

The Foxfire Book of Appalachian Women: Stories of Landscape The Foxfire Book of Appalachian Women: Stories of Landscape and Community in the Mountain South [book review]

By: Kathelene McCarty Smith

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Abstract:

Book review of: *The Foxfire Book of Appalachian Women: Stories of Landscape and Community in the Mountain South*. Kami Ahrens, ed. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2023. ISBN 9781469670034 (Pbk). \$25.00. 268 p.

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*****Note: Full text of article below**

The Foxfire Book of Appalachian Women: Stories of Landscape and Community in the Mountain South

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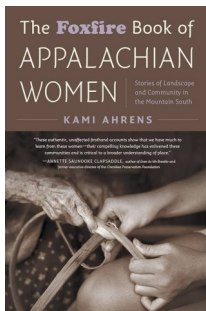


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The Foxfire Book of Appalachian Women: Stories of Landscape and Community in the Mountain South



Kami Ahrens, Eds.
Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2023
ISBN: 9781469670034
268 p. \$25.0 (Pbk)

Seldom is the origin story of a book as compelling and inspirational as that of the book itself.

The Foxfire Book of Appalachian Women is one of the rare exceptions. In 1966, a high school English teacher from Rabun Gap, Georgia, decided to create a literary magazine focusing on the poetry, stories, and personal accounts of Appalachia. As the popularity of the magazine grew, it was the interviews—first with relatives and neighbors and then branching out to individuals living in the wider region—that caught the imagination of the *Foxfire Magazine* readers. These stories became the basis of the dozens of books in the Foxfire series. *The Foxfire Book of Appalachian Women*, edited by Kami Ahrens, mines the Foxfire publications and chooses 21 narratives which Ahrens believes reflect the complex lives of the women interviewed by the Rabun Gap students all those years ago. The book encompasses women of different ages and regional cultures, and each chapter concentrates on a particular individual, with multiple interviews spanning several decades. Stories and mythologies of Appalachian ancestors are woven into the women's personal narratives, creating a continuous tale of Appalachian history and folklore. Ahrens endeavors to preserve the syntax and dialect of the interviewees, establishing a sense of their specific time and space. Photographs of the subjects and their homes provide the reader with an invaluable glimpse into the rich environment of

the region.

Margaret Burrell Norton (1910-1983) from Betty's Creek, Georgia, was the first to be interviewed by the students in 1967. Norton planted crops as dictated by the signs of the zodiac and the phases of the moon, as was the local custom. She explains what it was like to raise her own food and livestock, which grazed the land without the limitation of fences. She demonstrated to the students how she churned butter, spun wool, and cooked in a traditional wood stove. Perhaps inspired by her involvement with the project, Margaret went on to pen a column in the *Foxfire Magazine* from 1967 to 1972 which featured her own recipes as well as those of neighboring women. The chapter ends with Margaret's recipe for carrot pudding or cake.

As the reader moves through the interviews, life in Appalachia begins to take shape, incorporating a mix of past and present mountain life. Another chapter focuses on Mary Carpenter (1912-2002) of Scaly Mountain, North Carolina. Her Southern heritage harkens back to an antebellum lineage of smart, strong, working-class women who led food protests and took a stand against hard times and harsh conditions. She recounts tales of hunger during the Civil War and seeing Halley's Comet shoot across the mountain skies. She is also not shy about expressing her skepticism about events such as Watergate and the moon landing. Carpenter regales the reader with ghostly Appalachian tales, including a personal experience with a spirit horse that would run up the dirt road at night, stop at her window and stomp loudly, then disappear. Adding to her stories are wonderful photographs, which bring the reader even closer to Carpenter's mountain life.

A completely different perspective is given by Anna Tutt (1911-2008), an African American woman who was born and raised in Georgia during the Jim Crow era. Her father was a sharecropper. By experiencing this post-Civil War system firsthand, Tutt describes a system in which tenants farmed lands that were not their own, essentially trapping them in a never-ending cycle of oppression and poverty. After her father died, Anna and her siblings scattered until they were finally united to live with their beloved grandmother in Cornelia, Georgia. Tutt's charismatic personality shines through in her reflections on social dances, church gatherings, dating, and why she never

married. She ends her story by sharing a few thoughts on the impact of segregation in Cornelia.

The book also contains stories of Native American women of Appalachia, including Amanda Sequoyah Swimmer (1921-2018), a member of the Eastern Band of the Cherokee Indians of North Carolina. Amanda, a prominent potter, was named a “Beloved Woman,” a title considered the highest honor bestowed upon a Cherokee woman (p. 177). Her life was committed to preserving the language, ceramics, and culture of her tribe. Although the Cherokee once occupied vast lands over the states of Tennessee and Georgia, all but a few Cherokees had been forced out of the region and into Oklahoma. Those who could hide or return formed the Eastern Band in Western North Carolina where Swimmer was born and raised. Her father, Running Wolf Sequoyah, was a farmer. He also hunted and fished for their family and made furniture used in their log home. Swimmer describes a happy childhood going to school and playing outside with her many siblings, although they were too poor to own toys. She married Luke Swimmer and had nine children of her own, to whom she gave both Cherokee and English names. Her interview focuses on the many changes that she has seen for her tribe, including the influx of tourists into the region, which gained recognition for its history and crafts. She also talks about the loss and reemergence of the Cherokee language in some areas.

In writing this review, it was a struggle to choose only a few stories to feature, as each was more fascinating than the next. It must have been even more difficult for editor Kami Ahrens to select just 21 from the entire *Foxfire* series. The personalities of the women popped and sparkled in every chapter as they spoke of their love and commitment to the Appalachian region, the changes that they had seen, and their hopes for the future. Also fascinating are the perspectives of the student interviewers who had such unique experiences with these women. The reader hears their personal accounts about what it was like to see an automobile, hear a radio for the first time, or watch demonstrations of traditions passed down from their ancestors, such as weaving, planting, and canning. Before this project, it is unlikely that the students had ever heard of “granny witches” and their importance to the lives of the local people, or how locals lived, worked, and even died in this

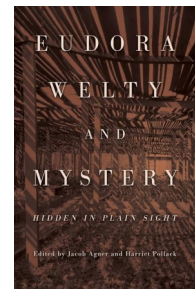
mountain environment.

Yet be assured, *The Foxfire Book of Appalachian Women* does not read like a history book. The stories continually question what it means to be an Appalachian woman. The answers are given through 21 distinctively different experiences, but also with a thread of commonality of the land, the traditions, and of the uniqueness of the region. This book would be ideal for those who are interested in the history of Appalachia, women’s history, and regional crafts, as well as for teachers who might be inspired by a class project that provides a life-changing experience for students.

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Eudora Welty and Mystery: Hidden in Plain Sight

Jacob Agner & Harriet
Pollack, Eds
Jackson: University Press of
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Jacob Agner and Harriet Pollack’s edited collection, *Eudora Welty and Mystery: Hidden in Plain Sight*, showcases Eudora Welty’s appreciation for and adaptation of the mystery genre in her own works. Welty’s love of mystery is evidenced by her large personal collection of popular and historical mystery novels, which far outnumbered other genres in her collection. A record of Welty’s personal collection was made in June 2021. The collection contained over 5,000 books, 6% of which were mysteries. Along with her expansive personal collection, many chapters comment on her relationship with Ken Miller, a popular hardboiled mystery writer who wrote under the name Ross Macdonald. The two corresponded for over 10 years and were very influential in each other’s work, often exchanging ideas for each other’s writing in their letters. Only a few of Welty’s early works are out-and-out mysteries, and these attempts were made when she was in college. It takes a well-tuned eye to see the mystery genre conventions at work, but once this is accomplished, you can see the heavy influence