

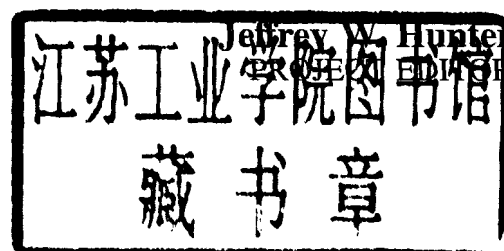
☐ Contemporary
Literary Criticism

CLC 270

Volume 270

Contemporary Literary Criticism

Criticism of the Works
of Today's Novelists, Poets, Playwrights,
Short Story Writers, Scriptwriters, and
Other Creative Writers



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Contemporary Literary Criticism, Vol. 270

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LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOG CARD NUMBER 76-46132

ISBN-13: 978-1-4144-1946-6

ISBN-10: 1-4144-1946-5

ISSN 0091-3421

Preface

Named “one of the twenty-five most distinguished reference titles published during the past twenty-five years” by *Reference Quarterly*, the *Contemporary Literary Criticism (CLC)* series provides readers with critical commentary and general information on more than 2,000 authors now living or who died after December 31, 1999. Volumes published from 1973 through 1999 include authors who died after December 31, 1959. Previous to the publication of the first volume of *CLC* in 1973, there was no ongoing digest monitoring scholarly and popular sources of critical opinion and explication of modern literature. *CLC*, therefore, has fulfilled an essential need, particularly since the complexity and variety of contemporary literature makes the function of criticism especially important to today’s reader.

Scope of the Series

CLC provides significant passages from published criticism of works by creative writers. Since many of the authors covered in *CLC* inspire continual critical commentary, writers are often represented in more than one volume. There is, of course, no duplication of reprinted criticism.

Authors are selected for inclusion for a variety of reasons, among them the publication or dramatic production of a critically acclaimed new work, the reception of a major literary award, revival of interest in past writings, or the adaptation of a literary work to film or television.

Attention is also given to several other groups of writers—authors of considerable public interest—about whose work criticism is often difficult to locate. These include mystery and science fiction writers, literary and social critics, foreign authors, and authors who represent particular ethnic groups.

Each *CLC* volume contains individual essays and reviews taken from hundreds of book review periodicals, general magazines, scholarly journals, monographs, and books. Entries include critical evaluations spanning from the beginning of an author’s career to the most current commentary. Interviews, feature articles, and other published writings that offer insight into the author’s works are also presented. Students, teachers, librarians, and researchers will find that the general critical and biographical material in *CLC* provides them with vital information required to write a term paper, analyze a poem, or lead a book discussion group. In addition, complete bibliographical citations note the original source and all of the information necessary for a term paper footnote or bibliography.

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A *CLC* entry consists of the following elements:

- The **Author Heading** cites the name under which the author most commonly wrote, followed by birth and death dates. Also located here are any name variations under which an author wrote, including transliterated forms for authors whose native languages use nonroman alphabets. If the author wrote consistently under a pseudonym, the pseudonym will be listed in the author heading and the author’s actual name given in parenthesis on the first line of the biographical and critical information. Uncertain birth or death dates are indicated by question marks. Single-work entries are preceded by a heading that consists of the most common form of the title in English translation (if applicable) and the original date of composition.
- The **Introduction** contains background information that introduces the reader to the author, work, or topic that is the subject of the entry.
- The list of **Principal Works** is ordered chronologically by date of first publication and lists the most important works by the author. The genre and publication date of each work is given. In the case of foreign authors whose

works have been translated into English, the English-language version of the title follows in brackets. Unless otherwise indicated, dramas are dated by first performance, not first publication.

- Reprinted **Criticism** is arranged chronologically in each entry to provide a useful perspective on changes in critical evaluation over time. The critic's name and the date of composition or publication of the critical work are given at the beginning of each piece of criticism. Unsigned criticism is preceded by the title of the source in which it appeared. All titles by the author featured in the text are printed in boldface type. Footnotes are reprinted at the end of each essay or excerpt. In the case of excerpted criticism, only those footnotes that pertain to the excerpted texts are included.
- A complete **Bibliographical Citation** of the original essay or book precedes each piece of criticism. Source citations in the Literary Criticism Series follow University of Chicago Press style, as outlined in *The Chicago Manual of Style*, 15th ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003).
- Critical essays are prefaced by brief **Annotations** explicating each piece.
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- An annotated bibliography of **Further Reading** appears at the end of each entry and suggests resources for additional study. In some cases, significant essays for which the editors could not obtain reprint rights are included here. Boxed material following the further reading list provides references to other biographical and critical sources on the author in series published by Gale.

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A **Cumulative Author Index** lists all of the authors that appear in a wide variety of reference sources published by Gale, including *CLC*. A complete list of these sources is found facing the first page of the Author Index. The index also includes birth and death dates and cross references between pseudonyms and actual names.

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An alphabetical **Title Index** accompanies each volume of *CLC*. Listings of titles by authors covered in the given volume are followed by the author's name and the corresponding page numbers where the titles are discussed. English translations of foreign titles and variations of titles are cross-referenced to the title under which a work was originally published. Titles of novels, dramas, films, nonfiction books, and poetry, short story, or essay collections are printed in italics, while individual poems, short stories, and essays are printed in roman type within quotation marks.

In response to numerous suggestions from librarians, Gale also produces an annual cumulative title index that alphabetically lists all titles reviewed in *CLC* and is available to all customers. Additional copies of this index are available upon request. Librarians and patrons will welcome this separate index; it saves shelf space, is easy to use, and is recyclable upon receipt of the next edition.

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Tim Gautreaux

1947-

(Full name Timothy Martin Gautreaux) American novelist, essayist, poet, and short story writer.

The following entry presents criticism on Gautreaux's career through 2009.

INTRODUCTION

Gautreaux is considered one of the best writers to emerge from the American South in recent years. In his fiction he has drawn on his rich Cajun heritage and French Catholic upbringing to explore themes of moral responsibility, sin, and redemption, emphasizing the importance of family, community, and tradition in an increasingly alienating and materialistic world. Critics have praised his wit, intricate plotting, detailed characterizations, and strong sense of place.

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Gautreaux was born on October 19, 1947, in Morgan City, Louisiana, part of the primarily Cajun region located in the southwest part of the state. His father, Minos Lee Gautreaux, was a tugboat captain, and his grandfather was a steamboat chief engineer; other male relatives worked as mechanics or in the railroad industry. The tales these relatives told about their jobs generated a love of storytelling in the young Gautreaux. Further, they inspired the motif of machinery and machine repair in his fiction. He was also influenced by his family's Cajun heritage, which dates back to the mid-eighteenth century. Many of Gautreaux's family members spoke Cajun French and emphasized the practice of oral storytelling. Another influence on Gautreaux's life and fiction was the devoutly Catholic nature of the Cajun region. As a child he was immersed in Catholic culture, attending parochial schools run by nuns of the Marianite order. Correspondingly, themes of transgression, salvation, religious devotion, and lapsed Catholicism recur in his stories and novels. In 1969 he was accepted at Nicholls State University in Thibodaux, Louisiana. Shortly after graduation, one of his college professors entered several of Gautreaux's poems in the Southern Literary Festival. These works attracted the attention of renowned poet James Dickey, who offered Gautreaux

a teaching assistantship to the Ph.D. program in English at the University of South Carolina. In 1972 Gautreaux became a teacher at Southeastern Louisiana University in Hammond, near New Orleans.

In 1977 Gautreaux was accepted to a prestigious novel-writing course taught by the celebrated author Walker Percy at Loyola University. Around that time he began to focus on fiction instead of poetry. A few of his early short stories were published in the *Kansas Quarterly* and *Massachusetts Review*. He achieved a national breakthrough when his story "Same Place, Same Things" appeared in the *Atlantic Monthly* and was then chosen for the *Best American Short Stories of 1992*. His success continued with "Waiting for the Evening News," which received the 1995 National Magazine Award for fiction, and "The Bug Man," which was selected for *New Stories from the South: The Year's Best, 1995*. Gautreaux was also the recipient of a National Endowment for the Arts fellowship. His first collection of short stories, *Same Place, Same Things*, was published in 1996 to considerable critical acclaim. That same year he was appointed to the position of writer-in-residence at the University of Mississippi for a semester. When he returned to Southeastern Louisiana University, he was promoted to writer-in-residence and given more time to pursue his craft. In 1998 his first novel, *The Next Step in the Dance*, was published. He retired from his teaching position in 2002 and since then has concentrated on writing fiction. His most recent story, "The Safe," was published in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 2006 and subsequently chosen for the collection *New Stories from the South: The Year's Best, 2007*. His latest novel, *The Missing*, was published in 2009.

MAJOR WORKS

Gautreaux first attracted critical attention for his debut volume of short stories, *Same Place, Same Things*, which collected twelve of his early tales. Many of the stories feature white, working-class characters who struggle to find a second chance at love and life. The award-winning story "Waiting for the Evening News" explores the moral dilemma of a drunken train engineer who flees the scene of a derailment he may or may not have caused. After hiding in a New Orleans hotel room and contemplating the damage he may

have done, he confesses to a local priest, who convinces him to take responsibility for his actions and turn himself in to the authorities. Another acclaimed tale, "The Bug Man," features an exterminator in Cajun country who cannot help but meddle in his customers' lives. When an attempt at matchmaking goes awry, he tries to intervene but finds himself alienated by class and economic issues. In the title story, an itinerant pump repairman travels in search of work in the South during the Great Depression. He arrives on a dilapidated, drought-stricken Louisiana strawberry farm to find the farmer dead in a field after being electrocuted. The farmer's widow tries to seduce the repairman and offers to leave with him. When he realizes that she had killed her husband, he leaves town without her—only to find that she has stowed away in his truck. She hits him in the head with a wrench, steals his truck, and disappears. Instead of despairing, he considers himself lucky to have his memories of his own happy marriage.

Gautreaux's second collection, *Welding with Children* (1999), addresses themes of moral responsibility, alienation, sin, redemption, and the return of the outcast to the safety of the community. The stories in the collection include "Misuse of Light," which chronicles the repercussions when a camera-shop employee develops a ten-year-old roll of film, and "The Piano Tuner," which explores the unconventional friendship between a middle-aged woman and a piano technician. "Resistance" follows the interaction between Alvin Boudreaux, an old widower living on his own in a changing subdivision, and his ten-year-old neighbor, Carmine, who is neglected by her parents. When Alvin volunteers to help Carmine with her science project against his instincts, he finds he enjoys encouraging her in her academics and takes pleasure in her accomplishments. After Carmine's father destroys the project in a fit of rage, Alvin stays up all night to remake the project, thereby transcending his solitary existence to further help the beleaguered young girl. In the title story, a grandfather confronts his past failures with his own kids and learns about love while taking care of his grandchildren. Gautreaux's acclaimed story "The Safe" centers around a strangely influential and redemptive piece of salvage from a defunct sewing machine factory. The antique office safe that has been delivered to a stagnant junkyard proceeds to transform the lives and perspectives of Alva, the junkyard owner, his family, and his employees. The tale explores themes of envy, beauty, imagination, and reawakening through the miraculous power of the safe's contents.

Gautreaux's novels expand on the thematic concerns of his stories. *The Next Step in the Dance*, his first novel, chronicles the trials of Paul Thibodeaux—a Ca-

jun French Roman Catholic mechanic from a run-down Louisiana town—who follows his restless, ambitious wife, Colette, when she leaves him to move to Los Angeles. Hopelessly confused as to his wife's chronic discontent and sharp yearning for something more than what they have together, he reverts to his love of fixing machines, which offers him a sense of understanding and fulfillment. Colette eventually divorces him. Alienated from his wife, his Cajun heritage, and his materialistic community, he finds his way back to his hometown, which has been ravaged by economic hard times and the collapse of the oil industry. It is there he recovers his sense of community and tradition. Colette, too, finds her way back home, and the couple tries to reunite. Gautreaux's second novel, *The Clearing* (2003), also concerns an estranged character who eventually finds his way home. In the years after World War I, a traumatized American soldier, Byron Aldridge, flees his familial obligations as the heir to his father's timber business in Pittsburgh and settles in Nimbus, Louisiana, where he takes a job as a constable for a rough logging operation. His father tracks him down and sends Byron's younger brother, Randolph, to convince him to return home to Pittsburgh. Randolph travels to Louisiana, only to become involved in his brother's feud with a Sicilian gang. In Gautreaux's latest novel, *The Missing*, a former World War I soldier, Sam Simoneaux, returns to his wife in New Orleans. He finds a job at a department store, eager to leave his wartime experiences behind him and resume his former life. Sam's resolution is shattered, however, when a young girl disappears from the store where he works. He decides to help the girl's parents in their search, joining them on a steamboat traveling up the Mississippi River into areas virtually untouched by civilization to find evidence of the young girl's whereabouts. During the journey Sam is forced to confront issues of law and morality as he uncovers a clue to the young girl's fate that endangers everyone involved and sheds light on an old family tragedy.

CRITICAL RECEPTION

Critics have lauded Gautreaux's realistic and sharp dialogue, rich evocation of Cajun and Louisiana regional culture, sense of irony, elaborate plots, and complex characters. They have likewise commended his insightful treatment of thematic concerns such as moral obligation, isolation, and absolution. Moreover, they have underlined his strong sense of place and the centrality of his home state of Louisiana to his literary imagination. Gautreaux, however, has stated that he would rather be classified in the frontier literary tradition, and several critics have noted, correspondingly, the elements of old tall tales and Southwestern humor

in his writing. Although a few reviewers have described him as a regional writer, others have argued that he transcends purely regional concerns and encompasses universal themes in his work. Commentators have also characterized his Cajun heritage as a key aspect of his stories and novels, asserting that his vivid recollections of Cajun dialogue, culture, and French Catholic tradition play an integral role in his fiction.

Moral questions also figure significantly in his work. As Gautreaux stated in a recent interview, "I consider myself to be a Catholic writer in the tradition of Walker Percy. If a story does not deal with a moral question, I don't think it's much of a story." In addition to Percy, scholars have compared him to both Flannery O'Connor and Joseph Conrad. Although early reviews had praised Gautreaux's moral vision, in later works commentators found it to be sermonizing and judgmental. Scholars have also emphasized the working-class sensibilities of his fiction, particularly his recurring motifs of machinery and machine repair, as well as his exploration of the social and economic issues that divide and alienate his characters. In many of his literary works, critics have detected a tendency to contrast themes of love, family, commitment, religion, and tradition against the postmodern values of materialism and consumerism. Many have commented on Gautreaux's place within the literary tradition of the American South, hailing him as one of the most talented Southern writers in contemporary literature.

PRINCIPAL WORKS

Same Place, Same Things (short stories) 1996
The Next Step in the Dance (novel) 1998
Welding with Children (short stories) 1999
The Clearing (novel) 2003
The Missing (novel) 2009

CRITICISM

Tim Gautreaux and Christina Masciere (interview date March 1998)

SOURCE: Gautreaux, Tim, and Christina Masciere. "Novel Approach: Tim Gautreaux Takes 'The Next Step.'" *New Orleans Magazine* 32, no. 6 (March 1998): 31, 35, 47.

[In the following interview, Gautreaux remarks on the differences between writing short stories and novels, the motif of machinery in his fiction, and his reputation as both a Catholic and Southern writer.]

Hot off the success of his *Same Place, Same Things* collection of short stories, Morgan City native Tim Gautreaux debuts his first novel this month. *The Next Step in the Dance* explores the rich and timeless Cajun culture of South Louisiana in a seriocomic tale that explores marriage, family and sense of place.

A recent Southern Writer-in-Residence at Ole Miss, Gautreaux has won a National Endowment for the Arts fellowship and the National Magazine Award. His lyrical short stories have appeared in magazines including *Atlantic Monthly*, *Harper's* and *GQ* as well as in the recent anthologies *New Stories from the South* (Algonquin) and *A Few Thousand Words About Love* (St. Martin's Press).

Gautreaux, a professor of English at Southeastern Louisiana University for 26 years, recently took time out to talk about his writing. Look for him at this month's Tennessee Williams Festival, where he'll teach a master class and speak on two panels.

[Masciere]: Besides length, what's different about writing a novel?

[Gautreaux]: The short story is something you have to work over in a microcosmic way. You can't really make a bad sentence in a short story. Everything has to be right. With a novel, of course, you've got to get it as right as you can, but a publisher will be more understanding if there is a bad page or something that is not quite logical or is underdeveloped. If he sees that you've created characters that a reader will be sorry to have finished reading about at the end of the book, he will work with you on all of the other problems.

There are many religious motifs in your work, and you've said that you switched from poetry to stories after taking a seminar with Walker Percy. Do you consider yourself a Catholic writer, like Percy?

Yes, I would say so. First, it's impossible to write about South Louisiana culture without writing about the Catholic Church, because it permeates everything—from wedding ceremonies to industrial fishing to the sugarcane industry to the way people think about eating on Friday. A lot of my stories have priests in them, or references to going to Mass or confession, and that's because of what I'm writing about.

[Themes of moral dilemmas and redemption] come out more or less subconsciously. Each of us has a type of ingrained, almost instinctual interest in a theme,

whether it's pollution or child abuse or alienation or depression. No matter what story you write, no matter what plot you choose, that theme is going to be in there. It's almost inevitable that a writer can escape the themes that are in his soul.

What about the recurring motif of machinery? I see it as a parallel to Catholicism—the possibility of fixing things.

I collect antique machinery, so I relate to that. Part of it is genetic: My father was a tugboat captain, and my grandfather was a steamboat chief engineer. My great-uncle was a master mechanic. Machinery has a particular metaphorical function, and sometimes I'm working with it a little bit obviously, but most of the time it's subconscious. My wife says I write fiction as an excuse to write about machinery.

Many of your characters are pathetic but funny at the same time.

This is what a writer is always looking for that situation that blends humor and pathos evenly. And you've got to hit it just right, because if you miss it, it's hokey or sentimental—both of which are just awful things to do to a reader. That's what Flannery O'Connor does so well. She has these characters that you laugh at, but that you can feel sorry for at the same time, or at least you're amazed at what a terrible experience they're going through while you're laughing at them.

Do you consider yourself a Southern writer?

I don't know if the term has much meaning. The more I think about it, the less I understand it. After *The Shipping News*, would you call Annie Proulx a Newfoundland writer? Would you call Sherwood Anderson a Midwestern writer? Ultimately, I consider the term "Southern writer" to be pretty empty. I'm just a writer that lives in the South.

The only real tradition in which I'm operating would be that of the frontier humorists. When I was a kid, what I read most of all was things like folktales—stories in which men sat around and told obvious lies. I grew up listening to a lot of old men tell stories to each other about their jobs.

Now, you're going to get into this question of well, aren't we greater storytellers in the South? I don't know. I bet if you walk into steelworkers' bars in the Northeast, you're going to find people who are telling stories. It's not only a Southern tradition or a Western tradition.

Dialogue in your books rings so true. How do you approach it?

There is still a rich creative metaphorical magic alive, and it's in the mouths of uneducated people. Educated people tend to speak a standard English which is not creative and which is not conducive to storytelling or bull-shitting or any verbal color at all. We go to a university, we get a degree, we get educated, we get a standard vocabulary and idiom, and then we use it like insurance salesmen. People who are uneducated basically have to make up an idiom as they go along. These are the people I like to listen to, because they're very acrobatic with the way they use the language.

Until I went to college I had a Cajun accent, and not much in the way of vocabulary. But I liked to talk, I liked to tell stories, because I was raised listening to people tell colorful stories. I liked to make up stuff and lie. That's where I got my verbal skills.

After attending Nicholls State, you studied under James Dickey at the University of South Carolina. Was graduate school the only time you've lived outside of South Louisiana?

Yes, I guess a lot of states are fairly homogenous as far as language is concerned and manners, things like that. I take care with "homogenous" because every place has its little nuances. But in Louisiana, you have such a strange hodgepodge. Maybe that's one thing that makes the South different from other parts of the country is that there's such a mixture of values, levels of society, understandings.

How does teaching affect you and your writing?

It's a two-edged sword. One, teaching keeps you reading contemporary fiction, because you have to teach it. But it takes a lot of your time to teach a 12-hour load. It keeps you from writing as much as you could. But then there are a lot of things that keep you from writing as much as you could, things that are just as important. I raised two boys and taught 12 hours and pursued a lot of hobbies.

One of the most important reasons I write is the feeling that I *can* write. People tell me that I do it well, and I actually believe it would be evil for me to not do what I can do well. Whatever you can do well is a gift, and if you don't exercise it, then you're doing something wrong. That's one of the main reasons I write.

What writers do you enjoy reading?

I like Annie Proulx. I like Cormac McCarthy's later books. He's the last guy in America who can handle grandiose dialogue. His earlier novels are very, very dark, not really what you'd call commercial fiction.

You've got to ask yourself, what do you want to do? When your publishers tell you that they need likeable characters in a novel, and you put likeable characters in there, are you really perverting your art? Whenever a publisher puts a hurdle in front of me and says that my writing is too dark, that I have to change it, I try not to make a directive like that from a publisher or agent something to surrender to. I just consider it a hurdle that I have to use my art to get over.

I have to do what I want to do, but I have to keep the public in mind. People don't want to be bombarded constantly with depressing things. I mean, there's a lot of depressing stuff in my fiction, but personally I don't believe that you have to constantly remind people that life sucks, then you die, because everybody knows that. This idea that some, particularly young, writers have that life is just some dark journey and then you die is a myopic way of looking at things.

How do you define yourself?

I write, but I don't look at myself as a writer. I've heard people introduce themselves as writers. That's the last thing I would ever say. I would rather say, "I'm Tim Gautreaux, and I'm a collector of antique steam machinery" or something. Or, "I'm an English teacher." I think it's almost important not to think of yourself in that one dimension. I do lots of things; writing is one of them. Ambition has never been my long suit, and that's one thing that marks me as a Louisiana native. It's nice that the appreciation of what I do as a writer happens. Yet if nobody ever published any of my stuff, I would still write.

*How did the success of **Same Place, Same Things** affect you?*

It made me work harder on the novel manuscript for *The Next Step in the Dance*. St. Martin's bought it with no qualms. This, of course, got the administration of my college thinking, "Hm, this guy's published nationally, maybe we ought to give him more time off to write." And so they gave me an official title of writer-in-residence and cut my workload in half, to six hours a semester.

What are you working on now?

I have another novel in mind that's set in Morgan City, La., in the 1920s, and it deals with the lumber industry down there. So I'm doing historical research on that. I've got a contract for a book of short stories. And I haven't signed it yet, but I've got a contract coming for a cowboy movie of some type—I'm writing a script.

What advice do you give to your creative-writing students?

A writer has a duty to get in touch with his culture, whatever that culture is. My students will say, well, I was basically a mall rat; what can I write about? I say, that's your culture. If you choose to be interested in the culture that God has given you, it's just as exotic as living in Istanbul. Everything is exotic—that's my view about life. It's not what you write about; it's how you write it. I gave that speech one time, and this kid wrote a story about his neighborhood near the Esplanade Mall. It was dead-on. It was Flannery O'Connor gone to Kenner. And when I can do that, I know I've taught him something.

L. Lamar Nisly (essay date fall 2002)

SOURCE: Nisly, L. Lamar. "A Sacramental Science Project in Tim Gautreaux's 'Resistance.'" *Logos* 5, no. 4 (fall 2002): 135-51.

[In the following essay, Nisly examines the sacramental action in "Resistance," viewing the protagonist of the story, Mr. Boudreaux, as an agent of grace.]

The action of grace changes a character. Grace can't be experienced in itself. An example: when you go to Communion, you receive grace but you experience nothing; or if you do experience something, what you experience is not the grace but an emotion caused by it. Therefore in a story all you can do with grace is to show that it is changing the character.

Flannery O'Connor¹

Louisiana author Tim Gautreaux claims that he inadvertently became an English major when he was in college. His plans of majoring in business were short-circuited, he says, when someone stole five accounting books that he had purchased. "I went to see my adviser," he reports, "and told him to put me in something where nobody would steal my books. He put me in English."² While the veracity of this account may be uncertain—Gautreaux admits that he is drawn to storytelling because "I liked to make up stuff and lie"³—what seems more telling than the factual quality is the understated and slightly surprising humor that comes through this account. For the wonder of Gautreaux's stories is that in the midst of accounts filled with less than remarkable, sometimes downright unlikable, small-town characters, Gautreaux is able with memorable dialogue, pithy descriptions, and—often—a touch of the divine to help us see the humanity, growth, and grace in these characters. As occurs in much of his best fiction, Gautreaux's story "**Resistance**" reveals an unlikely hero, Mr. Boudreaux,

quietly offering assistance to Carmine, the plain girl next door. While they work together on a science project—and even more clearly when he reconstructs the work after Carmine's father has destroyed the first project—Mr. Boudreaux becomes an agent of grace to this lonely girl. Emphasizing the mysterious quality of sacramental action, however, Gautreaux refuses to reveal if this offered grace has been received.

At a glance, Gautreaux would seem to be easy to label a Southern Catholic writer, but he resists at least a part of that designation. A professor at Southeastern Louisiana University since 1972 and a native of Louisiana, Gautreaux nevertheless argues that the title of "Southern writer" tends to confuse more than it clarifies:

I don't really understand what a "Southern" writer is. Writers just tend to write about their environment. If the South tends to be more poverty stricken, or has a less-educated population, or the politicians seem more arrogant, or there's a more intense devotion to religion, that's just the way it is. Perhaps the only difference I can perceive between a "Southern" writer and a non-Southern writer is that maybe the "Southern" writer loves where he lives more than other writers.⁴

Instead of this category, Gautreaux identifies more closely with the Frontier tradition, with its mix of tall tale and humor.⁵ On the other hand, Gautreaux accepts the weight of identification as a "Catholic writer." On a basic level, Gautreaux says he could not write about South Louisiana culture without encountering the Church because Catholicism so permeates all of life.⁶ However, Gautreaux's commitment to portraying Catholicism is much more than cultural: he switched from writing poetry to fiction after taking a seminar with Walker Percy, and he describes himself as "a Catholic writer in the tradition of Walker Percy. If a story does not deal with a moral question, I don't think it's much of a story."⁷ He self-deprecatingly acknowledges, though, "I'm not a philosopher like Walker Percy. . . . I'm just a Catholic from the bayou. But it's one of the rhythms of life."⁸ And from his stories, it would appear that this rhythm is an important element in how Gautreaux understands the world around him. In fact, he suggests that themes of moral dilemmas and redemption develop largely subconsciously in his stories: "Each of us has a type of ingrained, almost instinctual interest in a theme. . . . No matter what story you write, no matter what plot you choose, that theme is going to be in there." In his stories, even though there is considerable pain, he resists suggesting that such darkness is the final answer: "there's a lot of depressing stuff in my fiction, but personally I don't believe that you have to constantly remind people that life sucks, then you die, because everybody knows that."¹⁰ Such commitments

become clear in Gautreaux's stories as his characters are often significantly challenged but usually have some suggestion of hope, of redemption, by the story's close.

Some patterns of interest emerge in Gautreaux's stories. Machines, particularly old steam engines, figure prominently in his stories. The son of a tugboat captain and grandson of a steamboat engineer, Gautreaux is a collector of antique machinery, having old John Deere tractors, antique railroad lanterns, and steamboat whistles on his several acres of property.¹¹ This love of machinery plays a prominent role in his stories, whether the characters are pump repairmen, tugboat crew members, or machinists. Often Gautreaux's life in the academic world seems far from the small-town locale of his stories, since by his own admission he is drawn to the less formally educated people around him. He finds there is "still a rich creative metaphorical magic alive, and it's in the mouths of uneducated people. Educated people tend to speak a standard English which is not creative and is not conducive to storytelling or bullshitting or any verbal color at all. . . . People who are uneducated basically have to make up an idiom as they go along. These are the people I like to listen to, because they're very acrobatic with the way they use the language."¹² Besides the sounds of these characters, Gautreaux likes the ways that in these communities, "everyone knew everyone else, everyone was Catholic, I like the fact that everyone eats the same things. They share a common heritage so they make all sorts of assumptions about each other."¹³ It is in these small towns with their shared understandings that Gautreaux often sets his humorous and enlightening tales.

In Gautreaux's three published volumes—one novel, *The Next Step in the Dance* (1998), and two short story collections, *Same Place, Same Things* (1996) and *Welding with Children* (1999)—several thematic commonalities emerge. Although it is not a large category, Gautreaux does have several stories that deal with the academic life. "Navigators of Thought" (in *Same Place, Same Things*) and "The Pine Oil Writers' Conference" and "Dancing with the One-armed Gal" (in *Welding with Children*) are skillful and sometimes hilarious commentaries on academics. In "Navigators of Thought," five out-of-work professors try to navigate a tugboat; Gautreaux's ironic skill is well in place as he describes one of these crew as "a true academic, very intelligent, but so educated that he was unable to compose two coherent paragraphs in a row."¹⁴ Likewise, in "Dancing with the One-armed Gal," a professor who describes herself as a "crippled black woman and a gay feminist" loses her job to a "gay black female double amputee from Ghana."¹⁵ There is substance along with this humor in these

stories, but these tales involving academics do not seem Gautreaux's strongest.

More common—and more compelling—are Gautreaux's stories about the sordid lives of small-town folk. These accounts focus on such characters as a drunk train engineer, whose derailment while carrying hazardous chemicals causes a massively destructive fire; he runs away from the fire, is astonished to see a portrayal of himself that he cannot recognize on the evening news, but eventually seems to come to some recognition of his guilt. Or at times these tales have a surprise in them seeming worthy of Flannery O'Connor, as in the title story **"Same Place, Same Things,"** when a pump repairman encounters a widow whose sole desire seems to be to leave her too familiar farm. Occasionally Gautreaux's stories end with little possibility of hope, but more common is the ending of **"Same Place, Same Things,"** when the decent repairman, waking after being slugged on the head by the widow who then stole his truck, realizes, "It didn't matter. She was a woman who would never get where she wanted to go. He was always where he was going."¹⁶ In two sentences, Gautreaux is able to suggest the kind of rootedness, the sense of who he is, that allows the repairman to be able to right himself after his encounter with this rootless and ruthless woman.

In this Louisiana small-town world that Gautreaux presents, the most common theme is the presentation of an unlikely person serving as a help, even an agent of grace, to someone in need. At times these are service people—a piano tuner, an exterminator—who come into people's homes and end up offering more than what was requested. Gautreaux acknowledges that he enjoys writing "about service persons who visit our homes and get just a little entangled in our lives."¹⁷ Often, though, the characters who help others find their way are part of a shared community—older relatives, elders of a community—who serve as guides to those who are lost. Part of what makes Gautreaux's stories so compelling, though, is that frequently it is these guides themselves who demonstrate a human fallibility even as they offer a gracious hand to another. For instance, in the hilarious yet poignant title story, **"Welding with Children,"** the first-person narrator Bruton is stung when he overhears an older man in town call his car a "bastardmobile" on seeing Bruton pull up to the Pak-a-Sak with his four grandchildren, offspring of his four unwed daughters.¹⁸ From this snide comment, Bruton recognizes his own culpability in the upbringing of his daughters and begins to work to clean up the mess of his family's life. In describing Bruton's efforts, though, Gautreaux creates some of the most humorous passages since Flannery O'Connor's stories, especially when he is describing Bruton's attempt to introduce these children to Bible

stories. While it certainly has humorous passages, Gautreaux's novel *The Next Step in the Dance* is a somewhat more serious look at a similar theme. Colette Thibodeaux leaves her town and her husband, largely because, as she complains, "Everybody aims so low" in her town.¹⁹ Colette wants to find more "glittering" dreams, so she moves to California;²⁰ her husband Paul, who is a solid but not driven man, follows her. Gautreaux explores the manner in which each of them needs to learn, and by having them return to their hometown, shows how the larger community nurtures them while urging them back together. Particularly striking in the novel is the role of Paul's grandfather, an old man who seems initially to be nearly forgotten amid the daily rhythms of life, but who ends up playing a pivotal supporting role in their healing relationship. The list of Gautreaux's compelling stories that work within this broad category could go on for some time, for I find these kinds of tales his strongest in their mix of humor, community, and redemption.

"Resistance" (in *Welding with Children*) seems to fit within this rubric, but as he often does, Gautreaux pushes the theme in a slightly new direction. In this case, the story is set in a subdivision rather than a small town, with Mr. Alvin Boudreaux feeling left behind by his changing neighborhood, as the opening lines of the story quickly suggest:

Alvin Boudreaux had outlived his neighbors. His asbestos-sided house was part of a tiny subdivision built in the 1950s, when everybody had children, a single-lane driveway, a rotating TV antenna, and a picnic table out back. Nowadays, he sat on his little porch and watched the next wave of families occupy the neighborhood, each taking over the old houses, driving up in their pairs of bug-shaped cars, one for each spouse to drive to work.²¹

He feels isolated and worthless, with "no movement on his street that had consequence for him" (121). More than just seeing a new set of people whom he does not know, Mr. Boudreaux is realizing how much patterns of life have changed since he had a young family. At times he thinks back to memories of his own father and of his wife, who has been dead for eight years. And even though he has tried to make small talk with the new family next door, he has gotten only slight responses from the woman, who runs an electric coffee-grinding machine for six hours a day. In this context, Mr. Boudreaux is contemplating replacing his fifteen-year-old Buick: "Maybe it was time to trade it off for something that would fit in"—something like a Japanese-made compact (124). Mr. Boudreaux's thoughts here suggest more than a change in automobile; they imply that he is reconsidering his approach to those around him. Rather than resist the