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*Vale of Humility: Plain Folk in Contemporary North Carolina*  
Fiction by George Hovis (review)

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Mississippi Quarterly, Volume 63, Numbers 3-4, Summer-Fall 2010, pp. 733-735  
(Review)



Published by Johns Hopkins University Press  
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/mss.2010.0020>

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## BOOK REVIEWS

*Vale of Humility: Plain Folk in Contemporary North Carolina Fiction*,  
by George Hovis. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2007.  
325pp. \$39.95 cloth.

IN THE INTRODUCTION TO *VALE OF HUMILITY*, GEORGE HOVIS CONTENTS that while the planter elite class may have ruled the Old South, such was not the case in North Carolina, at least not by the same proportions. Instead, Hovis argues that the yeoman farmer and other “plain folk” dominated the Tarheel state, leaving a lasting impression on the region’s collective memory. Early in his introduction Hovis posits that “in North Carolina no tradition of gentrified letters exists for contemporary writers to supersede” (6), and he makes clear that his study will analyze the various ways in which six contemporary North Carolina writers draw from this plain folk tradition. As any connoisseur of Southern letters knows, North Carolina offers many authors for literary critics to analyze; Hovis’s six are Doris Betts, Reynolds Price, Fred Chappell, Lee Smith, Clyde Edgerton, and Randall Kenan.

Literary depictions of plain folk in contemporary North Carolina literature certainly warrant critical exploration. Readers attuned to gender issues may wish for more attention to the “yeowoman” farmer: Hovis always uses the masculine pronoun when referring to the “yeoman,” and his introduction makes no mention of the yeowoman figure or of the fact that men and women were the plain folks who kept farms running. One could argue that the authors Hovis considers extend the previously male “yeoman” label to men and women, to all of the state’s plain folk, but Hovis does not. However, he does investigate issues surrounding female plain folks and writers’ portrayals of them in later chapters. Likewise, he ends his introduction by writing that the authors he considers “hope to help preserve in cultural memory the yeoman’s values while simultaneously interrogating those values and the various ways they have been embodied, as a means of better understanding and critiquing the evolving communities within their state and region” (21). And in fact, one of the critiques of “yeoman values” Hovis explores involves the role of the male patriarch in yeoman society.

After his introduction Hovis first considers the work of Doris Betts, working to establish a critical framework that compares independence

with interdependence; readers interested in learning about Betts' incorporation of religion into her writing will enjoy this chapter. Even so, while Hovis explores the feminist slant of much of Betts' work, the yeoman paradigm is still somewhat problematic. For instance, Hovis cites Stephanie McCurry's work, explaining that in most cases men were able to perpetuate the value of their farms because of the work women did (48), but there is still an underlying assumption that yeoman values are male and that women function as a helpful addendum to the system rather than form an integral part of it. Similarly, the subsequent chapter on Reynolds Price opens by using the male pronoun to reference the casual traveler, and such references occur again in a later chapter on Fred Chappell's work (58, 117, 118).

Nevertheless, the chapter on Price provides an interesting comparison between Price and Betts, especially concerning their upbringing, social standing, and the reflections of both in their writing. Hovis also treats the subject of race in Price's work with delicacy and tact, allowing readers to draw their own conclusions about the role of race in Price's writing. Following the chapter on Price, Hovis discusses Fred Chappell's work, tackling Chappell's more recent, popular works as well as his earlier publications, which many scholars avoid. Next, readers encounter Hovis' chapter on Lee Smith, subtitled "The Yeoman's Wife." Although this chapter is primarily about women and Smith's depiction of them, Hovis makes no claim that Smith encourages readers to consider how the women of her fiction fulfill the yeoman role; however, he does explore the various ways in which Smith's characters subvert patriarchal structures, and he does so with grace and skill (144). This chapter also includes a fair amount of psychological criticism, and while this critical approach could have been more usefully framed at the chapter's outset, the addition is a welcome one. Having given great breadth of coverage to the other authors in his study, Hovis surprisingly limits his analysis of Smith's work to three novels (*Oral History*, *Fair and Tender Ladies*, and *The Devil's Dream*); one wonders about the plain folk of her other novels, particularly *Black Mountain Breakdown*, *Saving Grace*, and *On Agate Hill* (though *On Agate Hill* was published just one year before Hovis' study was, and he may not have been able to include it).

Like his discussion of Smith's novels, Hovis's treatment of Clyde Edgerton's work further explores the role of women, especially in communities dominated by matriarchal structures; he even argues that

Edgerton's work "invites a feminist critique of the yeoman farm" (204). He also notes Edgerton's critique of the church's role in supporting racism. (In discussing that issue, Hovis briefly contrasts the situation in Edgerton's Piedmont with "The lack of racial conflict in Appalachia" [189], though such a lack has been contested by Appalachian scholars including John Alexander Williams and John Inscoe.)

Hovis's last substantial chapter considers Randall Kenan's work, opening with an interesting and informative historical overview of race in North Carolina, especially in Wilmington, near Kenan's childhood home. Hovis sums up this chapter's overarching argument when he says that Kenan "does not propose a literal return to an agrarian-based society so much as a return to its values: autonomy, community, self-determination, egalitarianism, and a call for a unified vision of African American identity rooted in a common agrarian history" (234).

Although each chapter provides enlightening commentary on its respective author, no single argumentative thread emerges to connect the six writers' treatments of plain folk. That may be Hovis's point: that contemporary North Carolina writers draw from the plain folk tradition in different ways, with multifarious results. He concludes by briefly chronicling more North Carolina writers whose work he believes would benefit from analysis similar to his own. These include Allan Gurganus, Kaye Gibbons, Jill McCorkle, Tim McLaurin, Dale Ray Phillips, John Holman, Tony Earley, Robert Morgan, Charles Frazier, and Michael McFee. Such a long list of writers provides ripe fodder for those looking to continue studying North Carolina writers and their depictions of plain folk. In the meantime, *Vale of Humility* makes its own important contribution to criticism of one of the South's most productive and respected state literatures.

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*Not Quite White: White Trash and the Boundaries of Whiteness*, by Mark Wray. Durham: Duke UP, 2006. 232 pp. \$79.95 cloth, \$22.95 paper.

THE PROMISE OF A SOCIOHISTORICAL CHRONOLOGY OF THE PROVOCATIVE term "white trash" in Matt Wray's book *Not Quite White* should be