

A black and white photograph of a woman with dark, wavy hair, wearing a white lace-trimmed dress. She is leaning against a door with a textured panel. The word "Fever" is written in large, white, cursive script across the top left of the image. The background shows a room with a window and some furniture.

Fever

*The
Hot
and
Bothered
Characters
of
Southern
Literature*

*Sarah
Cleaver*

All the couples are breaking up. At the time of writing, the elusive English sun beats hot in the sky, creatures wake from numb hibernation and crime rates rise. British bodies, muscles constricted by months of cold, respond predictably. Energy previously utilised for shivering and complaining, overflows and transforms into lust and unwise decisions. Holidays are taken to Greek islands, where a few die deaths caused by sex, drugs and alcohol, the same as every year. Just when the air becomes thick and unbearable, an electrical storm breaks. The hot seasons are synonymous with fleeting romances that won't last past September, riots and running away. And that's even in the places that aren't so used to them.

The Deep South is a region steeped in sensational references, from brothels, belles and garden parties to racial tensions and tornadoes. Most definitions of this area usually include five states, Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi and South Carolina. Eugene Walter once described the Deep South summer as 'not only a season, a climate, it's a dimension. Floating in it, one must be either proud or submerged'. That word 'floating' contradicts the suggestion of resistance in the sentence, as if the South will do as it pleases, surrender or not. Natural disasters and days so hot that the hours before 5pm are useless, contribute to a mood of recklessness.

The destructive element and romance of this doomed land are perhaps best personified by one of its most famous characters - Scarlett O'Hara. Like the hurricanes and tornados that mark the area's history, she is unstoppable in her path, unswayed by the consequences of her actions. At the beginning of *Gone With the Wind*, a barbecue takes place. The picturesque party is the setting for Scarlett's individuality to be displayed. While the other girls cover up to avoid getting freckles in the sun, she wears a revealing dress that exposes her skin to both the suns rays and the attention of the guests. Later on, presumably at the hottest hour of the day, all the women retire for naptime, and a painterly scene of estrogenic strangeness is constructed. Girls in their undergarments recline sleeping on beds,

mattresses and chaise-lounges, while the children of their slaves keep them cool with peacock feather fans. Scarlett glides silently through, motioning the children to shhh, driven by her burning desire for Ashley, down the staircase and into the heat of the afternoon. In opting for the heat she has left behind passivity but also peace.

Gone With the Wind belongs to a genre of Deep South literature. Like most locations, this one carries its own unique turn of phrase and in these books, dialogue and description read like poetry and come peppered with sensory metaphors - hot heads, warm hearts and cool liars are commonplace.

'Somehow, it was hotter then. Men's stiff collars wilted by nine in the morning; ladies bathed before noon, after their 3 o'clock naps, and by nightfall were like soft teacakes with frosting from sweating and sweet talcum.'

Harper Lee's description of Maycomb County, Alabama, sets the scene in the first chapter of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and should be remembered throughout the book. Although the story spans several years, it's the summer that spurs the story on. It is the vacation period that brings Dill to visit, the routine of school is broken, and long days are filled with feats of the imagination, dares and coming-of-age époques.

The connection with cold and heat, to death and heat is an obvious one, as bodies drain of warmth once they are dead. In this community there is only one character that exists away from the sunlight, behind closed shutters in a cool dark house - Arthur (Boo) Radley. Unseen until the end of the book, his presence is constant in the form of gossip, ghost stories and the imaginary games of the children. Despite Dill's well-meaning theory that Boo might like to come out and play, each summer causes an encroachment on the still and silent world of the Radley house by the children's life-affirming experiments. Again in this instance, heat brings with it restlessness, and a disturbance of the peace. This theme can be spotted running through a number of other Southern stories, but none more than in

the work of Mississippi-born playwright Tennessee Williams.

More than pathetic fallacy, heat in these Deep South stories features as a location, an uncredited character and a catalyst, the lingo of weather conditions, whispering insanity into the ears of tortured men and women. *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, one of Williams' major plays as well as his personal favourite, establishes the setting of high summer in the first few minutes. In the directions for stage management, Williams wrote 'the set is the background for a play that deals with human extremities of emotion, and it needs that softness behind it'. The 'hot buttered biscuit' that one of Gooper's children hits Maggie with in the play, is replaced with ice cream in the film. The child's 'hot little hands' buried deep in carton of ice cream serve to remind us (and Maggie) that the heat within her will not be so easily relieved. Maggie is the cat of the title, and the hot tin roof symbolises her seemingly indestructible sexual desire for her husband Brick, who both openly despises and refuses to sleep with her.

'What is the victory of a cat on a hot tin roof? - I wish I knew... Just staying on it, I guess, as long as she can.'

These words from Maggie are not only a meeting of a challenge but also a pledge of constancy. She doesn't intend to extinguish the burning with anyone else but Brick. The metaphor also brings to mind walking on hot coals, an act of faith beyond reason. Brick himself has his own methods of putting out the fire; drinking until the moment he hears the 'click' that 'turns the hot light off and the cool light on and suddenly there's peace'. The stifled situation of the couple's unhappy cohabitation also introduces the idea of temperature in relation to confinement. 'I'm not living with you! We occupy the same cage, that's all'. At some point during their argument Maggie locks herself in with Brick. In answer to his warning to stop making a fool of herself she answers 'I don't mind making a fool of myself over you'. Just like Scarlett, she has no time for cool behaviour, playing hard to get.

Of all the unfortunate characters affected by Williams' claustrophobic caging device, the three main players from *A Streetcar Named Desire* have it the worst. Crowded into a New Orleans apartment, the brutish Stanley, his dreamily infatuated wife Stella and her mentally fragile sister Blanche reside uneasily. The pressure in the two-room apartment builds to the inevitable storm, helped along by the vast quantities of heat and steam produced by Blanche's hour-long baths. These are claimed to 'calm her nerves' but also have the effect of infuriating Stanley and causing the tension to rise with the temperature. Diametric opposites, the two characters can be compared in the way they respond to the stifling temperature of the steamy apartment. Blanche, unable to accept her own sexual desires, is trapped by her own state of denial. Relying on a complicated system of lies, distractions and drama to keep her safe, the steamy environment she manufactures could be seen as just another smokescreen, but is also a symbol of the turmoil on the inside. Stanley on the other hand, suffers no such need for suppression and is generally seen in a state of undress or the act of undressing 'My clothes are stickin' to me. Do you mind if I make myself comfortable?' The very idea that he should be denied comfort is as alien to him as acting naturally is for Blanche, making this terrifying man uncomfortable is just about the only act of war she can manage, but it's a war she'll ultimately lose.

Stepping out of the world of literature, but remaining in the South, *Mississippi Burning* is a thriller based on the story of three murdered civil rights workers, and the subsequent CIA investigation, and is included here thanks to the symbolism of fire as an act of violence. The fictionalised community of Jessup County where the film is set is hostile to the arrival of the agents Ward and Anderson, played by Gene Hackman and Willem Defoe. The fire of the title is present both as a threatening burning cross left for them outside their hotel, and in the form of the abuse inflicted on the black community by the Ku Klux Klan. Fire is chaos, uncontrollable and terrifying, and the locals use it to fight outsiders.



A Streetcar Named Desire (Elia Kazan, 1951)

Ward, the northerner, is provoked, drawn into the fire he has no idea how to play with, gradually exacerbating problems with his straightforward investigation style. Anderson, on the other hand, is local. 'Local problem' the corrupt police smirk as they close ranks against the CIA. Anderson, used to the heat, uses this to his advantage, remaining cool, impassive and watchful in the face of the mounting pressure, finally fighting it with fire of his own. His equally violent tactics and insider knowledge of the attitudes of the South win the war and crack the case.

'Every culture has its southerners - people who work as little as they can, preferring to dance, drink, sing brawl, kill their unfaithful spouses; who have livelier gestures, more lustrous eyes, more colorful garments, more fancifully decorated vehicles, a wonderful sense of rhythm, and charm, charm, charm; unambitious, no, lazy, ignorant, superstitious, uninhibited people, never on

time, conspicuously poorer (how could it be otherwise, say the northerners); who for all their poverty and squalor lead enviable lives - envied, that is, by work-driven, sensually inhibited, less corruptly governed northerners.'

This Susan Sontag quote sums up the romantic image of the South and its people, a mess of mythology and reality. The truth of this image takes a lot of deconstruction, as a cycle often forms in which art reflects its surroundings, while the surroundings begin to reflect the art. Intense, fast and strange to outsiders, with a wildness characterised by stronger desires and weaker self-control, the Deep South is as vivid as it seems in every film, book and play in which it stars. Northern visitors - arrive composed, leave incandescent.

© Sarah Cleaver / Arty