

Southern Literary Review

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“Gone,” Edited with Photography by Nell Dickerson

April 25, 2012 By [Allen Mendenhall](#) [Leave a Comment](#)

Review by Allen Mendenhall



BelleBooks. 118 pages.

I’ve always maintained a spectator’s curiosity in the rituals and practices of photography. I can’t take a good picture, no matter which side of the camera I’m on, but I appreciate the idea of reducing the world to a more manageable form, something I can look at and admire without getting overwhelmed by the sheer magnitude and kinetics of it all.

I used to have a friend who was a photographer, and I would watch her take pictures. She tried, once or twice, to teach me the nuances and particulars of photography, but I’m too proud to fail at new activities, so I strive never to undertake them.

Photographs are, folks say, moments stuck in time. That makes them especially melancholy if their subjects, as it were, are decaying, rotting, or dying. That’s what I realized when I leafed through the pages of *Gone*, a brilliant, conversation-starting, coffee-table book bearing the

subtitle “A Heartbreaking Story of the Civil War,” and the sub-sub-title “A Photographic Plea for Preservation.”

Gone makes history even as it documents history. Its images of antebellum Southern churches, plantations, and homes—some dilapidated, some just barely restored—ought to remind Southerners of the need for preserving the finest monuments of, and to, our complicated history.

That the photographer is Nell Dickerson, cousin to the late, great historian and novelist Shelby Foote, who needs no introduction to readers of this publication—[although we editors have given him one](#)—only adds a sense of authenticity to this project. It’s as if in image and word and authorial kin, the book is tied to a past that struggles, and fails, to remain present; and it’s in that failing that the book achieves its most meaningful and poignant expression.

We Southerners place a premium on the fixed, the immutable, the known, perhaps because we understand that the things we value—family, hearth, home, community, place, religion—are bound to change. We mourn change as we mourn loss, because all change entails loss, and it’s our tendency to mourn that gives us a unique, constructive identity.

We define ourselves as a people who have lost, or have lost something. It’s a position that doesn’t survive interrogation, but there it is, a tragic ethos (and, for that matter, pathos) that we hope will stay the same when all else is, if not different, then almost unfamiliar. Almost.

Any review of *Gone* that neglects to mention the powerful introduction by Robert Hicks, or the bleak but beautiful short story by Foote, both of which appear alongside Dickerson’s photographs, would be inadequate. The strength of this book, however, comes not from its prose but from its visual reproductions of reality, which is, as every Southerner knows, sometimes a harsh reality.

A book of stark, sad images of things bound to end. I could leave this review at that. Yet doing so would neglect the positive tones—the calls to action—that Dickerson seeks to inspire. She, like Hicks, is a preservationist, and she makes no secret of her desire to “honor and preserve the reflections of our collective past that continue to make us a great nation.” Dickerson’s camera is her means for shouting, “Save this place before it’s too late!”

And so I’m reminded once again of my photographer friend, and of a spring day when we rode bikes together into a grassy field so she could capture images of swaying wheat stalks. As usual, I declined her offer to hold the camera or to take a picture of my own. “You’re funny,” she said. When I asked why, she answered, “Because you’re always wanting to slow down and sit still, to make time stop, but you won’t do the one thing that would give you the illusion that you can.”

There is, I suspect, something in that statement that explains why *Gone* is so touching and provoking. I’m not sure what it is.

Whatever it is, it affects me strangely.

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