cornbread and sweet potato (165-66). In the next flashback, he describes "her head wrapped in a red kerchief" and her tendency to correct his grammar, even though she continues to speak in dialect herself (246). In *Light From Heaven*, Tim reveals that Peggy vanished when he was ten: "It occurred to him as he sat here, more than a half century later, that he'd looked for Peggy for most of his life" (145). This might explain his childlike adoration of Louella and Mamie and his relationships with his own working-class white maids, from the heroic Puny Bradshaw to the comical Del Flower, who has a Confederate flag on

the antenna of her van. Tim feels a familial affection for both black and white domestic workers, but they are never depicted in their own homes.

In *Clinging to Mammy*, Micki McElya explains the ongoing appeal of this stereotype: “The myth of the faithful slave lingers because so many white Americans have wished to live in a world in which African Americans are not angry over past and present injustices, a world in which white people were and are not complicit, in which the injustices themselves. . . seem not to exist at all” (3). This myth seems very pervasive among the readers that I surveyed, who made no references to race or racism when asked open-ended questions like: “Have you ever disagreed with or been offended by anything in the books?” and “Do you think that the Mitford books are realistic?” In a follow-up interview in which I brought up the issue directly, one liberal, white New England reader explained how she overcame her initial annoyance that Louella has to wait on Sadie just because she is black: “I think the reader is transferred to a magical ‘other’ place, almost like reading about a foreign culture. In a foreign culture, we have been schooled not to judge or feel superior. It makes the black question seem to be one outside our realm, not triggering our call to action about black stereotypes and inequalities of all kinds.” If Mitford can be found “everywhere,” it also turns out to be nowhere, a “magical ‘other’ place” where racism becomes invisible.

***Home to Holly Springs*: A New Direction for Jan Karon?**

Home to Holly Springs (2007), the first novel in the new Father Tim series, offers a jarring contrast to Karon’s portrayal of the South in the Mitford books. It is no surprise that one reader told the Mitford Bulletin Board that she threw the book in the trash without finishing, since it refuses to offer the comfortable pleasures that drew readers to Mitford. In her dedication to the new novel, Karon explains how she had chosen Tim’s hometown more than a decade earlier: “I spread a map of America on the floor of my writing room, and proceeded to eliminate every southern state but Mississippi (which I had never visited)” (ix). She chose the town based on its name. Writing *Home to Holly Springs* compelled Karon to travel to “this gem of the Deep South,” and this author who has always avoided Civil

War references was faced with an enormous Civil War cemetery and more than sixty antebellum homes (ix).

On his fictional version of this journey, Tim learns some surprising things that transform the Peggy of Mitford into the more well-rounded character Peggy Lambert Winchester. In one graphic flashback, the young Tim shoots a white man who is raping Peggy (142-45), which places her in the realistic position of having to defend herself from white male violence, even if Tim does get to enjoy the role of savior. More importantly, Tim discovers that Peggy abandoned him because she was pregnant with his father's baby and wanted to focus on raising her own child, a choice which even Tim learns to respect. While the book cover conflates Tim's mother figures by showing the back of a slender caregiver in nylon stockings who could be either Peggy Lambert Winchester or Madelaine Howard Kavanagh, the novel makes it clear that both women endured more than Tim realized, and Peggy is the one who survived.

So what do the Mitford novels say about the present role of the South in American popular culture? In *Dirt and Desire*, Patricia Yaeger concludes that southern studies have become marginalized within the academy, while "fiction by southern women is hardly the flavor of the month" (252). She was writing in 2000, in the middle of the enormous popularity of the Mitford series. While these books prove that the racial politics of plantation fiction are still very present, they also remind us to look for southern literature in unlikely places, including Christian novels with pastel covers. The appearance of *Home to Holly Springs* also reminds us not to judge southern women's writing too quickly. When Peggy shows Tim her scars in the latest novel, Karon demonstrates her willingness to explore themes "of flesh that has been ruptured or riven by violence, of fractured, excessive bodies telling us something that diverse southern cultures don't want us to say" (Yaeger xiii). Perhaps the remaining novels of the Father Tim series will continue to dig up surprising messages about the Deep South, even in a "postsouthern" world.

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Note

[1] I conducted the survey of thirty-six Mitford readers in 2008. Twenty-five readers responded to the survey posted on the Mitford Books Bulletin Board on MitfordBooks.com, while other surveys were mailed to Mitford readers recommended by my friends and family, including the members of a Mitford book group affiliated with a Foursquare Gospel church. There were fourteen respondents from the South (Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Maryland, Missouri, North Carolina, Tennessee, and Virginia), six from the Northeast (Massachusetts, New York, and Vermont), six from the Midwest (Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Minnesota, and Wisconsin), and ten from the West (Arizona, California, Colorado, and Oregon). All but one were women, with an average age of fifty-six. They had read an average of eight out of nine Mitford novels, and most had also read companion books such as the cookbook and *Bedside Companion*. Not surprisingly, they were very sympathetic readers, with only four respondents claiming that they had "disagreed with or been offended by anything in the books" (all of them involving a character or plot event that they did not like, none of them concerning race or the South). Seventy-five percent of respondents claimed that the books were "realistic." I created a list of eight possible reasons for enjoying the Mitford books based on comments that I had read and heard from readers. The respondents ranked them in the following order of enjoyment: characters; Christian values; the chance to experience a simpler, more caring world; humor; writing style; escape from everyday life; Southern setting; and sharing/discussing books with other readers.

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