

Fremont Great Books Book Club
Discussion Questions for Southern (Mostly Gothic) Short Stories from "The 100 Best Short Stories of the Century"
June 18, 2026

What is Southern Gothic?

This EBSCO (<https://www.ebsco.com/research-starters/literature-and-writing/southern-gothic-literature>) article provides a nice summary of many themes in Southern Gothic literature including:

- Published mostly between the 1920s and 1960s.
- Decay of pre-Civil War lifestyle and culture
- Presentation of the normal as abnormal to create unsettling or even horrific atmosphere
- Complex and even unusual characters
- Pressures of the past upon the present, including the legacy of historical events, like slavery and the plantation system, as well as gender roles
- Social hierarchy and class

1939 Richard Wright "Bright and Morning Star"

1. How did changes in dialect, such as from the narrator's voice in standard English to Sue's voice and some thoughts in colloquial rural dialogue of 1930's Tennessee (see opening paragraph for an example), affect the flow of story?
2. Who has the power in this story? Do the seemingly powerless in a world of racial violence have any power?

1940 Eudora Welty "The Hitch-Hikers"

1. Why did Harris resonate with hitchhikers?
2. What is the story saying about America's expanded mobility and the impact on interacting with other people?

1951 Tennessee Williams "The Resemblance Between A Violin Case and a Coffin"

1. The most beautiful people in the story die at any early age and quite suddenly. Why is this the case in the story's world?
2. Did Tom's sister actually lose her musical talent or was something else going on?
3. Whose coming-of-age story is this?
4. Were you surprised at the lack of dialogue from an author known for his skill with plays?

Footnote – The story is dedicated to the author's Aunt, who died relatively young, and Williams' father's middle name was Coffin

1956 Flannery O'Connor "Greenleaf"

1. The story compares old money vs. new money, truth vs. lies, sterility vs. virility, congenial vs dysfunctional families, light and dark in a handful of pages and mostly from the perspective of Mrs. May. How do these contrasts build up to the finale?
2. What were the meanings of the biblical allusion to lilies and mythological allusion to the bull?

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3. Who has the power in this story? Does assumption of control create control?

Footnote: <https://ashesfromburntroses.blogspot.com/2014/09/short-story-analysis-greenleaf-by.html?m=1>

1968 Mary Ladd Gavell "The Rotifer"

1. Unlike the other stories we are reading this month, this one is set in multiple locations (Texas, Tennessee, Paris, possibly New York City). How do these sudden shifts in time and location affect the reader's perception of the story?
2. Are the three stories told by our academic linked together and, if so, what is the overarching theme?
3. How do themes of when to observe and when to step in appear in the selection? What is the author saying about an individual's power to change things for others?

Footnote: The author was Managing Editor of "Psychiatry" and her fiction was not published until after she passed away from cancer in 1967.

1997 Pam Durban "Soon"

1. "What do you do with what you've been given?" How does each generation of the Long women we meet answer this question?
2. Hope is something that comes and goes for each woman, which is explored in the most depth with Martha. What is the author saying about hope?
- 3.

CONCLUSION

1. Did you have a favorite story of the 7 we read?
2. Is there an author you've been introduced to that you'd like to read more from?
3. Do you think these stories fit into the Southern Gothic genre generally?
4. Why do you think the figure of the outsider is so prevalent in Southern Gothic literature?
5. Why do the macabre and the grotesque play such a prominent role in this literary tradition? What do these sinister or disturbing elements represent or suggest about Southern identity?