



Calls and Responses: The American Novel of Slavery since *Gone with the Wind* (Southern Literary Studies)

Tim A. Ryan

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In this comprehensive, groundbreaking study, Tim A. Ryan explores how American novelists since World War I have imagined the institution of slavery and the experience of those involved in it. Complicating the common assumption that authentic black-authored fiction about slavery is starkly opposed to the traditional, racist fiction (and history) created by whites, Ryan suggests that discourses about American slavery are -- and have always been -- defined by connections rather than disjunctions. Ryan contends that African American writers didn't merely reject and move beyond traditional portrayals of the black past but rather actively engaged in a dynamic dialogue with white-authored versions of slavery and existing historiographical debates. The result is an ongoing cultural conversation that transcends both racial and disciplinary boundaries and is akin to the call-and-response style of African American gospel music.

Ryan addresses in detail more than a dozen major American novels of slavery, from the first significant modern fiction about the institution -- Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind* and Arna Bontemps's *Black Thunder* (both published in 1936) -- to recent noteworthy novels on the topic -- Edward P. Jones's *The Known World* and Valerie Martin's *Property* (both published in 2003). His insistence upon the necessity of interpreting novels about the past directly in relation to specific historical scholarship makes *Calls and Responses* especially compelling. He reads Toni Morrison's *Beloved* not in opposition to a monolithic orthodoxy about slavery but in relation to specific arguments of controversial historian Stanley Elkins. Similarly, he analyzes William Styron's *The Confessions of Nat Turner* in terms of its rhetorical echoes of Frederick Douglass's famous autobiographical narrative. Ryan shows throughout *Calls and Responses* how a variety of novelists -- including Alex Haley, Octavia Butler, Ishmael Reed, Margaret Walker, and Frances Gaither -- engage in a dynamic debate with each other and with such historians as Herbert Aptheker, Charles Joyner, Eugene and Elizabeth Genovese, and many others.

A substantially new account of the development of American slavery fiction in the last century, *Calls and Responses* goes beyond merely exalting the expression of black voices and experiences and actually reconfigures the existing view of the American novel of slavery.

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