



# **Desire and the Divine: Feminine Identity in White Southern Women's Writing (Southern Literary Studies)**

*Kathaleen E. Amende*

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## **Desire and the Divine: Feminine Identity in White Southern Women's Writing (Southern Literary Studies)** Kathaleen E. Amende

In this groundbreaking study, Kathaleen E. Amende considers the works and lives of late-twentieth-century southern women writers to explore how conservative Christian ideals of femininity shaped notions of religion, sexuality, and power in the South. Drawing from the work of authors like Rosemary Daniell and Connie May Fowler, whose characters?like the authors themselves?grow up believing that Jesus should be a girl's first "boyfriend," Amende demonstrates many ways in which these writers commingled the sexual and the sacred.

Amende also looks at the writings of Lee Smith, Sheri Reynolds, Dorothy Allison, and Valerie Martin and discusses how southern women authors and their characters grappled with opposing cultural expectations. Often in their work, characters mingle spiritual devotion and carnal love, allowing for salvation despite rejecting traditional roles or behaviors. In Martin's *A Recent Martyr*, novice Claire disavows southern norms of femininity?courtship, marriage, and motherhood?but submits to Jesus as she would to a husband. In Reynolds's *Rapture of Canaan*, teenage protagonist Ninah Huff imagines that her out-of-wedlock child is the offspring of Christ because of her conviction that Jesus was present during the sexual act that produced him.

This tie between sexuality and religion afforded women movement between the two, but any attempt to separate them into compartmentalized spaces, as Amende shows, produces negative consequences?from pain and mental illness to an inability to connect with others. Ultimately, women have to find a way to unite the realms of the body and of faith in order to achieve spiritual and romantic fulfillment. As in Dorothy Allison's *Bastard Out of Carolina*, where, for the protagonist, gospel music includes both the intensity of violent fantasies along with a spiritual yearning, it is only when the erotic and the spiritual coexist that women achieve full self-realization.

Grounded in southern cultural and gender studies and informed by historical, religious, and devotional literature, Amende's timely and accessible book offers one the first studies to view the intersection of sexuality and Christianity in southern contexts.

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