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Locklear, Erica Abrams. "Mountain Fatalism in Wiley Cash's *A Land More Kind Than Home*." *Appalachian Heritage* 42, no. 3 (Summer 2014): 110-121

MOUNTAIN FATALISM IN WILEY CASH'S

A Land More Kind Than Home

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In 2003 Wiley Cash had the initial idea for the storyline of his debut novel, *A Land More Kind Than Home*, when his “professor, Reggie Scott Young, brought in a news story about a young African American boy with autism who’d been smothered during a healing service on Chicago’s South Side.” Cash elaborates that he “wanted to tell the story, but [he’d] never been to Chicago and knew [he] couldn’t represent the experience of those living on the South Side.¹

Instead, Cash set the novel in Madison County, a region in Western North Carolina that has long been associated with both positive and negative stereotypes about Appalachia.

On the positive side, those interested in traditional ballads often connect the county with the hit movie *Songcatcher*, since both Olive Dame Campbell and Cecil Sharp collected ballads in the area in the nineteen-teens. Photographers Rob Amberg and Tim Barnwell have also documented the beauty of the landscape and its people in their image collections, while musicians including Laura Boosinger and Sheila Kay Adams have brought major recognition to the area for its performance arts. Adams, for example, was recently named a 2013 National Endowment for the Arts National Heritage Fellow, one of only nine in the United States.

But Madison County also seems to function as a distinctly Appalachian space onto which cultural anxieties about poverty, drug use, unruly evangelicalism, and all manner of negative stereotypes are projected. It was the site of the Shelton Laurel Massacre in 1863, garnering the nickname “Bloody Madison” that still resonates today. In 2009, for example, journalist Rob Neufeld wrote an article for the *Asheville Citizen-Times* newspaper about a true-crime novel called *Unfinished Business* by Mark Pinsky. The novel re-creates the unsolved rape and murder of a VISTA worker, Nancy Morgan, in Madison County in 1970. According to Neufeld, a Madison County native named Ellen Banks told Pinsky, “We’ll never really rest in Madison County about Nancy’s death. People really liked her,” and “We’ve had enough problems since the Shelton Laurel massacre.”² Banks’ mention

1 Hovis, George, “The Seen and the Unseen: An Interview with Wiley Cash,” *North Carolina Literary Review* 22 (2013), 94.

2 Neufeld, Rob, “True Crime Book Digs into Unsolved 1970 Madison Rape-Murder,” *Asheville Citizen-Times*, May 27, 2009.

of the massacre—almost one-hundred-and-fifty years after the incident—signals that residents remain acutely aware of the associations people inside and outside of the region make between the county and violence. I often tell my students that Madison County serves the same purpose for North Carolina that West Virginia serves for the rest of the nation. Scholars including Anthony Harkins and J.W. Williamson have hypothesized that the rest of the nation—or in this case, the rest of the state—uses such areas to imagine a population of “them, not us,” prompting Manly Wade Wellman to write in 1973 that Madison County was “surely among the most misunderstood and most interesting of all counties in North Carolina,” and certainly that still holds true today.³

This classic blend of binaries perpetuated since the late 1800s of the rustic pioneer inhabiting the same beautiful mountainous space as the degenerate hillbilly coupled with a rich history of Civil War conflict, tourism, and a little-known World War I internment camp serves as rich literary fodder for contemporary authors: Charles Frazier, for example, sets several scenes of *Thirteen Moons* at the Warm Springs Hotel, while writers including but not limited to Pamela Duncan, Terry Roberts, Rose McLarney, and Ron Rash place much of their fiction and poetry in the county. The fact that Wiley Cash uses Madison County as the setting for his novel about a snake-handling congregation who smothers a boy to death while trying to heal him of his muteness (though readers soon learn that the preacher’s motivations are likely far more sinister) is a loaded one. At first glance, it might seem as though the novel perpetuates problematic notions about the county: after all, where else would one find a stereotypical Western North Carolina snake-handling congregation in the 1980s? But a closer inspection reveals that much more is at play in Cash’s novel than a too-easy reliance on clichés of

mountain people and their religious practices. Instead, Cash first draws readers in by perhaps giving them what they might expect to find in a novel set in Madison County, but he soon turns those expectations on their head.

This tactic has no doubt been successful; the novel has received stunningly positive reviews, quickly garnering a spot on the *New York Times* bestseller list and a recent appearance on the shortlist for the Robert W. Bingham PEN Literary Award. Combining elements of Southern Gothic, literary thriller, and familiar Appalachian tropes, the novel finds easy refuge in already established traditions that casual readers and literary critics alike find attractive. In some cases this widespread appeal means that reviewers are perhaps too eager to group the text with its Southern, not Appalachian, predecessors. *Kirkus Reviews*, for example, states that the novel “explores Faulkner/O’Connor country, a place where folks endure a hard life by clinging to God’s truths echoing from hardscrabble churches.”⁴ While certain literary elements of Cash’s novel clearly harken back to techniques employed by both William Faulkner and Flannery O’Connor, the geographic location Cash chooses of Western North Carolina hardly equates to Faulkner’s Mississippi or O’Connor’s southern Georgia. Even so, the larger point that the novel fits within the canon of Southern literature is a valid one.

What critical attention the book has received thus far focuses on the influence literary giants like Thomas Wolfe had on Cash’s writing. George Hovis, for example, places *A Land More Kind*

3 Wellman, Manly Wade, *The Kingdom of Madison: A Southern Mountain Fastness and Its People* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1973), 3.

4 “A Land More Kind Than Home,” a review of *A Land More Kind Than Home* by Wiley Cash, *Kirkus Review*, April 3, 2012, <https://www.kirkusreviews.com/book-reviews/wiley-cash/land-more-kind-than-home/>

than Home, Terry Roberts's *A Short Time to Stay Here*, and Ron Rash's *The Cove* firmly within the tradition of Appalachian literature while noting the ways in which each diverge from Wolfe's frequent urban settings.⁵ Certainly Cash's novel qualifies as Appalachian in other ways too, but it also forges new and important literary ground by upending one long-held stereotype of Appalachia in particular: mountain fatalism.

Religion scholars and philosophers have written extensively about the term "fatalism." Regardless of whether it is defined in religious or secular terms, at its most basic level, fatalism means that an outcome is predetermined. Southern religion scholar Deborah Vansau McCauley explains that "the extreme Calvinist position of extreme predestination" is "the closest doctrinal formulation to what can be characterized as 'fatalism'."⁶ According to philosopher Robert Solomon, "fatalism is the narrative thesis that some action or event was bound to happen because it 'fits' so well with the agent's character," suggesting that the outcome may be positive or negative.⁷ It is simply what was meant to be. But when we add the qualifier "mountain" to the term, the definition takes on a decidedly negative connotation.

This regional understanding of the term began early, as evidenced in William Goodell Frost's frequently cited *Atlantic Monthly* article from 1899, "Our Contemporary Ancestors." In it, he writes that the "the mountains seem the natural home of fatalism," suggesting a kind of predetermined quality to a specific geographic location.⁸ Almost a century later, War on Poverty writer Jack Weller compounded statements like Frost's by contending that "[t]he fatalism of mountain people has a religious quality to it: 'If that's the way God wants it, I reckon that's the way it'll be. We just have to take what the Lord sends us. He knows best.'"⁹ The term is used still used widely; for example, in a 2011 article about how fatalism affects healthcare in Appalachia, Wendy Welch writes that

it can appear as “Faith-based; oppositional to distrust; pride covering poverty; apathy or unwillingness to change; based on ignorance of potential health outcomes; upholding a quality of life.” She concludes with a plea for “an ongoing dialogue about care in Appalachia” that will help dismantle “the smothering blanket of fatalistic stereotypes.”¹⁰ Although Cash’s novel does not focus on healthcare in the region, it nevertheless helps us begin having the kind of dialogue that Welch recommends.

It does so because in a literary sense, a character in Appalachian fiction with a fatalistic outlook would automatically expect the worst. Or as Janet Boggess Welch explains, “It is Murphy’s Law of the Mountains that things will always get worse, even if presently they are better.”¹¹ This propensity for gloom is somewhat understandable given the often difficult living circumstances for some—though notably not all—in the mountains from the late 1800s to present-day, yet the focus on this outlook in literature seems unusually common. In Mary Noailles Murfree’s 1883 local color short story, “The Harnt That Walks Chilhowhee,” for example, Clarsie

- 5 Hovis, George, “The Legacy of Thomas Wolfe in Contemporary Appalachian Fiction: Four Recent North Carolina Novels,” *Thomas Wolfe Review* 36.1/2 (2012): 70-91
- 6 McCauley, Deborah Vansau, *Appalachian Mountain Religion: A History* (Champaign-Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995), 97.
- 7 Solomon, Robert C., “On Fate and Fatalism,” *Philosophy East and West* 53.4 (2003): 447.
- 8 Frost, William Goodell, “Our Contemporary Ancestors in the Southern Mountains,” *The Atlantic Monthly* 83.497 (1899): 317.
- 9 Weller, Jack E., *Yesterday’s People: Life in Contemporary Appalachia* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1965), 37-38.
- 10 Welch, Wendy, “Self Control, Fatalism, and Health in Appalachia,” *Journal of Appalachian Studies* 17.1/2 (2011): 109, 119-120.
- 11 Welch, Janet Boggess, “Uneven Ground: Cultural Values, Moral Standards, and Religiosity in the Heart of Appalachia,” *Christianity in Appalachia: Profiles in Regional Pluralism*, ed. Bill J. Leonard (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1999), 56.

Giles' mother laments that "Some folks is the favored of the Lord, an' t' others hev ter work fur everything an' git nuthin'. Waal, waal; we-uns will see our reward in the nex' worl."¹² Here Clarsie's mother does appear to have some hope for the future, but this better end may only be realized after her death and even then, nothing is guaranteed. Her perspective is one grounded in religion, but in a much more secular, contemporary example, former-teacher-turned-drug-dealer Leonard Schuler in Ron Rash's Madison County-based novel, *The World Made Straight*, questions whether landscape is destiny. In other words, his character asks tough questions about the potential to improve his lot in life when living in Madison County, where he feels surrounded on all sides by mountains that limit his view of the world, both literally and figuratively. Likewise, in a recent essay in *Southern Cultures*, poet Michael McFee writes: "Sometimes, after I make an especially dark pronouncement or gloomy prediction, I'll shrug and say, 'Well, I'm just a hillbilly fatalist.' I inherited that philosophical predisposition from my mother, who could find the coal-black lining in any silver cloud. She believed, and a lifetime of disappointing experience have proved, that fate was waiting for you at every turn, ready to crush your spirits and prospects flatter than a fritter: you might as well accept it and submit to it."¹³ From turn-of-the-century writing about Appalachia to War on Poverty reports about the region to contemporary literature, the phrase "mountain fatalism" signals an unavoidably undesirable conclusion.

These examples represent only a fraction of the many references to mountain fatalism in Appalachian literature, thus readers familiar with other mountain writers might expect Cash's characters to share this fatalistic outlook, but not all of them do. In fact, one major way in which Cash subverts reader expectations is by joining with other writers who break with Appalachian literary tradition when he depicts surprisingly

hopeful characters, despite the exceedingly difficult situations in which they find themselves. In doing so he overturns proclamations like Weller's that "Mountaineers are never very optimistic about anything."¹⁴ Ironically, although religion seems intimately connected to a fatalistic outlook in much, though not all, previous fictional and non-fictional writing about Appalachia, for Cash the kind of faith he writes about has the opposite result. He states in an interview that "What's amazing about the charismatic faith or the holiness movement is that everyone is considered morally corrupt. And you can be morally corrupt and pray your way out of it. You can be the greatest sinner in the world and then ask for forgiveness. You credit your successes to God and your failures to the Devil."¹⁵ While this doctrinal belief is certainly not new to Appalachia, Cash's representation of it as a central feature in his novel lends hope to what seems an otherwise hopeless situation comprised of a majority of characters seeking spiritual and human assurance. In this way, the novel features an ending that combines both tragedy and cautious optimism.

The story opens from Adelaide Lyle's perspective, an elderly woman who feels partially responsible for the death of Stump Hall during a church service. Early in her section we learn about the change that her church underwent ten years prior when a former meth-maker, Carson Chambliss, became pastor. She explains that he changed the church's name from French Broad Church of Christ to River Road Church of Christ in Signs and painted Mark 16:17-18 as a scripture reference on the church sign. Although Cash does not include the scripture

12 Murfree, Mary Noailles, "The 'Harnt' That Walks Chilhowee," *In the Tennessee Mountains* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1970), 293.

13 McFee, Michael, "My Inner Hillbilly," *Southern Cultures* 19.2 (2013): 63.

14 Weller, 38.

15 Rocca, Alexander, "His Brother's Keeper," *Publishers Weekly* 259.10 (2012): 46.

in the chapter, readers familiar with the Bible know that it reads as such: “And these signs shall follow them that believe; In my name shall they cast out devils; they shall speak with new tongues; they shall take up serpents; and if they drink any deadly thing, it shall not hurt them; they shall lay hands on the sick, and they shall recover.” Lyle goes on to recount an incident when Chambliss first introduced snake handling to the congregation and a woman named Molly Jameson died. After that incident, Lyle took care of the children during services, explaining “I had my little congregation and he had his, and we didn’t have hardly anything to do with each other. I felt like I was doing what the Lord wanted me to do with those children.”¹⁶ Given her devotion to these children, Lyle feels especially guilty when Christopher Hall, whom everyone else in the novel except his mother calls Stump, dies.

Likewise, the novel’s other two narrators—Stump’s brother, Jess, and the town’s Sheriff, Clem Barefield—are also seeking a kind of redemption, but for different reasons. While Lyle feels guilty about her inability to save Stump, Jess feels ashamed because he witnesses two significant incidents that contribute his brother’s death: first, Stump and Jess accidentally discover that their mother, Julie, is having an affair with Carson Chambliss. Jess flees the scene without detection by Chambliss, but Stump does not. Cash’s portrayal of Chambliss as an ex-drug-dealing, immoral preacher makes clear that both Jess and readers should be concerned for Stump’s well-being, yet Jess is reluctant to tell anyone what he and Stump saw. Second, when Jess and his friend Joe Bill sneak to the back of the church and peep through a gap above the air conditioner, they witness the first of two healing ceremonies performed on Stump. Traumatized by seeing Stump “kicking like he was trying to get away,” Jess “for a second for[gets] where [he is] and holler[s] out ‘Mama!’”¹⁷ Jess’ mother hears the call and interprets it as a

miracle, believing that the laying of hands has made Stump able to speak. Jess does not reveal the truth to his mother, and when Stump dies during the second healing service that evening, Jess is left harboring not one, but two dark secrets.

The novel's third narrator, Clem Barefield, also carries an enormous sense of guilt, one that ties him to Jess' grandfather, Jimmy Hall. A notorious drunk with a history of physical and verbal abuse, Jimmy Hall once supervised Clem's son, Jeff, who dies in a tragic power line accident. Clem blames himself for letting Jeff work with Jimmy, and after a long hiatus from Madison County, Jimmy returns in an effort to rebuild his relationship with his family. Cash manages to connect this cast of characters through a shared sense of responsibility, guilt, and a yearning for forgiveness. Despite these desperate longings, the novel ends in tragedy: Jess tells his father about his mother's affair, resulting in a shoot-out near the novel's conclusion that leaves both Jess' father and Carson Chambliss dead and Jess' mother injured and traumatized. Jess' prospects for the future look grim with a mother who seems likely to abandon him and a grandfather-turned-caretaker with a history of addiction and abuse.

Moreover, given the fatalistic tradition into which this novel falls, readers might expect the remaining characters to feel dejected and hopeless. Instead, in an unexpected twist that plunges into surprising territory for Appalachian characters, Cash suggests that perhaps both Jimmy Hall and Adelaide Lyle find something that resembles forgiveness or at least the possibility of it. Jimmy Hall's return to Madison County coincides with Stump's death, so his attempt to re-enter the family structure occurs as the family grieves and tries

16 Cash, Wiley, *A Land More Kind Than Home* (New York: William Morrow, 2012), 13.

17 Ibid., 50.

to understand how and why Stump died. Cash makes clear that Julie does not approve of Jimmy's return when she tells her husband, Ben, "Well, if he asks you for any money, then you'd better tell him to get in line behind me."¹⁸ Jess meets his grandfather for the first time when the sheriff and Jess' father realize that they need someone to take care of Jess as they attempt to sort out what happened to Stump. On the ride to Jess' house, Jess notices that Jimmy's fingers are twitching, and when Jimmy tries to buy alcohol at a gas station (but fails because it is Sunday), then searches the house for hidden bottles, readers understand the severity of his dependence on alcohol.

From this point forward readers might expect a swift decline into addiction for Jimmy, but instead, Cash includes a reference that signals hope for Jimmy when he successfully removes a splinter from Jess' hand. During the process Jimmy explains that he has experience working with wood, and when Jess asks him if he is a carpenter—which when read within the context of this novel may be seen as a reference to Jesus—Jimmy responds, "I ain't much of anything right now ... but I've been a lot of things. I guess I was one of those at one time."¹⁹ Though Jimmy feels insecure about his standing, Cash nevertheless embeds a powerful reference to forgiveness and the hope for eternal life with this comparison to Jesus' occupation. Such referencing makes sense when paired with Carson Chambliss' Satan-like portrayal; after one particularly unsettling encounter with him, Adelaide reveals that she had "looked right into the face of evil."²⁰ This comparison seems even more appropriate given Chambliss' dependence upon snakes in his church services; in the same way that a serpent disrupts the Garden of Eden, so too does Chambliss disrupt life in the novel's community.

Yet Cash's characters are not doomed to suffer the evils of the world, nor of Carson Chambliss. Although the novel ends

in tragedy, Jess seems to undergo a kind of baptism, or at least cleansing, when he is caught in a rain storm on the way home from Joe Bill's and decides to tell his father the truth about his mother's affair. Moreover, in the novel's conclusion Adelaide observes that at Ben Hall's funeral, Jimmy "had him on a nice clean shirt and a tie just like his grandson's" and he "kept those hands steady," a sign that he had not been drinking that day.¹⁸ Lyle goes on to report, "Jimmy Hall brings [Jess] down for church just about every Sunday now, but he never comes with him," yet she decides "that's all right with [her]. He don't ever have to step foot inside [the] church if he doesn't want to. It's enough for [her] to know that he's out there if Jess needs him. [She] think[s] it's enough for Jess too." Her comments about Jimmy are notably free of judgment, and Adelaide also states, "A church can be healed, and it can be saved like people can be saved. And that's what happened to us."²¹ Certainly the perspective with which Cash ends the novel does not coincide with "Murphy's Law of the Mountains." Instead, Adelaide's narration provides a rupture of optimism within what seems an otherwise bleak situation. This tentative hopefulness echoes the ending of James Still's seminal Appalachian novel *River of Earth*, when the Baldridge family rejoices in the birth of a new child, even though their last child likely starved to death or Charles Frazier's *Cold Mountain*, where grieving Ada finds joy in a new baby. Like Still and Frazier, Cash avoids giving readers a sugar-coated ending but instead imbues a dire situation with the possibility—however unlikely—of a better day for his characters. n

18 Ibid., 75.

19 Ibid., 145.

20 Ibid., 228.

21 Ibid., 304, 306, 305.