



# **The Life and Works of Augusta Jane Evans Wilson, 1835-1909**

*Brenda Ayres*

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Over the course of her 57-year career, Augusta Jane Evans Wilson published nine best-selling novels, but her significant contributions to American literature have until recently gone largely unrecognized. Brenda Ayres, in her long overdue critical biography of the novelist once referred to as the 'first Southern woman to enter the field of American letters,' credits the importance of Wilson's novels for their portrait of nineteenth-century America. As Ayres reminds us, the nineteenth-century American book market was dominated by women writers and women readers, a fact still to some extent obscured by the make-up of the literary canon. In placing Wilson's novels firmly within their historical context, Ayres commemorates Wilson as both a storyteller and maker of American history. Proceeding chronologically, Ayres devotes a chapter to each of Wilson's novels, showing how her views on Catholicism, the South, the Civil War, male authority, domesticity, Reconstruction, and race were both informed by and resistant to the turbulent times in which she lived. This comprehensive and meticulously researched biography contributes not only to our appreciation of Wilson's work, but also to her importance as a figure for understanding women's roles in history and their art, evolving gender roles, and the complicated status of women writers.

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