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Book Review: Bearwallow: A Personal History of a Mountain Homeland

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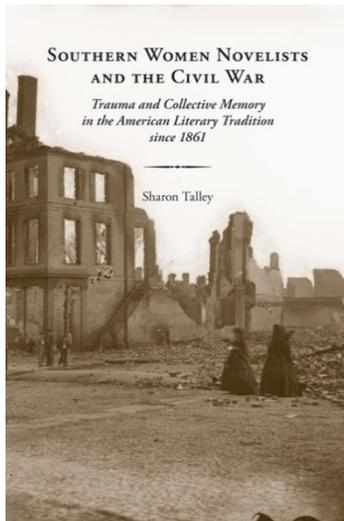
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BOOK REVIEWS

Southern Women Novelists and the Civil War: Trauma and Collective Memory in the American Literary Tradition since 1861. Sharon Talley. Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 2014. ISBN 1-62190-013-4. \$74.



On lifting the cover of this book, I wondered naively “what is there to talk about in Civil War history that I haven’t already seen, heard and suffered through” as has any woman born and lived two-thirds of her life in the southern United States.

Yet, inside the front cover, Ms. Talley tells me that southern women played a critical role in shaping the South’s evolving collective memory by penning journals, diaries, historical accounts, memoirs, and literary interpretations of the war. At this point, she caught my attention. I thought women managed the plantation houses, supervised the farming, the slaves, and the crop rotations during the Civil War but I was woefully lacking in the depth of women’s contributions through their writings.

Talley brings us through a presentation of oral and written histories and analyses of the voices of fifteen women novelists spanning the “Civil War Period, Reconstruction, Turn of the Century, The Modern Period and Novels Since World Two...”(inside fly leaf). Fascinating reading, eye opening discussions and commentaries drew me into this historical collection of women’s voices and experiences as seen through the eyes of many women. While Ms. Talley obviously included the famous “Gone With The Wind” writings of Margaret Mitchell, she raised other novelists and their writings as well.

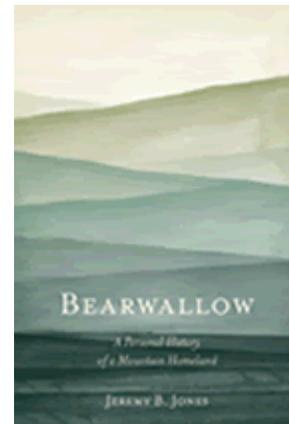
A note of interest, according to Talley, women novelists came to be called “scribbling women ...even referred to as “...damned scribbling women..” and yet in 1850, James Harr (p. 339) declared novels by Hawthorne, Melville,

Thoreau, and Whitman did not equal the sales of one of the more popular domestic novels by women”.....

There is an extensive End Notes and Index which I highly recommend to any student or faculty member who hopes to learn more about southern women writers during the Civil War years and beyond (1861- present). (p. 337-432)

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Bearwallow: A Personal History of a Mountain Homeland. Jeremy B. Jones. Winston-Salem, NC: John F. Blair, Publisher, 2014. ISBN 978-0-89587-624-9. 288 p. \$24.95.



A native of southern Appalachia, Jeremy B. Jones spent the early years of his life in the shadow of Bearwallow in the Blue Ridge Mountains of North Carolina. Pulled away by education and a teaching position in Honduras, he continued to be drawn back to the mountains and has now settled into a position as a professor in the department of English at Western Carolina University. In his debut memoir, *Bearwallow: A Personal History of a Mountain Homeland*, Jones explores how his mountain upbringing imprinted on his adult life, and through that journey, he grapples with the age-old questions of who we are and how our geographical and cultural background affects who we become.

The stories of Jones’ personal odyssey take place within the backdrop of the mountains and it is this unique topography that reflects the themes of the book: the pull of home versus the need to leave, the outsider assimilating in a native culture, reality versus regional stereotypes, and land conservation in the face of impending development. The inherent tension of these themes is found in Jones’ exploration of the mountains, which give context to his life as he seeks to understand his geographical and genealogical past. Biking through the challenging local terrain, he takes the time to listen to a local historian’s tales of Civil War

conflicts, some of which continue into the present. He speaks to his grandmother about the local bird life, family quilts, and accounts of his own relatives who settled in the mountains. It is obvious that he listened closely and these stories gave him the perspective he needed to write his own story of the regional connectivity that he had experienced since his youth.

Jones learned early that “mountain folk” were different. His accent and dialect gave him away, and he soon realized that outsiders formed opinions that were not easily shaken. As the story of his family unfolds, he explores the stereotype of mountain people; deconstructing it in every anecdote, proving that the history of the Appalachia is varied, complex, and not easily pigeonholed. Jones’ own regional history reaches back to his Dutch ancestor, Abraham Kuykendall, who settled in the wilderness of the Blue Ridge Mountains in the mid-eighteenth century. It is Abraham, one of the early settlers, who becomes the first outsider, the first land developer.

Isolated, wild, rural, and wise, Jones adeptly describes the Southerness of his Blue Ridge home, but points out that the mountain culture was unique in its independence of thought and diverse political ideologies. This is demonstrated particularly well in his description of the mountain region torn apart by the Civil War. Jones uses Civil War folk tunes, plucked out on banjo strings, to illustrate the independent temperament and complex loyalties of the mountain people as each was forced to choose a side. The Appalachia was interspersed with both Unionists and Confederates, and Jones’ own family has its roots in both.

Jones leads the reader into discovering the history of the mountains but he quickly pulls the reader back from the struggles of the past to his own experiences with independent and ever-changing mountain cultures. Jones and his wife spent a year teaching in the small town of Gracias a Dios in Honduras and the book is peppered with many anecdotes about his time there. Geographical similarities between the mountain towns of Honduras and the Blue Ridge reminded him of home, and he eventually finds himself back in his former elementary school in the mountains of North Carolina teaching immigrant children to comfortably assimilate into their new culture.

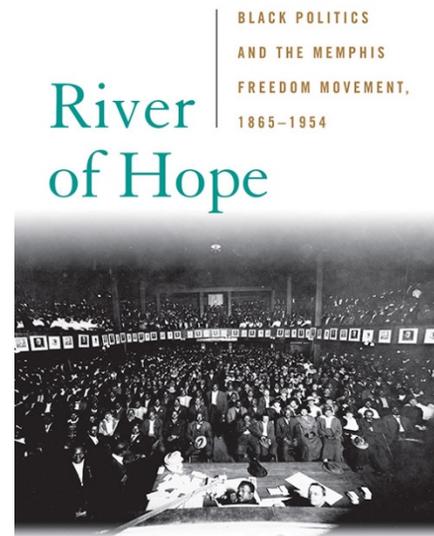
Yet change is inevitable, even in the formerly isolated landscape of the mountains, a new wave of outsiders threatens to physically transform the region. This threat comes in the form of builders and developers of large upscale communities, which could alter the mountain forever.

Bearwallow: A Personal History of a Mountain Homeland is a compelling journey, and Jones successfully weaves the language, music, food, faith, and geography of the mountain area into a multi-layered narrative. While capturing the deep and haunting regional history and culture of the mountains, he does not over-romanticize or sentimentalize his topic. His fluid writing style allows the reader to travel with him, and in the process, find themselves pulled back to their own roots, questioning if

they too find their past irrevocably imprinted on their present life.

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River of Hope: Black Politics and the Memphis Freedom Movement, 1865 to 1954. Elizabeth Gritter. Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2014. ISBN 978-0-8131-4450-4. 380p. \$40.



Elizabeth Gritter

In “River of Hope: Black Politics and the Memphis Freedom Movement”, Elizabeth Gritter shows the reader the political landscape of Memphis, Tennessee, between 1865 and 1954.

Gritter introduces the reader to the Lincoln League (1916), to prominent black citizens such as Robert R. Church, Jr. and Dr. Joseph E. Walker, and to Edward H. Crump, “leader of the white political machine in Memphis between 1910 and 1954” (p.6). “ Her carefully woven stories of the political activities of important movements and their leaders reveal Memphis to be a center for the “river of hope” for black Americans.

Sensing there was a deep meaning to Dr. Gritter’s title “River of Hope: Black Politics and the Memphis Freedom Movement 1865 -1954”, I wrote to her to ask about the meaning of “river of hope”. She kindly responded and gave permission for me to share her comments in this review:

“River of Hope: I see, as many artists and writers have, the river as a metaphor for life. In my case, it stands for the black freedom struggle more specifically,