



## The Coastal Plain

The abundant lands of North Carolina's Coastal Plain are home to most of the state's tobacco farms. There are large military bases in Fayetteville and Jacksonville, but most of the towns in this region are small farm communities, many of which are struggling to keep pace with a changing economy. Authors Clyde Edgerton, Jill McCorkle, and Allan Gurganus have all set novels in this area and Margaret Maron's Judge Deborah Knott is a popular fictional resident of the Coastal Plain.

Jeffery Deaver. *The Empty Chair*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000.

Lincoln Rhyme, a quadriplegic forensic investigator (and protagonist of Deaver's 1997 novel *The Bone Collector*), is in fictional Paquenoque County, N.C., where he is to undergo an experimental operation that may restore his mobility. Rhyme's plans quickly change when a local sheriff comes to ask for his help on a series of murders involving a creepy teenager known as the "Insect Boy." Paquenoque County is near the Great Dismal Swamp and is the location of Tanner's Corner, known mysteriously as the "town without children."

Clyde Edgerton. *Lunch at the Piccadilly*. Chapel Hill: Algonquin, 2003.

At the heart of this book is the relationship between Carl Turnage, a middle-aged bachelor, and his Aunt Lil, but much of the novel is given to a lively group portrait of Lil and her friends at the Rosehaven Convalescence Center, a nursing home in the fictional eastern North Carolina town of Listre.

Clyde Edgerton. *Raney*. Chapel Hill: Algonquin Books, 1985.

Raney Bell discovers, a little too late, that she didn't know her fiancé Charles Shepherd as well as she thought. This novel is a chronicle of the first two years of their marriage as the innocent and cheerful Raney and the moderately worldly Charles quarrel about religion, race, sex, and family as they adjust to life together. Raney has a funny, distinctive, and unapologetically Southern narrative voice. The novel is set in the fictional eastern North Carolina town of Listre.

Clyde Edgerton. *Where Trouble Sleeps*. Chapel Hill, N.C.: Algonquin, 1997.

Jack Umstead is a professional con man and a fugitive from the law. When he first shows up here, he has just arrived in the small town of Listre, N.C., where he's working on an elaborate scheme, but first, he must earn the trust of the residents. The story is told by a number of narrators, including Umstead

himself and some of the people he has taken in. The result is a full and comic portrait of Listre, a fictional town in eastern North Carolina, which is the setting for several of Edgerton's novels.

Anderson Ferrell. *Have You Heard*. New York: Bloomsbury, 2004.

As *Have You Heard* opens, Jerry Chiffon is dressed in woman's clothing and pointing a gun at a well-known conservative North Carolina senator. The story of Chiffon's life unfolds as several narrators, all residents of the fictional Eastern North Carolina town of Branch Creek, struggle to understand what has happened. Chiffon felt uncomfortable as a gay man in a small, conservative community and left for New York as soon as he could. He has just returned home to recover from the death of a lover when he makes his attempt on the life of the senator. Ferrell is from Black Creek, in Wilson County.

Gwynne Forster, *Blues from Down Deep*. New York: Kensington, 2004.

Regina Pearson never really felt at home in Hawaii, especially after her father passed away and she had no family left in the islands. When she learns about relatives in New Bern, N.C., she heads off to find them, excited about meeting the extended family she's never known. Although she meets many colorful characters, Regina finds a group of people with troubles of their own, hardly the warm embrace she'd expected. It isn't until she gets to know a retired soldier named Justin Duval that she decides she might have a reason for staying.

Kaye Gibbons. *A Virtuous Woman*. Chapel Hill: Algonquin, 1989.

Ruby Pitt Woodrow and Blinking Jack Stokes tell, in alternating chapters, the stories of their lives. Ruby's chapters are told from her perspective as she is dying of cancer at age 45, while Jack's reminiscences are set during the period just after Ruby's death. These stories take place largely on tobacco farms in eastern North Carolina and describe a fondly remembered marriage, which stands in contrast to the characters' otherwise difficult lives.

Allan Gurganus. *Oldest Living Confederate Widow Tells All*. New York: Knopf, 1989.

Ninety-nine year old Lucy Marsden spins an epic tale that covers the Civil War, slavery, marriage, and death. With an energetic and humorous style, she tells the story of her remarkable life. Married at fifteen to a Confederate veteran thirty-five years her senior, Lucy has survived long enough to be the oldest living Confederate widow. The novel alternates between past and present, telling the story of Captain Marsden's experiences in the war, Lucy's childhood, her close friendship with a former slave, and her life at present, where she is living in a nursing home in fictional Falls, N.C., a town in the eastern part of the state probably based on the author's hometown of Rocky Mount.

Josephine Humphreys. *Nowhere Else on Earth*. New York: Viking, 2000.

Set in Robeson County in the final days of the Civil War, sixteen-year-old Rhoda Lawson tells the story of the last desperate struggle to resist the Union Army. General William Tecumseh Sherman's army was on its way, and the local Home Guard was rounding up everyone they could for the fight. The local Lumbee Indians, however, wanted no part in a war whose aims they had opposed. When Henry Berry Lowrie comes to help Rhoda's brothers hide from the Home Guard, she falls in love with him, and leaves to live with the outlaws. Lowrie is an actual historical figure, and the events of this novel are based in part on his life.

Robert Inman. *Captain Saturday*. Boston: Little, Brown, 2002.

*Captain Saturday* is the story of Will Baggett, a popular television weatherman in Raleigh, whose life begins to crumble when in a short span of time he loses his job, his wife leaves him, and he's arrested for a crime he didn't commit. Baggett escapes from his sophisticated life in the Triangle to visit family

in rural Brunswick County where he begins his recovery by delving into his past. The book provides an excellent portrait of life in contemporary Raleigh, commenting on the city's struggles with development and the often-contentious relationship between new arrivals and the denizens of "old Raleigh."

Roberta Isleib. *Fairway to Heaven*. New York: Penguin, 2005.

Pro golfer Cassie Burdette has a lot to do when she arrives in Pinehurst, N.C., site of both her best friend's wedding and a prestigious golf tournament. Her on-again off-again boyfriend Mike Callahan is in town, too, and it looks like she'll be seeing plenty of him as he's a member of the wedding party and her partner in the tournament. As if that wasn't enough to worry about, there are a serious of murders in town, which may be linked to the mysterious disappearance of the father of the bride. Burdette is quickly on the case.

Randall Kenan. *A Visitation of Spirits*. New York: Grove, 1989.

Kenan's acclaimed first novel is the story of an African American family in the fictional town of Tims Creek in rural eastern North Carolina. Horace Cross, the sixteen-year-old protagonist of the book, is haunted by what may be actual demons, while at the same time trying to come to terms with his homosexuality. He seeks advice and comfort from his older cousin James, a schoolteacher and preacher, who fears that other family members will have a hard time understanding. This richly written novel is told in several shifting voices and styles.

Catherine Landis. *Some Days There's Pie*. New York: St. Martins, 2002.

When Ruth Ritchie's marriage falls apart, she flees Tennessee and ends up in the fictional eastern North Carolina town of Lawsonville. (There is a real Lawsonville in Stokes County near the Virginia border, but this is clearly not the one that Landis describes). Ruth, who has just turned twenty, is having a hard time getting by until she meets eighty-year-old Rose. Rose helps Ruth get a job at the local paper and the two become fast friends. Although Rose is facing lung cancer she is still feisty, and sees something of her younger self in Ruth. The two women throw themselves into the Lawsonville scene, engaging the oddball local characters and living life to the fullest.

Margaret Maron. *Last Lessons of Summer*. New York: Mysterious Press, 2003.

After her grandmother is murdered, Amy Steadman returns from New York to her family's farm, located southeast of Raleigh, to help sort through her grandmother's belongings. As Amy digs through her family history she tries to understand not just her grandmother's mysterious death, but the death of her mother, who committed suicide when Amy was three. The relationships among the members of this large family are at the heart of the story, especially as Amy begins to believe that her grandmother's murderer may be a relative.

Margaret Maron. The Judge Deborah Knott Series.

Bootlegger's Daughter. New York: Mysterious Press, 1992.

Southern Discomfort. New York: Mysterious Pres, 1993.

Shooting at Loons. New York: Mysterious Press, 1994.

Up Jumps the Devil. New York: Mysterious Press, 1996.

Home Fires. New York: Mysterious Press, 1998.

Storm Track. New York: Mysterious Press, 2000.

Uncommon Clay. New York: Warner Books, 2001.

Slow Dollar. New York: Mysterious Press, 2002.

High Country Fall. New York: Warner Books, 2004.

Rituals of the Season. New York: Warner Books, 2005.

These popular mysteries feature Deborah Knott, a District Court Judge in fictional Colleton County, N.C., which is located "a few miles southeast of Raleigh." In each novel Judge Knott is forced to step out from behind the bench to pursue a local mystery on her own. The setting is especially important in these books. Colleton County still has working tobacco farms, and yet is bordered by the sprawling, increasingly urban Research Triangle. Deborah Knott, her large family, and the residents of the county are often caught in the clash between North Carolina's high-tech future and its traditional, agrarian past.

Eric Martin. *Luck*. New York: Norton, 2000.

Mike Olive and several classmates from Duke spend the summer in fictional Cottesville, N.C. alongside Mexican migrant workers on a tobacco farm. The students are working on a project to document the living and working conditions of the workers, and find that conditions are even worse than they imagined. As they began to protest the abuses they see, the locals are none too happy, especially Harvey Dickerson, Mike's childhood friend. To make things even more complicated, Mike has fallen for the daughter of one of the Mexican workers. As the end of the summer approaches, Mike finds that there are now several people out to get him.

Jill McCorkle. *Carolina Moon*. Chapel Hill, N.C.: Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 1996.

Set in fictional Fulton, N.C. (a town "halfway between the river and the ocean"), this novel is populated by eccentric characters including a controversial local disk jockey and the memorable Quee Purdy, proprietress of a center to help people stop smoking. The novel is told from several perspectives and contains overlapping plots of romance and murder.

Jill McCorkle. *July 7*. Chapel Hill: Algonquin, 1984.

On July 7, in the fictional eastern North Carolina town of Marshboro, multiple generations gather to celebrate the 83rd birthday of Granter Weeks. In another part of town, the proprietor of the Quik Pik is found murdered in his store. Meanwhile, young writer Sam Swet, disillusioned but desperate for experience, has just arrived in town. This novel, set in a single day, features a wide and diverse cast of characters whose stories often overlap and result in a compelling portrait of a contemporary Southern town.

Michael Parker. *Virginia Lovers*. Harrison, N.Y.: Delphinium, 2004.

The rural community of Trent, N.C., a fictional town between Fayetteville and Wilmington, is shaken when a local gay teenager is found murdered after a high school party. Thomas Edgecombe, owner of the town's weekly newspaper, begins to report on the case and is horrified to learn that his two sons may be suspects. The Edgecombe boys do not help their case when they disappear, running away to Washington, D.C. The novel follows the three Edgecombes as they struggle to understand the crime, its consequences, and each other.

Michael Parker. *Hello Down There*. New York: Scribners, 1993.

Edwin Keene has become something of a recluse after a tragic car accident in which one of the passengers was killed. The aristocratic Keene, son of a prominent local family, eases the pain of his own injuries with too-frequent doses of morphine. As his life appears to be slipping away, there is a sudden hope for redemption when Keene falls for Eureka Spaight, a local high-school girl whose working-class family is very different from his own. The novel is set in the early 1950s in the fictional eastern North Carolina town of Trent.

Michael Parker. *If You Want Me to Stay*. Chapel Hill: Algonquin Books, 2005.

With his mother gone, having abandoned the family, and his father ravaged by mental illness, fourteen-year-old Joel Junior is forced into adulthood. When their father becomes violent, Joel takes his two younger brothers and leaves in search of some way to save the family. The novel takes place in the 1970s in and around Trent, the same fictional eastern North Carolina town in which two of Parker's previous novels were set. Joel narrates the story in a vivid first person, his worries interspersed with the music of the day running through his head.

Reynolds Price. *A Long and Happy Life*. New York: Atheneum, 1962.

Price's widely acclaimed first novel is the story of Rosacoke Mustian and her unshakable adoration for the rakish Wesley Beavers. Rosacoke's patient and unselfish love appears wasted on Wesley, a motorcycle-riding skirt-chasing Navy veteran who simply seems too impatient to settle down. The setting in rural eastern North Carolina is carefully and lyrically described.

Reynolds Price, *The Good Priest's Son*. New York: Scribner, 2005.

On September 11, 2001, Mabry Kincaid is flying home from a relaxing vacation in Italy when the terrorist attacks hit. Unable to return to his apartment in New York, he travels instead to his father's house in the fictional town of Wells in eastern North Carolina. In the time he spends back at home, Mabry tries to reconcile his relationship with his ailing father and come to terms with his own past in North Carolina, which he thought he had escaped by moving to New York. In the midst of personal crises, and set against the chaos and tragedy in New York, there is also the compelling mystery of a painting which Mabry, an art dealer, has recently acquired and suspects to be a Van Gogh.

J.D. Rhoades. *The Devil's Right Hand*. New York: St. Martin's, 2005.

Jack Keller is a bail bondsman and a veteran of the first Gulf War. Still scarred by memories of battle, his life doesn't get any easier when he's caught in the middle of a violent struggle in Fayetteville. Jack is on the trail of an elusive bail-jumper who has just murdered a local Lumbee man whose vengeful sons compete with Jack to see who can catch the fleeing killer first. To make things even more complicated, the Fayetteville police department seems to have it in for Jack, so that while he pursues his quarry he's forced to stay one step ahead of the law.

Bland Simpson. *The Mystery of Beautiful Nell Cropsey*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993.

As far as anyone knew, the last person to see Nell Cropsey alive was her boyfriend Jim Wilcox, who left her crying on her front porch in November 1901 after he ended their relationship. The people of Elizabeth City, N.C. looked desperately for the young woman, relying on bloodhounds and even psychics in a search that brought national attention to the small town. Nell's body was finally found floating in the Pasquotank River, a few weeks after she disappeared. Jim Wilcox was accused of the murder, even though the evidence against him was only circumstantial and he hotly proclaimed his innocence. In this "nonfiction novel," Simpson dramatizes the true story of Nell Cropsey with the

touch of a novelist, relying on first-person narrators and period details to give an intimate look at small-town eastern North Carolina at the dawn of the twentieth century.

Sharon Wildwing. *Some Welcome Home*. Gale, 2005.

Elizabeth Pepperhawk has just come back from Vietnam to serve at the army hospital at Fort Bragg. She had barely arrived when she comes across the dead body of a soldier who was supposed to have died overseas two years before. When the Military Police are hesitant to pursue the case through to the end, Pepperhawk enlists the help of officer Avivah Rosen and the two women track the clues on their own. The story is told from the alternating perspectives of Pepperhawk and Rosen and is a rich glimpse into life on a military base in the early 1970s.