tive process” (151), the reader may figure out that Wallace might mean that Cooper had access to the same cultural conditions that governed Balzac’s texts, but she might also become prey to a misreading that indicates Cooper’s awareness of Barthes. Shortly afterwards, Wallace comments, “If we set aside selfish motives, pretentious theories, and our fear of being ignorant, it [sic] we patiently approach a text on its own terms, if we become those naïve readers who prefer homely moral art to the rarified [sic] effusions of genius, then we will discover the truth of the text. So long as we insist on reading as critics, imposing on the text our critical vocabularies and pretentious theoretical concepts, we will be building a vinegar cruet for our church steeple” (153). Here what might be read as an animating of Cooper’s sentiments in The Pioneers becomes a little difficult to distinguish from those of the critic. Wallace subsequently leaves behind the “good reader/bad reader” dichotomy by which he pits Elizabeth Temple against Richard Jones and does some useful excavation of the novel’s cases of misreading: “the issues of names and aliases, names and realities, language and law lie at the heart of the conflict that this skirmish mirrors” (159). Even in making what are often excellent points about these novels, however, some inexactitudes of language make for imprecision. The book tends to be more persuasive when it combines close readings with an “old style” literary history grounded in solid readings of the surrounding material, including some excellent examinations of contemporary reviews.

Near the end of the book, Wallace comments that “[t]he exact nature of Cooper’s audience is elusive” (173). Since those who wrote responses were an educated minority, any claims about Cooper’s audience must remain tentative. Certainly he had one, for his books sold. It might be that, as Wallace asserts, Cooper made later writers aware of what an audience wanted (183): “The enduring effect of Cooper’s popularity was the permanent change it wrought in the taste of the novel-reading public in America” (181). Although it’s a usefully provocative claim, I remain somewhat unconvinced by Wallace’s argument that Cooper “forged the American novel and taught his audience how to read it” (184). Since so much work has gone into arguing that Cooper was himself responding to a perceived desire of the American public for the kind of fiction he then supplied, and since he later lost the knack of reading the very audience that Wallace claims he had taught to read him, such claims need to be qualified or restated. One of the best aspects of Wallace’s book is that it makes such qualifications and restatements possible.

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After one examines it carefully, Fifty Southern Writers Before 1900 seems so valuable a resource for teachers and scholars that one can hardly imagine how
nineteenth-century Southern literature has been taught without it. The book will make the task of future students of the Southern past vastly easier. It presents the essential information about its fifty chosen figures concisely and clearly, in a useful format. It is exceptionally well edited; as a result, though its contributors are as numerous as its subjects, no jarring stylistic lapses remain. If one needs to find out fast who Albery Allson Whitman or Philip Pendleton Cooke was, this volume is clearly the best text to consult.

The fifty writers who are the primary subjects here are arranged alphabetically, for this volume is designed as a reference tool, not a relaxing read. While it is fun, in fact, to browse within, one reasonably doubts that many people will try. In the course of the volume's long, somewhat chauvinistic introduction (which includes such quaint phrases as "the War Between the States" [xi] or "the Golden Age of eighteenth century William Byrd's plantation"[4]) the reader receives a very useful account of Southern literature from the first settlement days to 1900. When we move into the sections on individual writers, each "chapter" is arranged identically: a short summary and defining statement, a biographical sketch, description of major themes, survey of criticism, and bibliography. The chapter format encourages one to use the volume as an encyclopedia, not a chronology.

Occasionally, the labels this volume includes for its writers appear contradictory. William Wells Brown, for example, is called the "first black American man of letters" (44), significant for his novel Clotel. Charles Chesnutt is indentified as the "first important black fiction writer" (107). If the phrases lead the puzzled student to read both writers, however, so much the better.

The chief defect of the volume is its sterilized presentation of Southern literary life: about the worst scandal wrung out of any account is that Thomas Holley Chivers was once called a wife-beater; the accusation was never, apparently, substantiated. Unlike the Nature described in Ralph Waldo Emerson's "Experience," these subjects rarely come eating, drinking, and sinning. Disconcertingly, they usually appear to be "children of our law."

Nevertheless, taking consistently positive views of the fifty lives included here seems a plausible tactic. It is an act of courage to insist that a full fifty Southern writers existed before 1900 who deserve memorializing. Their dirty linen does not need public washing at the very moment we discover where and why and even that some of them existed. Because most treatments are positive, the best thing about many of these chapters is their articulation of what is interesting about the writer's work in such unfashionable genres, for example, as the sentimental novels of Augusta Evans Wilson or the florid biography of Patrick Henry by William Wirt.

An interesting exception to the dominant sunshine rule is Everett Emerson's treatment of Twain. When Twain's life is compressed into a brief sketch, all the impudent and delightful lines he brewed as stimulants are by necessity excised. The grounds left behind consist merely of Twain's frenzied movements over the globe, aborted schemes, uncompleted fictions, and misdirected energies. But a valuable part of the Twain chapter is Emerson's handling of relevant literary criticism. His undisguisedly subjective comments convey a personal and specific taste. It is as pleasant to encounter as a room which reveals conscious
choices by a particular person, rather than a professional display of currently approved fashions.

The volume offers a number of pleasures. Occasionally one discovers here a touch of irony or wry humor: for example, "Bagby is not an author who has been scrutinized by critics and scholars, nor is he one who cries out for rediscovery" (27); or, "Mary Chesnut's Civil War represents a kind of Vanity Fair of the Confederacy" (102). And many delights are the kind one experiences when discovering a treatment which is written with the zest that only a personal involvement with the subject can provide—for example, Mary Ann Wimsatt on William Gilmore Simms. Such sketches can also provide literary surprises, as when Wimsatt labels Simms's best long fiction The Cassique of Kiawah (400).

Another pleasure the volume offers is the chance to trace connections through an understudied literary "dynasty" such as that of the Tuckers. Both George and St. George Tucker, we learn here, came from Bermuda to Virginia to study law at William and Mary as well as to wive it wealthily in Williamsburg. St. George Tucker, who in fact married two wealthy widows in sequence, stepfathered John Randolph of Roanoke and fathered Nathaniel Beverly Tucker. Both offspring significantly affected Southern politics as well as Southern literature. Here one can begin the research for a Tucker family chronicle.

Perhaps the best pleasure arrives when one hits upon such excellent coverage as Eric W. Carlson's of Poe. In the matter-of-fact biographical sketch, Carlson packs a plentitude of details. Even more remarkable is the complexity of his description, within these space constraints, of Poe's complicated themes. And what is perhaps most valuable of all is the amount of important information Carlson swiftly conveys about Poe's critics. In its way, the treatment of Poe is a model, though of course Carlson has the advantage of a major artist for his subject.

All in all, this volume seems essential to every university library and to the personal library of any Southern literary scholar. It defines a pre-1900 Southern canon which is reasonable and sound.

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When I was eleven years old, my weekly trip to the library always began with an anxious, hopeful search of the shelves under "A" in case—just in case—there was one I had not read. I remember vividly the rising anticipation, the effort to suppress it so I wouldn't be disappointed, even the physical feel of that corner of the library, though I do not recall when and why I finally stopped: presumably someone showed me what card catalogues do or broke the news that Louisa May Alcott was no longer slipping into a vortex at her desk. But of course our childish