

Out of Appalachia: New Writing From an Old Region

Including an Interview With Gretchen Laskas & Ron Rash

By Jeff Biggers

Mama always said that most of being a good midwife was in knowing the famfamily history," begins Gretchen Laskas' endearing debut novel, *The Midwife's Tale*. "Not just the birthing story of any given woman—although that was a good thing to keep in mind—but the whole history."

The whole history for Laskas' reluctant narrator and midwife, Elizabeth, living in the hollows of West Virginia around the time of World War I, emerges from a diverse terrain of traditions among a family of mountaineers. With clarity and a delightful storytelling ease, Elizabeth provides a rare window onto the conflicts and joys in a genuine Appalachian family saga.

This search for the "whole history," wonderfully coined by Laskas, an eighth-generation West Virginian, has been at the heart of a wellspring of new writing out of Appalachia. It lingers amid a family's secrets at the bottom of a reservoir in the lost Jocassee Valley in the South Carolina mountains, in Ron Rash's riveting debut novel, *One Foot in Eden*, winner of the 2002 Novello Literary Award. It has also transformed the mountain region's voices and visions into some of the best quintessentially American novels.

In fact, since Chris Offutt's short story "Melungeons" appeared in *Best American Short Stories 1994*, a new wave of Appalachian poets, novelists, and memoirists has quietly been staking out an important place on the national literary scene, chronicling their stories and histories in the mountain South. More importantly, this new era of Appalachian writers has managed to get books published on their own terms, galvanized by Charles Frazier's National Book Award-winning *Cold Mountain*; the longtime work of writers such as Robert Morgan, whose *Gap Creek* became an Oprah Book Club selection and launched him as a best-selling author after 30 years of writing; the popular "Coalwood Way" memoirs of Homer Hickam; and the return of best-selling titan Barbara Kingsolver, who grew up in rural Kentucky, to her self-described "own language and culture" with her novel *Prodigal Summer*.

Few other regions in the United States have placed such a social burden on the backs of their authors; no other region has suffered the relentless barrage of literary and film calumnies or the gnawing reminders of despair and poverty. For more than 150 years, starting foremost with Mary Murfree's popu-

lar novels in the late 19th century, which churned out romantic portraits of lazy, feuding, and backward hillbillies, mountaineers have seen their stretch of land maligned or misrepresented by outside writers in the form of literary and media characters: Li'l Abner, Snuffy Smith, Ma and Pa Kettle, *Hee-Haw*, *The Beverly Hillbillies*, *The Dukes of Hazzard*, and *The Waltons*.

James Dickey's best-selling novel *Deliverance* (1970) had a devastating and lasting impact, issuing a bloodcurdling account of Appalachian man's inhumanity to civilized man in the north Georgia mountains, replete with inbred banjo pickers, moonshine, sexual deviants, and miasmic gorges. As the last nail in the coffin of respect for many Appalachian authors, California-based Robert Schenkkan's *The Kentucky*

Cycle, recycling many of the same old stereotypes of mindless violence and bleakness, won the Pulitzer Prize for Drama in 1992.

The recent novels by Rash and Laskas stand out as two of the most important works by young Appalachian writers to nudge aside these misinformed and worn-out images with distinctly Appalachian

views. They join emerging fiction writers Silas House, Ann Pancake, Chris Offutt, and Karen Salyer McElmurray, and non-fiction writers Noah Adams and John O'Brien, in a formidable stable of nationally acclaimed authors in the mountain South. That stable includes Morgan, Hickam, Lee Smith, Sharyn McCrumb, Denise Giardina, Fred Chappell, Jayne Anne Phillips, George Scarbrough, Wilma Dykeman, and Mary Lee Settle, among many others. Authors Wendell Berry, Dorothy Allison, and William Gay add a literary influence on the region's edge. Rounding out the scene, commercial fiction writers Adriana Trigiani, author of the Big Stone Gap series, and Jan Karon, author of the wildly successful Mitford series, have broadened the national reading circles.

The work of these authors is as varied and complex as the region. Thoroughly researched and grounded in a storytelling tradition, most of these novels and collections of stories and poems generally take on historical and socially engaged

themes. In both fabulist and social-realism narratives, writers have sought to depict the mountain South's vastly different histories and cultural streams from those of the low-land South, especially in terms of the roles of Native Americans and African Americans, the diverse immigrant and pioneer backgrounds, disparate land patterns, antislavery movements, and the region's deeply held practices of self-reliance and independence.

With a profound sense of place and nature—in one of the last regions of the country where rootedness applies to both family deeds that date back to the American Revolution and a respect for wilderness spir-

The Midwife's Tale

GRETCHEN LASKAS

Dial, \$23.95 cloth, ISBN 0-385-33551-2

One Foot in Eden

RON RASH

Novello Festival Press/Public Library of Charlotte &
Mecklenburg County, \$21.95 cloth, ISBN 0-9708972-5-1;
310 N Tyron St, Charlotte, NC 28202

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its that pervade personal stories—this new Appalachian writing also understands its region’s botany, crops, ballads and music, Old World language patterns, and religious visitations. At the brink of some of the most violent and lawless clashes between the crush of industrialization and the loss of families and tight-knit communities, themes have dealt with the region’s bleak and unflinching coal wars, timber wars, land wars, contemporary drug wars, and the repercussions of a high percentage of returning soldiers from foreign wars.

In truth, writers from the mountain South have cultivated one of the richest and most enduring literary terrains in the country over the past century. Consider these examples: Thomas Wolfe’s *Look Homeward, Angel* (1929) remains one of our most cherished coming-of-age novels; the critical praise for James Still’s classic novel of coal miners in eastern Kentucky, *River of Earth*, overshadowed *The Grapes of Wrath* in 1940, until the latter’s heralded film version was released. Georgia mountaineer Don West’s collection of poetry, *Clods of Southern Earth*, sold nearly 100,000 copies in 1946. Harriette Simpson Arnow’s *The Dollmaker*, hailed by Joyce Carol Oates as our nation’s “most unpretentious masterpiece” for its unblinking look at the Appalachian diaspora to wartime Detroit, spent 31 weeks on the best-seller list in 1954, and was a finalist for the National Book Award. James Agee’s Knoxville-based novel, *A Death in the Family*, won the Pulitzer Prize in 1958, as did Annie Dillard’s Virginia Blue Ridge-based spiritual memoir, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, in 1975.

Like Wolfe and Agee, a large number of Appalachian-born authors have trundled out of the region to take up residency elsewhere: West Virginian Pearl Buck was the first American woman to win the Nobel Prize for her novels of the Far East; Pennsylvanian Edward Abbey’s fiction and nonfiction emerged as the conscience of the American Southwest; and Knoxville-raised Cormac McCarthy’s *Border Trilogy* has defined the Southwest and earned him the National Book Award. Despite her more lauded O Beulah Land series of historical novels of West Virginia, Mary Lee Settle finally won the National Book Award in 1978 for *Blood Ties*, her portrait of expatriates in Turkey. William Demby, considered the African American heir to Gertrude Stein’s expatriate and experimental writing, based his classic first novel, *Beetlecreek*, in Clarksburg, West Virginia. Nikki Giovanni, one of the country’s most beloved poets and leader of the Black Arts movement, emerged out of Knoxville. And one of the United States’ most influential literary critics and thinkers, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., comes from a small town in West Virginia.

This emergence of recent Appalachian writing, however, has had to surpass untold odds. Until recently, unable to attract the full attention from the New York publishing world, it has relied largely on regional and university presses to support the quiet, abiding, hard work of lesser-known writers, including early 20th-century stalwarts Mildred Haun and Jesse Stuart, and more recent chroniclers Jim Wayne Miller, Gurney Norman, George Ella Lyon, John Ehle, and P.J. Laska.

Lee Smith, deeply influenced by James Still, often retells

the story of her troubles in the mid-1970s, with three novels under her belt, failing to find a publisher for her novel *Black Mountain Breakdown*. With a family to support, she was forced to return to teaching full-time, until a contact through a fellow author led to the novel’s publication in 1981 by Putnam. Fiction writer Silas House credits *Black Mountain Breakdown* as a bridge to the region’s long-standing literary continuum; he says it was this very novel that provided him “the permission to explore my own Appalachian heritage and identity,” in his widely acclaimed first novel, *Clay’s Quilt*.

The Bloomsbury Review recently caught up with Gretchen Laskas and Ron Rash, who discussed their own views on the recent state of Appalachian writing. In the tradition of Mildred Haun’s classic novel *The Hawks Done Gone*, Laskas’ *The Midwife’s Tale* weaves the story of a reluctant midwife’s struggle with her family’s longtime role in a mountain community, the price it extracts from her conscience, and the gifts it awards her personal life. Ron Rash, the author of three highly praised collections of poetry and two collections of short stories, has published *One Foot in Eden*, a gripping family tragedy divided into Faulkner’s multiple narrators, all of whom must deal with their own secrets and a haunting death when their community is flooded out by the construction of a dam.

The Bloomsbury Review: *Can you discuss some of the literary influences on your style, themes, and visions, especially from other Appalachian writers?*

Gretchen Laskas: When I first began writing seriously, in my early 20s, I didn’t know that anyone else was writing about West Virginia or the mountain region. Seems ridiculous, looking back on it, but it’s true. I’d read Jesse Stuart in school in Pennsylvania and knew vaguely of Jayne Anne Phillips, but I identified her work more with the baby-boomer generation than with the region. I had one class with West Virginia writer Chuck Kinder at the University of Pittsburgh. I remember reading Chris Offutt’s story “Melungeons” in *Best American Short Stories 1994* and being very relieved—I was not alone.

On the other hand, I was a librarian’s daughter and I knew how to research nonfiction. My husband was a graduate student at Yale University, and as a spouse I had access to the library. I read every book about the region that I could—county histories, political polemics, essays, linguistics, anthropological and geological studies. There were also two collections of obituaries. In some ways, I feel that I had to go to Connecticut in order to come back to West Virginia.

In 1996 I found Mary Lee Settle’s novel *Beulah Land* in the Washington, D.C., library. I was browsing, and the title caught my eye, since I had grown up singing the hymn. When I realized, reading the dust jacket, that here was a West Virginia writer who had not only written many many novels, but had received considerable critical acclaim *and* who lived in Charlottesville, Virginia (where we were about to move), I knew not only that I was not alone, but that I had a mentor.

I’ve never known Ms. Settle personally, although I’ve met her at book signings and the like. I was able to thank her personally last year, to tell her what her work had meant to me,

and I was glad to do so. Her Beulah Quintet is extraordinary—not only in its breadth (covering West Virginia from the beginning impulses in Cromwellian England to the 1970s) but also in its diverse narrative techniques, hundreds of character portrayals, and passionate sense that history matters. Her work also showed that I could take all of this nonfiction reading I had done and *do* something with it on a fictional canvas.

I've read hundreds of novels, stories, and poems by Appalachian writers in the past 10 years, and I've consciously or unconsciously taken bits and pieces from them. Breece Pancake was the master of looking at violence and not blinking (at least in the stories, if not in his life). Who can read James Still's poetry and not be moved? There is a wonderful tradition in Appalachian fiction depicting strong, willful women—in the work of Mildred Haun, Harriet Arnow, Lee Smith, and Wilma Dykeman, and even in the work of male writers Robert Morgan and Silas House. After starting out feeling very much alone, it is wonderful to think that I am, in some way, adding to this chain.

Ron Rash: As a kid I read a lot of Jesse Stuart; later I read Lee Smith, Fred Chappell, Robert Morgan, and James Still. Still's *River of Earth* was an especially good novel for me to read because of its wonderful merging of poetry and prose. I've also been influenced quite a bit by a number of Irish writers, including James Joyce, and books like *Dubliners*.

I am proud of my Appalachian heritage, and I do believe its culture is different from any other region in the U.S., certainly different from the piedmont and low-country South. At the same time, I hope my work transcends our region. I like what Eudora Welty says: "Understanding one place well helps us understand all other places better."

TBR: *Ron, your novel One Foot in Eden shares a lot of the territory of your latest volume of poetry, Raising the Dead, and the geography of your own family, which has been based in the Carolina mountains for more than 200 years. Can you give us some background on the novel?*

RR: *One Foot in Eden* began with a single image: a young farmer standing in a field of dying crops. I began a poem with these details but soon realized that what I wanted to write and what that farmer wanted me to write could not be contained in a poem. I began a short story narrated by this man, but after two pages I knew what he had to say was more than a short story could contain. I knew that if I were to give him and his story their due, I would have to write a novel. Since the longest story I had ever written was 18 pages, and the vast majority of my recent writings had been poems of less than a page, I felt like a sprinter being asked to run a marathon.

I do believe something can be truly measured only when it's lost. I believe this outpouring of Appalachian writing has happened in part because Appalachian writers are seeing much of their culture disappear.

TBR: *Gretchen, the character of Elizabeth not only comes from a long line of midwives, but a long line of women storytellers who have chronicled the history of Denniker's Mountain.*

Elizabeth declares, however, that she is the last midwife. In essence, with the influx of modern medicine and mass media, are we to assume that midwifery and storytelling are about to vanish from Denniker's Mountain and from West Virginia?

GL: As with a whole generation of children born in the cynical 1970s and 1980s, I grew up with a certain appreciation for a time and place that once was—when life was good, we might say in passing. When you could live an authentic life, we might say, on an existential level. I've been told my whole life that Appalachia was disappearing, that the best parts of ourselves were being corrupted, stolen, fading away. But as I read, I realized that the only thing that never did seem to change was our insistence that our world was vanishing. Generation after generation talked about a world that once was, just out of our reach.

It's easy to call this nostalgia and forget it, but Appalachians know very well that we've undergone huge changes in the past 100 years. My great-grandfather died in 1965, just four years before I was born. He lived in a log cabin without running water. Even my father plowed fields behind a horse—this in the 1950s. He went to a one-room school.

I don't think we can talk about the Appalachian past—with its tight family units, its storytelling, its quilts and music—without at least remembering just how hard life was for so many. Or at least I don't want to do this. I love Appalachian culture as much as anyone and celebrate it in my novel, but I'm not interested in creating a world where we only focus on what we've lost. The time frame of *Midwife* was deliberately chosen because so much change was taking place. And more change was coming, with World War II on the horizon. We were going to lose something—my characters know this. But by remembering, by telling, we ourselves will not be lost.

I want to remember where we came from—the good, the bad, and the ugly. Because no matter what we become, the past is still our past. It is how we cope with those changes, as much as the changes themselves, that forms us into people worth knowing, worth writing about. By looking to our past, without being held hostage by it, we create a world that speaks for itself, that offers a counterpoint to a mainstream, homogenized American culture.

TBR: *Ron, you apply a tremendous amount of attention to language patterns and vocabulary in your novel. Did you struggle with capturing a true Appalachian voice?*

RR: One thing I did not want to do was have my characters lapse into a language that would turn them into characters like Snuffy Smith, so I definitely avoided a lot of contractions, subject-verb errors. Instead, I emphasized distinctly Appalachian words, and most of all a cadence true to the Appalachian speech I heard while growing up. I wanted to give my reader the sense of the "otherness" of Appalachian speech without allowing readers to lapse into stereotyped assumptions about the language of the characters who spoke it.

I also don't want my characters to be clichés, mere extras from the set of *Deliverance*. That kind of writing is too easy. It's

also not true, though there are many people (among them a number of editors and publishers) who want it to be true—to confirm their own prejudices about the region.

TBR: *In her anthology, Bloodroot: Reflections on Place by Appalachian Women Writers, Joyce Dyer suggests that Appalachian women writers have been overlooked on a national level, largely because of lingering prejudice about the region. Do you think this is a fair appraisal of the situation? In terms of women in Appalachia, your novel depicts the lives of women deeply involved in maintaining the local community. Do you see women in Appalachia as playing a unique role as keepers/writers of stories?*

GL: Joyce Dyer's *Bloodroot* is a wonderful and much-needed book. I've read it many times and am always learning something new. Dyer asks all the right questions, and I'm delighted by the idea of discussing what it means to be an Appalachian writer—a woman writer—and also where we women fit in the grand literary world. I do believe that Appalachian writing is overlooked on a national level.

I'm not sure about active prejudice, however. If anything, I've learned that the world outside the region is fascinated by us—ironically, I often compare this to the tourism that has evolved around Amish communities. Indeed, the biggest stereotype I think contemporary Appalachian writers face is not that we are inbred country hicks, but that we are somehow pure and noble, part of a “simpler” past. Not that this is new—we've been “our contemporary ancestors” for 100 years.

I do think that the literary culture has been hampered by what I think of as a benign neglect. A woman should not have to go to New Haven in order to find her own past. Libraries in the region continue to be understaffed and underfunded. If we are unable to sustain our own creative lives, how then do we accuse others of failing to do this for us? I do believe, however, that this is beginning to change, has been changing over the past 30 years, and is only growing in momentum—in our schools, our libraries, our small presses. I'm excited about the possibilities the Internet offers, both in bringing information in and in helping to get it out.

I'm cautioned, however, by a seeming lack of staying power in Appalachian literature. There is definitely a role that the outside publishing and literary world plays, and I'm more than happy to complain about it. But I'm also practical enough to realize that there are reasons to explain this that have nothing to do with how we are portrayed, but how we portray ourselves. ■

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