

Tales from Missouri Bayou Country

By Catherine Browder

Book Review:

Delta Pearls, by Judith Bader Jones. Sweetgum Press, 2006.

Southeast Missouri, known geographically as the Bootheel, is a place foreign to most of us, overshadowed by Twain's Hannibal farther north or Memphis farther south. It is soybean and cotton country, remembered for heat and poverty and the nearby Mississippi that floods its bottomland. Judith Bader Jones has not forgotten the "Missouri Bayou" of her childhood, specifically Cottonwood Point; and her recent collection of stories, *Delta Pearls* (winner of the 2007 William Rockhill Nelson Award), is a tribute to the region.

The collection comprises a series of small stories like an album of yellowing snapshots. Most of the stories range from three to five pages and are situated in the first half of the 20th century. Jones gives us a past seen mostly through the eyes of young girls, as in the opening story, "Venus," set in a community called Kin Folk Ridge in 1912. Harsh things happen to the girls or their families, but Jones views life through a positive lens—an unusual posture in our overly ironic, even cynical age. Through the course of the collection, we discern that this nonjudgmental view of life fits her interpretation of the mid-century period and the resilience of her characters—farm and small town folk, dealing with material losses and spiritual gains, while the Great River rolls by.

The collection appears organized around several loose themes: young girls with friends, with both intact and divorced parents; neighbors and food; Christmas stories; coming-of-age and love stories; and young girls with adult "colored friends." Of this latter remarkable group, we are aware of the shadow of slavery hanging over her black characters, and the Bootheel rests shoulder to

shoulder with Tennessee, Arkansas, and Kentucky. Here “colored folks” are usually servants and free to leave, although poverty keeps them as immobile as whites. Two stories stand out. In “Letha’s Caged Monkeys,” an uneducated black woman, hoping to charm her two white charges, takes them to the back room of a bar to see the miraculous “caged monkeys,” which no longer exist. The mystery of their disappearance, her sense of betrayal, hurls Letha into illness. How the young girls help Letha recover is a jewel of compassion and restraint. In the best of Jones’ stories, what is not said but suggested proves powerful.

Likewise, in the moving story “Across the River,” hired hand Joe is leaving, and a sense of impending loss haunts the white folks left behind. At the same time, we intuit that Joe is eager to get on to his new life “across the river” and leave the old place behind.

Joe shifted his burden and walked down the dusty road. The moon was big enough to illuminate his path all the way to Cottonwood Point, where he waited for the ferry. The river flapped against the sunken sand. He turned and looked at his life behind him hidden in the depths of darkness.

On a different note, “Fifteen Years Later,” a sequel to a different tale, brings a local man back from New York to claim, or at least visit, a daughter whose mother died in childbirth.

Sarah was born at Cottonwood Point. He had never seen her, but he remembered the making, the mating. He had loved her mother, still did, would never have left her in this rotten, bloody, cotton bayou if he had known. . . . Honesty, purity and cotton galled up inside him.

The strength of the piece lies in the father’s voice. Jones does not often write from a male point of view; but when she does, we believe her. One wishes she would venture there more often. We believe most of her voices—black and white, female and male, young and old. Her dialogue consistently satisfies.

In the four-page “A Bus to Memphis,” two strangers narrate: a young woman running from home—“The Lord only knows she

never meant to leave, but the heat and the smell of the hogs was overbearing”—and an older man who sits beside her. While Anna Grace yearns for a new life, the stranger yearns for her.

Her head became a wobbling rag doll's until he steadied it against his shoulder. He longed to press the young woman to him . . . to stop the bus and take her out and across the field of Arkansas where he would lay her down in his early life in a cabin.

By the time they reach their destination, they have shared modest words about themselves.

They left the bus and walked a short distance to the Honey Dripper Café to order breakfast before Memphis even knew they were there.

Jones' writing has a “down home” quality without being annoyingly folksy, a tone one suspects she has honed. We can taste the biscuits “with the soft tops and crusty bottoms,” hear the mosquitoes, and even smell the nearby river. Certainly the voices sound authentic to the region, the people, and the decades she writes of. We also notice the enviable shape of her sentences. Simple and graceful and informative, each sentence does an enormous amount of work, revealing mood and character, and contributing to equally graceful paragraphs. Furthermore, she is skillful in minimizing clumsy transitions. In such brief tales, she has found the solution to the passage of time: Don't bring undue attention to it. Begin a new paragraph and move on.

It must be said that, from time to time, I wanted more from a tale. “Venus” is the longest story in the collection, yet there is so much happening we can imagine it even fuller. Also, several pieces veer toward the sentimental. Especially in the Christmas stories, endings feel conveniently uplifting or the set-up, too familiar.

Admirable, however, is the ease with which Judith Bader Jones demonstrates that “less is more.” Throughout *Delta Pearls*, what is deliberately withheld resonates with deep feeling.