

# Gradual Changes

## Meredith Sue Willis and the New Appalachian Fiction

George Brosi tells me that 1940 was the vintage year for regional fiction. Brosi, Appalachia's circuit-riding bookseller, makes his living from knowing these things better than I do, and I don't argue mountain literature with him. Besides, I've checked him on this one and find that 1940 brought us both Jesse Stuart's *Trees of Heaven* and James Still's *River of Earth*. The itinerant bookman has his whole argument right there and no doubt can point out a half-dozen other landmark titles as well.

There have been other prime periods. In 1954 we got *The Dollmaker*, Davis Grubb's fine and terrifying *Night of the Hunter*, and the first of Mary Lee Settle's "Beulah" books. And there has been a steady stream of mostly lesser works, with a few classics salted in, year in and year out for most of the century. I generally do my checking on George Brosi in Cratis Williams' *The Southern Mountaineer in Fact and Fiction* and find a long line of Appalachian books marching right up to the point where Dr. Williams laid down his pen.

Today we are in another especially productive period for regional writing. Young Appalachian writers have penetrated the major publishing houses in a big way in the last few years—Lee Smith, Jayne Anne Phillips, Lisa Alther, and the brilliant, troubled, and short-lived Breece D'J Pancake among them. They are good writers, almost without exception. Some are turning out best-sellers, and all are doing well enough to keep New York interested. It adds up to an upsurge of new books in the past decade which is no less exciting for the fact that it is not unprecedented.

That all this has gone largely unacclaimed as any sort of renaissance of Appalachian writing stems from the caution of wiser heads, such as Brosi and the late Dr. Williams, who can remind us of all that has come before. But also, I think, it derives from reasons having to do with the writing and the writers themselves. The newcomers are different from the authors who built our literature and their writing reflects the differences.

Bear with me, for it's a hard generalization to make. So little of our literature seems to be properly hillbilly in origin, coming from born-and-raised natives hunkered down for the duration—people we can count on to reflect on the meaning of it all for the benefit of the rest of us. Stuart did it, and at any given time there were a few others. Gurney Norman may prove to be our great writer on that model for this generation. Mostly, however, our classic fiction seems to have come from outside in one sense or another, either from natives who had moved out or outsiders who had moved in. The writing was done by natives with a middle-class predominance and by generally more affluent outsiders. It all represented a sort of literary coming to the culture, but the result was a body of work very diverse in its roots.

---

Ken Sullivan is editor of *Goldenseal*, *West Virginia Traditional Life*, the quarterly magazine published by the state of West Virginia through its department of culture and history, Charleston.

The successful new writers, on the other hand, are a fairly homogeneous group. Most, or at least the post prolific, are women. Women have not before been in a substantial majority among Appalachian authors, and it seems certain that women's issues will be addressed in greater measure than previously. The timing is significant, for our region has not long had the luxury to separate men's and women's concerns. The longevity of the subsistence farm in reality and in writing kept domestic matters to the fore, but home was man's place as well as woman's when sustenance came from the surrounding fields. Later, family struggles in the face of industrialization continued the domestic trend. *River of Earth*, Still's masterpiece, manages to capture the critical transition between farming and mining and is very much a family novel. Male writers have ventured into the distinctly macho only recently, as with Pancake, and earlier—as with James Cain's *The Butterfly*—mainly when they actually knew very little of what they were talking about. Women writers spoke from the male or female literary viewpoint but generally from within the overarching family context. The concerns of Harriette Arnow's Gertie Nevels are very different from those of Lisa Alther's protagonists.

The successful new Appalachian writers are also overwhelmingly middle class in origin, the children of merchants and professionals. They have introduced their experiences into their writing, injecting the town/country dichotomy into regional fiction to an unprecedented degree. This is important, for nowadays those of middle-class means can plug into mainstream America from almost any point, including the courthouse towns of Appalachia. The effect has been to produce a homegrown set of "outside" observers, and their observations provide the bedrock of the new fiction. The educated Appalachian middle class has had the chance to study regional ways from some cultural distance but close at hand physically. They have watched country kids blundering through consolidated town high schools, for example, and uneasily cruising the streets at night. The sharp portraits that result anchor the novels and stories of Phillips, Smith, and others. The crisp perspective enlivens the new writing, although at the cost of the firsthand, lived-in feel attained by past masters of our fiction. The new authors are not fully at home in our basic regional culture.

Nor, increasingly, are they at home here literally. It is a distressing fact that the most successful of our new writers are now expatriates who have chosen to put some real geography into cultural distance. West Virginian Phillips writes from Boston, Southwest Virginian Smith from Chapel Hill, and West Virginian Pancake, before his death, from Charlottesville. It seems unlikely that many will be able to keep in touch with the mountains. If they continue with regional themes at all, their writing at best is likely to be *about* rather than genuinely *of* Appalachia—a distinction which, for the older generation, might be drawn between Settle and, say, Still or Stuart. In fact, much of the new writing chronicles the very process of moving away, and we are in danger of ending up with a literature of the departed.

Meredith Sue Willis is representative of the new Appalachian authors in that she is young, female, a good writer, and gone from our mountains. A native of Shinnston in northern West Virginia, she now lives and works in New York. In addition to a creative writing handbook and short fiction, she has produced three novels for Scribners: *A Space Apart* (1979), *Higher Ground* (1981), and *Only Great Changes* (1985). The latter pair may be considered the two halves of one larger work having to do with the coming of age of Blair Ellen Morgan, schoolteachers' daughter from a fictitious central West Virginia town.

A re-reading of the earlier books suggests that Willis has lost some of the raw power of enthusiasm, while maturing in her craft and becoming a more skillful writer in the process. *A Space Apart* is an engaging sprawl of a book, all elbows and knees, with characters not always under control but always going somewhere. Each of them takes a turn in the first perspective, a challenge for any writer and a real trick for a first novel. Willis pulls it off well enough, although the book does not have the firm sense of direction of its successors.

Nonetheless, in *A Space Apart* Willis stakes out many of the major themes of her later books. The scene is small town and the concern is growing up, particularly girls growing up. She takes two generations of the Scarlin family, sketching the early years of John and sister Mary Katherine before settling in with John's daughters.

The Scarlins are religious after their own distinct fashion. "Preacher" the patriarch is a self-annointed "Second Miler" Baptist minister who spends his prime years about equally in making his motherless children miserable and flailing nonbelievers. His combination house, church, and country store on Black Run is not a pleasant place, and John gets out early. He ends up the educated pastor of a mainline Baptist church in the county seat of Galatia. In the eyes of the Preacher the place is no more than a "purple synagogue that *calls* itself a Baptist church" and his berobed son little better than a Catholic priest.

John and Mary Katherine become pillars of Galatia, no thanks to the old man. Mary Katherine marries her childhood sweetheart, a rock of a local boy, while John lands Vera, a preacher's groupie from his first small church in Pennsylvania. Vera is an endearing and well-meaning sort but with an unmanageable wackiness that demolishes John's limited ambitions. Thwarted, he settles down to the bitter prospect of lifelong service to his hometown church, and things hang in delicate equilibrium as daughters Tonie and Lee grow up.

The real trouble begins when they do. The frustrated Reverend Scarlin has allowed his family to suffer with him, and between that and mothering themselves and sometimes Vera, the girls have had a rough time of it. They eventually break out, Lee escaping to New York and Tonie dropping out of college to take up with the black sheep of her parents' generation. The fragile compromises hold until Lee, smitten with big-city candor, feels called upon to inform their father that Tonie has had an abortion and that he's about the only one in Galatia not to know that his baby daughter has been carrying on with the town drunk. All this would be plenty for a well-adjusted preacher to handle, and for John it's plainly too much.

The elements of Willis' later fiction are here: the occasional strong older woman like Mary Katherine, floundering older women like Vera, and impatient young women fast on their way to becoming one or the other. The men are ambivalent or flawed. John Scarlin manages to be both, a preacher without passion who can bring forth no redeeming fire from his own inner suffering. The society is small town, and the question is whether that society can accommodate one more younger generation in any mutually fruitful way. Growing up takes its own peculiar literal as well as figurative directions under such circumstances.

The issues are not resolved in *A Space Apart*. We end up with John looking forward to a penance grimmer even than Galatia First Baptist, Vera resigned to her wifely fate, and the sophisticated Lee headed back to the Big Apple. Our hopes rest with Mary Katherine, the steadiest of the bunch

throughout, and Tonie, off to visit a newly discovered grandmother in Ohio. The tone is mildly upbeat, for it seems unlikely that things could get much worse for the Scarlins.

*A Space Apart* has some of Willis' strongest page-by-page writing, but a basic structural problem in all those point-of-view characters jostling for attention. The author herself seems to realize this toward the end when she has Lee muse wistfully of Aunt Mary Katherine, in relation to her cousins, sister, and mother: "I wanted there to be no Jimmy or Johnny, or Tonie either. And I wanted you for my mother and my mother for my aunt. She would have made a terrific aunt."

This more manageable scenario is approximately what Willis lays out for us in *Higher Ground* and *Only Great Changes*. The Blair Ellen Morgan introduced in *Higher Ground* is the only child of a level-headed mother and a loving if often narrow-minded father, with zany Aunt Pearl thrown in for good measure. "Two sets of grown-ups for one little girl at dead center of the universe," Blair Ellen thinks early on, before Uncle Joe's death upsets the happy balance and gets the novel's action rolling. The setting is another imaginary small town also in West Virginia. In the course of the two novels Blair Ellen comes to leave the place in a process identified with growing up.

It is Aunt Pearl's misfortune that provides Blair Ellen's first exposure to the world beyond the town limits. Joe Stone dies in the first chapter as his niece ends fifth grade. A prosperous dentist, he has left his widow "Stone Paradise," a summer place on nearby Coburn Creek. She holes up there, and Blair Ellen is shipped out to comfort her over summer vacation.

Stone Paradise opens up the hinterland for the girl from town. Blair Ellen meets the country people of the surrounding hills, represented in particular by the extended Odell family, and the spirit of the mountains they embody. The higher ground of the title refers specifically to the Odells' mountaintop homeplace, a world with a different reality than the snug certainties to which Blair Ellen has been accustomed.

Garland Odell is the strongest supporting character in the novel and strongest in Willis' fiction thus far. He's a sort of junior greaser when Blair Ellen meets him, a bony kid with hair slicked back like Elvis. There's no electricity on Odell Mountain and he and sister India come down to dance to rock-and-roll records at their cousin's house near Stone Paradise. Blair Ellen first runs across him there.

Garland handles himself unlike any town boy his age, fascinating Blair Ellen:

I knew boys who would clump around as if they had buckets on their feet and make fun of dancing, but they would never get wrapped up in it the way this boy was. He seemed to be concentrating even more than the girl. He stopped her once and held both of her hands and counted the beat and made her start over. I didn't care much for boys altogether, but I always thought that if I ever did end up liking one, it would be someone athletic who disdained indoor activities.

It turns out that Garland Odell disdains a lot of things, even most, but girls and the indoor activity of dancing are not among them. He is naturally physical, with a magnetism that troubles young Blair Ellen. She doesn't know how to size him up and finally decides that "on top of being a hillbilly Garland is a sissy." Aunt Pearl knows better. "That's a sissy?" she asks her niece. "They don't make sissies like they used to."

The relationship with Garland is central to the book, eventually carrying Blair Ellen a long way toward the complexities of adulthood. In the meantime

she returns to the circumspect reality of her own world, losing touch with Garland and India after that one summer. When they eventually show up for high school, she does her best to avoid them and the other kids from Coburn Creek.

The creek kids don't know how to act in town although India Odell catches on fast. Garland doesn't much care, hanging on to the few essentials that mean something to him. The only time he excels in school is in Blair Ellen's mother's English class, writing of his motorcycle. "What is really important is a solid engine that you can take apart and repair yourself. What is not important is a lot of chrome junk stuck all over it," he writes. "The most important thing of all...is to be sure your motorcycle is a Harley Davidson." The assigned subject was that old standby, the really important things of this world. Blair Ellen has written earnestly of civil rights and Cuban missiles and can't understand Garland's success.

Garland's passage into manhood is abrupt, symbolized by the big bike and his rejection of a no-good father. Blair Ellen comes along more slowly. She learns petting at Methodist teen leadership summer camp—two weeks "illuminated with religion and dedication and necking"—from an impossible prig of a Charleston boy, and she has the usual high school crises. Garland observes it all from astride his Harley, managing to get Blair Ellen up behind him from time to time. He rescues her from another hopeless boyfriend in one wild scene, and the two settle deeper into a pattern of passionate mutual frustration.

Garland Odell has a female counterpart in sassy Bunny Hoover. She runs off with a sailor, while Garland's ticket out is the army and Vietnam. Blair Ellen learns from both friends, envying their poverty-bought freedoms at times but herself clinging to the middle-class prerogative of easing gradually into adulthood. "Hell, Blair Ellen, we may not be alive next year," Garland cries as his own uncertain future looms. A part of her responds, but the ruling part looks after the conventional necessities of growing up properly. She makes it safe and sound in time, with an offstage passage from high school through college. The end of the book finds her returning from a New York marriage for the 10-year class reunion. After that fades into a drunken singing of "Country Roads," she has a final fling at Garland, and the two make it back to the Odell mountaintop. Metaphorically, however, the higher ground eludes both.

Blair Ellen comes of age in *Only Great Changes* as we pick up part of the lost period between high school graduation and the class reunion. In a nice twist, it turns out that this Appalachian girl has joined VISTA and gone off to fight poverty in the lowlands. The attraction is her native idealism, planted by her parents and honed to a fever pitch by Dave Rivers.

Rivers is central to this part of the story, the man Blair (the "Ellen" is lost in transition) tries out her womanhood on. She might have done better with Garland, for Rivers lacks the raw vitality of his predecessor. The assistant chaplain of Franklin State College, he is a charismatic armchair revolutionary of the sort common to campuses of the period. He lures Blair to a project in the black South Jenkin neighborhood of Norfolk and then abandons her there in the crunch. That turns out to be the best thing he's done for her, finally giving her the opportunity to mature in the absence of all figures of authority.

Dave Rivers is typical of Blair Morgan's romantic involvements. From the conclusion of *Higher Ground* we know that she winds up in an apparently

satisfactory marriage with a shadowy husband holding the fort back in New York. Otherwise, her relations with men have been problematic. Garland Odell is unmanageable, even for himself, and has gone to seed by the time we last see him, while Rivers turns out to be a general moral lightweight. All flash, he talks a good uprising and is still worse in his personal relationships. Blair finishes the third book with a go at Spencer, a young black man inherited from a VISTA roommate. She has idealized Spencer, as she had Rivers, but he too has his own agenda. The Norfolk ghetto is an experience for him, and Blair part of it, and in the end he unearths a suitcase of fine sweaters and heads back to college.

Blair's man troubles are emblematic of Willis' treatment of male figures, which tends to be sympathetic but ambivalent. The best are psychologically crippled in one way or another. Religion often figures in, and generally they are certifiable hillbillies. The crazy old preacher in *A Space Apart* sets the pattern in a fascinating character study. The motivating secret from his youth proves to be an immigrant bride who momentarily converted him to Catholicism before he backslid to his native faith to take up a life's work of heaping damnation on the Papists. He flip-flops again in senility and requires a Catholic to usher him into the hereafter, shaming son John Scarlin from his own Baptist parsonage when the town priest comes to tend to the old man.

Roy Critchfield of *Only Great Changes* is a hillbilly likewise entangled in his religion. He shows up at the same college Blair Morgan attends, reporting from Big Haul Holler with a Bible in his hand and some serious convictions in his heart. He gets over both soon enough, falling like Blair under the spell of Dave Rivers. Roy too is bundled off to the low country, willing to forego faith for good works in his disillusionment. His moment of revelation comes in his first good Norfolk drunk. The boozy vision tells him to "become as one of these," so Roy suits up in a dashiki, does what he can to grow an Afro, and marries a black woman. He's a long way from home when we lose sight of him but clearly has love and good intentions enough to get by on.

Then there's Joe Bob Farley from *A Space Apart*, your basic alcoholic wreck of a formerly magnificent man whose attempts to straighten up for young Tonie Scarlin are what drive her from him. Joe Bob's passage from comfortable failings to reawakened yearning is presented kindly and in detail. Otherwise, the men of the three books are less clearly drawn. The weak-kneed Rivers figures prominently in *Only Great Changes* but remains one-dimensional. He is never more than a foil for Blair, as West Virginia is a milestone for her to grow past. Blair's father appears frequently in both later books, but mostly as a pipe-smoking background presence. He progresses from a Falcon to a Pinto and keeps a big garden out back, but apart from that we don't know a lot about him. He appears to represent basically decent people with small prejudices. The romanticized South Jenkin pastor is likewise without depth, the stock figure of a strong black preacher with a troubled flock.

Good and bad, the men of Blair Morgan's life are all swept aside by the end of *Only Great Changes*. Decision time finds her finally alone. South Jenkin was supposed to have been a summer project, but Blair discovers that she can't go home. She tries, boarding a bus in a moment of crisis and making it as far as a late-night truckstop in West Virginia's Eastern Panhandle. There she finds an eastbound bus, and heads back to the Tidewater. For Blair, a return to the mountains is equated with a return to dependency. We understand that she moves on to New York in the years ahead, finding a new life

with a sustaining routine of its own. "My work, my friends aren't down here," she reflects at the time of the class reunion visit in *Higher Ground*. "Only my parents."

There is nothing wrong with any of this. The direction the body of the work takes may disappoint in leading us out of the mountain region, but there is little to fault with the execution. Willis is not a great American writer, not even a Gore Vidal or a John Gardner. Nor is she yet equal to our great regional writers, not Still or Arnow or Dykeman. She certainly stands comparison to the best of the new Appalachian authors. She lacks the commercial glitter of Lisa Alther or the recent critical success of Jayne Anne Phillips but fits nicely in the company of Lee Smith—and that's not bad company at all. Willis treats her home country with gentle solicitude, turning out books that are a pleasure to read.

She is, of course, entitled to her subject matter. Going away is Appalachia's hallmark experience for our time. The best postwar writers take it up as naturally as their predecessors turned to subsistence agriculture and the trauma of industrialization. Willis and some of her contemporaries give the familiar theme a new twist, however, in looking to the pull rather than the push of demography. The classic Appalachian migrant was of the working class and driven from home. That was true of displaced coal miners in the 1950's, and it is true of their sons and daughters today. Blair Morgan has a choice in the matter.

There are many like her, in life as in fiction. Those enjoying middle-class or higher privileges respond to different forces than hungry miners. They are attracted by opportunities abroad rather than repelled by impending poverty at home. A schooled and sophisticated hillbilly has about the same chances as any educated white American; tame the accent and we pass pretty well. Our college graduates are as apt to become transient careerists as anyone else, floating rootless between the coasts as the century wanes. Like Blair, they may find themselves with no attachment to home other than aging parents, and no home to pass on to their own children. The phenomenon merits literary investigation, but it is not typical of Appalachia in this generation or any other.

The danger lies in allowing the regional experience to be interpreted primarily from the standpoint of the comfortable expatriate. Appalachia itself is not comfortable, not usually. More often it's a hard place, and it can be a beautiful heartbreaker. Binding affection for such a place is something you're born with, and still you may have to work at it. Or maybe it's not affection at all that binds but rather the inborn determination to best a contrary place. Whatever the operative emotions, they are felt in the daily living.

This is not an argument for impounding writers. Self-exile is a venerable tradition in American literature. The nation has sent forth generations of authors at least from Henry Adams' time onward. Mostly they returned. American writers may have fled provincialism, craving the quickening influence of the European intellectual climate, but the ironic upshot was that the national consciousness of the best of them was sharpened. Hemingway and Fitzgerald were never in danger of becoming Parisians.

Regionalism is more fragile. Faulkner needed the South, and it is unlikely that Wendell Berry could spin his marvelously sane philosophy away from the Kentucky River, or radio humorist Garrison Keillor thrive out of Minnesota. A region is less culturally pervasive than the nation and its pull less insistent. The flavors are fainter and they need to be tasted more frequently. One loses touch otherwise. Writers draw from their own experiences, continually

replenished from their surroundings. In moving from one place to another, they may first write of the old place, then of moving from the old to the new, and finally of the new altogether. There they cannot speak with the authority of natives. Place is reduced to setting, and transplanted writers themselves become part of the overlay of reigning national culture, whatever that may be at the time. A few manage to retain their special regional “feel”; Davis Grubb wrote some good Appalachian novels from New York before West Virginia called him home again. Most do not.

Alther is a case in point. Her latest bestseller, *Other Women*, is set entirely in New England. Appalachia is but rarely mentioned, and then as the object of misguided charity. The themes are trendy Eighties Americana, with a suicidal lesbian seeking a reason to live from a psychiatrist who herself has lost two children to carbon monoxide and a husband to combat. It’s a good read, but the plotline would pass for downright exotic in east Tennessee.

The demographic exchange works both ways, to be sure. Young people come to the mountains as well as leave them. We have gained fine citizens, including survivors of the Poverty War and the back-to-the-land movement of a few years ago. Some of our West Virginia counties seem to have more Ivy League alumni per capita than Boston, and they have made a discernible impact on politics and society. No one replaces those who have gone, but the new mountaineers have taken an interest in native culture and contributed much to recent cultural revival. Some have provided striking artistic and photographic views, but few have ventured into literary interpretation. Perhaps they share my prejudice that that most intimate work is the business of natives. Or perhaps, like me, they cannot write fiction.

At any rate, with some notable exceptions, we have failed to produce either a homegrown or imported fiction colony from among the current generation. That is not to say that we don’t have good young writers. Our mountains are awash with better-than-average poets, and I know several fine but essentially unpublished novelists. Whether we can hold the latter when they do publish nationally is questionable, for there seems to be some extractive mechanism that comes into play by that point. There is no particular reason for this that I can see. If writers of all people can thrive on beauty and solitude, and if literature can be wrenched from the hard realities, Appalachia should be overrun.

What is to be done? I don’t know. My own inclination is to rejoice in the bounty as it passes before us, relishing the Smiths, Phillipses, and Willises so long as they produce credible regional portraits, and to lose interest in the Althers as they range into other realms. It’s a transient feast if we are to continue exporting writers good only for a few regional books each, but at present there is plenty of it.

Apart from that, we might try a general amnesty. I’ll take the opportunity, here and now, to invite our wayward writers to return. Leave your day jobs in the great universities or whatever it is that keeps you from us. We’ve got schools enough for all of you and still another generation of writers to be influenced. The Hillbilly Repatriation Act is in force, and you will be welcomed with open arms. No questions asked.

In other words, come home, Meredith Sue Willis. We need you here.