

Deep South; Four Seasons on Back Roads, by Paul Theroux

In the United States, the Deep South is typically defined as the area in which slavery and cotton prevailed: Georgia, Alabama, South Carolina, Mississippi, and Louisiana, with parts of some adjacent states sometimes included.

Having traveled the world and written countless novels and travel books, Paul Theroux realized that he had never applied his skills to understand this part of his own country. So, in 2012, armed with a deep understanding of previous literary treatments of the region by the likes of William Faulkner, he set forth from his New England home to travel by car on the back roads of this part of the South.

He talked with everyday people whenever the opportunity arose, with chance comments leading him to follow areas of unexpected interest. As he put it: "I stayed away from the big cities and the coastal communities. I kept to the Lowcountry, the Black Belt, the Delta, the backwoods, the flyspeck towns." He knew that what was evolving in the better-known urban areas was different, but that was not his focus. So drawn was he to the area that he spent four seasons of travel there, with the result being his best-seller Deep South, published in 2015.

While he started with some preconceived ideas, what he encountered was not entirely what he expected from reading the Southern literary giants like Faulkner, and he grappled with piecing together his many conversations with the poor, a barber, preachers, unknown local figures, civil rights leaders, and those off the beaten track, many of whom eked out a precarious existence with unwritten rules of life.

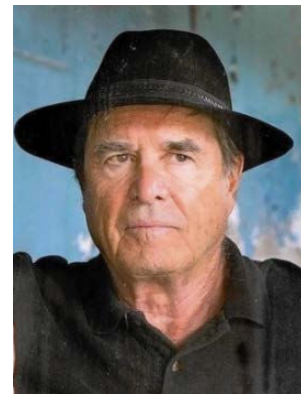
His writing meanders as his travels did, and he sometimes repeats himself. Early in his travels, he realized that much of what he was seeing, while changed on the surface from the slavery and Civil War era, was perhaps a more gentle, but nonetheless real, manifestation of long-standing traditions. In many areas, unstated rules and expectations were more powerful than

legal rights. In the poorest of the farming areas, he encountered people of both races barely subsisting. He repeatedly heard that official programs were not always as easily availed of by the blacks. He found economically marginal whites badly harmed by the loss of jobs to automation and the Third World. He found whites, now often in the minority, uneasy and uncertain.

He became fascinated with local gun shows, concluding that they represented a place for the whites who felt uneasy about “progress” to reinforce their social comfort. In observing the role of churches in the Black community, and the terror that arose when they were burned, he quotes another author, John Shelton Reed: “Black Southerners find in their churches a unifying focus and respite from a hostile (or strange) culture, as immigrant ethnic groups do.”

He recounts seeing both races living in substandard housing -- worse than in the northern slums -- and livelihoods delicately balanced against the next harvest or the next bank payment.

“These poor folk are poorer in their way ... and less able to manage and more hopeless than many people I had traveled among in distressed parts of Africa and Asia. Living in the buried hinterland, in fractured communities and dying towns and on the sidelines, they exist in obscurity.” Yet, he found them more willing to talk with a stranger than in the Northern cities.



He summarizes his findings of the South: “the uncomplaining underclass that amounted to a peasantry ... the powerful few, black and white, animated by their pretensions ... the poverty ... the grim and seemingly ineradicable hardship....” In many respects, the whites were as much locked into the past as the blacks.

He concluded that he had seen more progress in parts of Africa than here, and that there had been more effort and investment by government and nonprofit foundations in resolving deep disparities there than in the South. This bothered him deeply.

The book received mostly praise but some criticism. Were his observations accurate, and are they the same today, just a few years later? The book was not intended as a statistically validated doctoral dissertation, but his observations are powerful. Theroux saw some change coming. He disagreed with Faulkner’s often-quoted line about the South: “The past is never dead. It’s not even past....” He notes: “In many places, the cities most of all, the South has been turned upside down; in the rural areas the change has come slowly, in small but definite ways.”

He writes: “... the vitality of the South lies in the self-awareness of its deeply rooted people. What made the South an enlightenment for a traveler like me, more interested in conversation than sightseeing, was the heart and soul of its family narratives -- its human wealth.” He adds: “... the South has been held back from prosperity and has little power to exert influence on the

country at large, so it remains immured in its region, especially in its rural areas, walled off from the world.”

If the reader wonders about all this, consider Theroux’s words: “Ignore the books and go there. The Deep South today is not in its books, it’s in its people, and the people are hospitable, they are talkers, and if they take to you, they’ll tell you their stories. The Deep South made me feel like a fortunate traveler in an overlooked land.”

-- Jim Alexander