"Entre nous I'm not in the habit of writing fan letters and when my thoughts penetrate such ideas I get the willies. Somehow with you its different. . . (Maybe after I finish this letter I'll wonder where O Where I obtained all my boldness)."

—Mary Louise Aguirre, in a letter to Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings, 1939

This chapter examines fan mail as a distinct form, one made possible by the creation of the identity of the fan. Fan mail is explored from the archive of Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings, whose 1939 Pulitzer Prize and inclusion in the Armed Services Editions program, the Book-of-the-Month Club, and Reader's Digest brought her national recognition. From 1935 to 1946, Rawlings saved a large portion of her fan mail, which provides us with a compelling look into the actual texts that fan mail writers produce. These letters—and Rawlings's various responses to them—provided their writers a workshop space in which they could hone their authorial voice. Unlike uncirculated texts, letters allowed fans to submit this apprentice work to a master for approval and, ultimately, inclusion in the archive.

Regional literature's maligned status has become a critical commonplace, but the genre has experienced a critical
As scholars, such as Stephanie Foote and Kate McCullough, have pointed out, regionalism provides a unique vantage point from which to examine issues of identity, community, and nation-building in American literature. For Foote, regionalism's focus on "non-normative persons" (28) enables the genre "to figure difference as both a commodity and a positive value in itself" (34). Thus, Foote notes, while scholars, such as Richard Brodhead, have implicated regional literature in a project of imperialism (34), the genre provides its own counter-narrative in the form of its non-normative writers, making value out of their authority and authenticity (36-37). Finally, for Foote, regionalism "helped to establish a way of imagining communities that interrupted even as they sustained a national culture" (40).

Rawlings's work and her fan correspondence form a convincing case study for the regionalist project of interrupting and sustaining national culture. Rawlings has not to this point been recovered by the many scholars revitalizing regional literature studies, partly because she doesn't fit neatly into the prevailing scheme of literary categories: she's too late to be a nineteenth-century regionalist but doesn't belong with the 1930s New Deal regionalists, either. However, critics should class her with the earlier women regionalists, such as Sarah Orne Jewett and Kate Chopin, whose works focus on queerness and marginal identities and stress empathy, compassion, and reparation in community settings. Her fan mail demonstrates this focus.

The majority of Rawlings's archived fan mail was received between 1938 and 1946, roughly from the publication of her two most well known works, The Yearling (1938) and Cross Creek (1942), to the Cross Creek Trial, and her departure from Florida. The letters are kept in their own box in the Rawlings archive at the University of Florida, which by estimation contains around 200 individual pieces of correspondence. Though many letter writers mention her other books and stories (particularly 1933's South Moon Under), the concentration of fan mail received and saved by Rawlings during this period suggests several possibilities. First, Rawlings may have assembled these letters from a larger collection as part of the trial evidence. Other potential fan letters are filed with her general correspondence, chronologically, in 30 boxes. Second, it is possible that Rawlings both received and saved more fan mail during these eight years, the first four of which biographer Gordon Bigelow suggests "represent a peak period in Marjorie's life, not only in terms of popular success, but in terms of writing creativity and personal happiness as well" (23). Third, it is possible that Rawlings's celebrity and her fairly well known small town Florida address combined to make her significantly more accessible during this time. While a 1935 letter from Franklin Shields is addressed to Rawlings in care of her publisher, later letters, such as Lucille Shearwood's from 1939, were often simply sent to "Cross Creek" or "Hawthorn" (where the nearest post office is located). No street address was necessary.

While no fan mail from the time of South Moon Under's immediate release survives in the Rawlings archive, a slightly later letter from 1935 suggests what appealed to readers of the novel and which responses of theirs appealed enough to Rawlings for her to preserve their correspondence. "About forty years ago I used to hunt and fish about various parts of the scrub," writes John Franklin Shields, on letterhead of his law firm in Philadelphia. The letter continues:

I note you refer to Moss Bluff or Mossey Bluff and the killing of a particular large alligator by one of your characters near this place. This is of interest to me by reason of the fact that the largest 'gaitor I ever saw was at a place about eight miles from Moss Bluff and I estimated to be 25 or 30 feet long. I was about 50 yards from it at the time it slid into the water at a little island on the edge of a lake which we called Half Moon Lake which was east of Electra on a blind road which carried us into the sand beach on the lake at the edge of the scrub. ("Letter")

This paragraph has more in common with South Moon Under than simply the Floridian flora and fauna. The course of its sentences, gradually lengthening with clause after clause,
traces a linguistic pathway from the cosmopolitan North to the rural South that mirrors Rawlings's novel. Thus, a cordially described "particularly large alligator" becomes the scrub hunter's "largest 'gaitor I ever saw," as the Philadelphia lawyer adopts the colloquial turns of phrase of his former hunting grounds. Shields wants to know if his Moss Bluff is the same one Rawlings's novel describes, and also if she knows "grimy Hunter's "I ever saw," as the Philadelphia to the rural South that mirrors Rawlings's novel. Thus, a lawyer adopts the colloquial turns of phrase of his former hunting grounds. Shields wants to know if his Moss Bluff is the story of Nick Myers, a Florida man who was rumored to have threatened an outsider in the same fashion as one of Rawlings's characters. He relates too that he "knew the Ocklawaha River when the original cypress was there... and later knew some of the Wilson Lumber Company who were the people from Palatka who took out the original cypress" ("Letter"). The excitement of recognition and connection is palpable in Shields's letter as he explains: "Naturally I recognized, reading your book, that you thoroughly knew the localities and the people as well as being able to tell the story in an entertaining and captivating manner" ("Letter"). Shields reaches out to Rawlings authoritatively voiced novel with authority and first-hand experience of his own. Given that Rawlings valued the approval of those who knew Florida as she knew it, it's little wonder this letter survives when so few others from this point of her career do. Unfortunately, there is no indication as to whether she ever wrote back.

South Moon Under shares several features with Rawlings's third and most successful novel, The Yearling. Indeed, the latter book was born out of the former, suggested first when Charles Rawlings read a draft and told his wife, as she relates to her editor Maxwell Perkins: "Take out all the profanity. If you do this, you automatically open up a wide and continuous market for the book among boys, entirely distinct, an accidental by-product, from your mature appeal" (Selected Letters 57). Rawlings balked: "I remember, out of the red fog that enveloped me, remarking caustically that possibly the book could become the first of a series, 'The Rover Boys of Florida.'" (Selected Letters 57). Charles, Rawlings continues, explained that he meant a boys' book in the tradition of "Huckleberry Finn, Treasure Island, and some of Kipling's (Selected Letters 57). South Moon Under went to press with its profanity intact. But Perkins agreed with Charles; in October 1933, he pressed Rawlings to write a book for boys, suggesting that men would enjoy it as well (Max and Marjorie 126).

To make her "boys' book on the scrub" (Perkins 124), Rawlings transforms South Moon Under's rough and distant Lant into the dreamy, nurturing Jody of The Yearling (1938). Both boys delight in the relative freedom of life in the scrub, and in the outdoor pleasures of tracking, hunting, and camping. Lant listens to old man Paine describe fire-hunting for deer, "twitching in his eagerness," and "[runs] for his gun and shells" when Paine suggests they go hunting themselves, to kill the deer that has been eating their crops (South Moon Under 99-100). Likewise, Jody is "wild to begin the hunt" for the bear that killed his mother's brood sow (The Yearling 31). But Jody prefers the story of the hunt to the hunt itself (69), and on another occasion feels "sickened and sorry" to see the "mangled death" of a deer (85). And, while Lant does feel connected to the deer he hunts (South Moon Under 106) and "sorry to have killed" a pregnant squirrel (119), he is not identified with these female animals in the way Jody is. Indeed, The Yearling repeatedly casts Jody in the role of mother to the scrub animals: he nurses a raccoon with a "sugarteat," holding it "cupped in [his] arm" like a mother with a baby (62), and later feeds his yearling deer by "[dipping] his fingers in the milk and [thrusting] them into the fawn's soft wet mouth," directing it to "do whatever I tell you... like as if I was your mammy" (208-09). While Lant "want[s] to kill" (South Moon Under 106), Jody wants to mother.

But, perhaps, the biggest change comes down simply to how Rawlings, following Perkins's advice (Perkins 126), fixes Jody at an indeterminant age for the course of the story. Lant grows up in South Moon Under, and the narrative orients the reader to his age: first 14, then 16, then 19 years old. Jody's boyhood is lengthened until it fills the whole of The Yearling. The novel's innocence-to-experience narrative arc is established with early foreshadowing: Penny Baxter, Jody's father, thinks to himself: "Let him kick up his heels... The
day’ll come, he’ll not even care to” (25). The story pursues this day unflaggingly as hunts, a hurricane, and the killing of his pet deer teach Jody about the harshness of nature and death. Finally, in the book’s closing line, Jody is separated from the boy he was: while he lies sleeping in his bed, “Somewhere beyond the sink-hole, past the magnolia, under the live oaks, a boy and his yearling ran side by side, and were gone forever” (509). Rawlings freezes Jody just at the transition point between childhood and adulthood, suggesting in this moment that his adolescent self will continue to inhabit the scrub, like a ghost, forever frolicking with his yearling pet.

Jody and Flag resonated deeply with the reading public; The Yearling was a massive success that unquestionably brought the Florida scrub and its Cracker residents to national attention. Maxwell Perkins proclaimed he “never knew a book that had such universal liking” (Perkins and Rawlings 344). It became a bestseller, was released as the main Book-of-the-Month Club selection for April 1938 (Perkins and Rawlings 333), and won the 1939 Pulitzer Prize. MGM bought the film rights for $30,000 (Perkins and Rawlings 342). In a flurry, and without leaving the backwoods of Florida, Rawlings had parlayed her regional fictions into national celebrity.

As after the publication of South Moon Under, Rawlings used her letters to Perkins as a place to reflect on her success and her readers’ feedback. “I am getting the most wonderful and touching letters,” she tells him in May of 1938, when the book had been out for just two months (Perkins and Rawlings 346). Already, Rawlings had been struck by the similarities across such letters, and she was coming to develop a theory of fan response that cast her own work as an interactive impetus to reader creativity. She continues her letter: “Readers themselves, I think, contribute to a book. They add their own imaginations, and it is as though the writer only gave them something to work on, and they did the rest” (Perkins and Rawlings 346). Her modesty has the air of a suddenly successful writer struggling to understand why this work struck a chord—“the so-called ‘success’ seems to have nothing to do with me,” Rawlings writes (Perkins and Rawlings 346)—and yet the sentiment unifies much of the fan mail Rawlings writes about and saves during the course of her career. By preserving such letters—the ones that demonstrate her readers’ imaginations and active work in co-authoring their experiences in reading the novels—Rawlings expands her own archive to include the voices of the many correspondents, professional and non-professional writers alike, who interacted with and transformed her work.

It is again hard to know exactly which letters Rawlings refers to above; few letters dated from March to May of 1938 survive in her papers. But even the later fan letters praising The Yearling evince the imaginative work her readers were doing. These letters share a remarkable number of expressions, what we should think of as the conventions or tropes of the fan letter as a form. Across the small group, multiple authors utilize the following tropes: they announce their discomfort with the form, make recourse to their own authority of the subject matter, speak to their intellectual and emotional experience of the novels’ characters, claim kinship with Rawlings by virtue of being authors themselves, demonstrate their aesthetic sensibility, and comment on their sense of “pleasure” in reading.

In letters from January 29 and February 20, 1939, respectively, Lucille Shearwood and Jack Latham each declare that they do not usually write “fan letters,” but that they feel they have to express to Rawlings how The Yearling makes them feel. For Shearwood, that feeling is one of tremendous personal connection to the characters:

To me, it is so real and alive—I know Penny and Jody better than I know people I meet daily—and how much better I understand them. I can see Baxter’s Island; hear the chirring of the squirrels—and feel intensely interested in all Ma Baxter’s cooking, smelling the cornpone—marvelling at the detail in which you described the household and farm jobs. (“Letter”)

Shearwood frames her admiration of the novel’s details with references to her own imaginative work. She personalizes her response with repeated first-person statements: “to me,”
There is a kind of pleasure in the facts themselves, and in how the real world weaves together with the fictional one. Like Rawlings, who did extensive research for her novels, Brinson claims authority by supplementing Rawlings's setting with his personally observed real world details.

Beyond place, many of these fan letters draw special connections to the main characters of The Yearling: Jody, the young protagonist; Penny, his father; and Flag, his yearling deer. The characters come off the page for the fans who write to Rawlings. As Paul Rittenhouse hesitantly expresses, "One feels he knows the counterpart in his own life, of all the characters—I should better say each character" ("Letter"). Even more personable and enthusiastic is May Cox: "Penny and Jody are to be my life long friends! And of course Flag!" ("Letter"). Shearwood, Rittenhouse, and Cox all bring the characters out of the novel and locate them within their real lives.

Other fans use Jody to make sense of their own emotional responses to the novel. A fan who signs only as "Atalooa" uses Jody as a standard by which to describe his reaction: "I feel just like your beloved Jody when I try to find the right words for all that wells up within; it only spills over in futile longing." This moment suggests an inexpresible depth of feeling evoked by the novel that only the novel itself can help parse.

Fan mail gives these writers a space in which to practice finding "the right words for all that wells up within," as well as to try out various identities and authorial voices. Though a letter is not as safe as a private journal or diary, it is certainly safer than a piece of writing intended for publication. In fan letters, correspondents, such as Shearwood and Latham, could—and did—test out their identities as authors themselves. As Theresa Strouth Gaul and Sharon M. Harris point out, the act of exchanging letters allows writers to work out "an authorial persona" (10). Thus, Latham can confide (or boast?) that, though young and unpublished, "I feel one of my short stories will click soon" ("Letter"). Lucille Shearwood uses her letter to express a palpable dissatisfaction with her
authorial self:

I have been battling with a N.Y. newspaper for the last seven years, and before that edited some weeklies—always promising myself that when I had time, I would write something noble. Right now, I have time—and what am I doing? Watering my Florida chandelier plant (2 1/2 ft. tall) and writing a stinking weekly colyum. ("Letter")

Shearwood builds on a co-claimed identity—author. And, at the same time, her playful spelling of "column" suggests her own attempts to render dialect for the amusement of her audience—in this case, the writer she so admires. Shearwood repeats this tactic in her final lines, this time quoting Rawlings's writing back to her in an attempt, just like Ataloa's, to express the inexpressible: "I see this letter isn't turning out the way I expected, but mine never seem to. Hit frets me, you not knowin' how I feel. I mean!" ("Letter"). The word "Hit" mimics the regional voices in The Yearling, most especially Jody's, who during the novel's emotional climax cries out, "Hit's me!" (The Yearling 488).

Feelings are troubling for these fans. Or, perhaps more accurately, the standardized form of fan response necessitates an understanding of feelings as difficult, even impossible, to express directly. Fans, such as Ataloa, Latham, and Shearwood—not all of whom identify themselves as writers—use the fan letter as a space to work out how to express their feelings in text. Even more strikingly, these fans, who are separated by geographic distance and time, use the same expressions as each other, and as other fans of other authors, artists, and actors, while at the same time incorporating Rawlings's voice and work into their letters. These fans create something new by combining standard fan mail forms with adaptations or transformations of Rawlings's own voice.

Works Cited


