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## Book Review - The Hills Remember: The Complete Short Stories of James Still

Eli Arnold

Oglethorpe University, [earnold@oglethorpe.edu](mailto:earnold@oglethorpe.edu)

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Off the **SHELF**

**The Hills Remember: The Complete Short Stories of James Still**, by James Still, edited by Ted Olson (University Press of Kentucky. 2011: ISBN 978-0-8131-3623-3, \$29.95)

*The Hills Remember: The Complete Short Stories of James Still* transports the reader to the rural, coal-mining hollows of eastern Kentucky, populated with the down-to-earth folks of the Cumberland Plateau and Appalachian foothills.

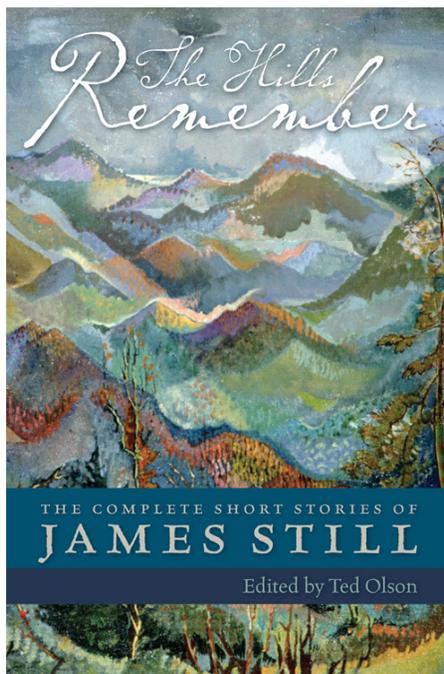
The only complete collection of James Still's fifty-three short stories (including ten previously-unpublished works) begins with a succinct but detailed introduction to Still's life and publishing history by Ted Olson, Professor of Appalachian Studies at East Tennessee State University (and, interestingly, Grammy-nominated American Folk scholar). Olson, the leading expert on Still, previously edited Still's collected poetry as well as two scholarly volumes on the author.

Still was widely published during his lifetime in such magazines as *The Atlantic* and *The Saturday Evening Post* as well as in literary journals such as *The Virginia Quarterly Review* and *The Yale Review*. While his popularity has waned in recent history, Still's style and narrative quality should warrant him a place among the great Southern storytellers.

Stylistically, the short stories in *The Hills Remember* could be described as Southern Gothic-light. While he writes of normal country folks suffering from poverty and in often

depressing or trying situations, absent are the real grotesque or evil characters that are so often prevalent in true Southern Gothic. There are some mildly-grotesque (or, more accurately, quirky) characters—such as a circus-joining obese woman or characters with missing fingers or legs—but nothing in the vein of a Flannery O'Connor tale. Still's characters are flawed, but

they are less cynical and more real than most Southern Gothic characters. (Think 90 percent Truman Capote's "A Christmas Memory" with only 10 percent O'Connor's "Good Country People.") Still's stories did become less dark and happier over time. Since the stories are collected chronologically, with little exception the tone tends lighter as the volume progresses. Interestingly, Still utilizes many children and young adults as narrators. These voices give the stories an innocent and matter-of-fact tone and are reminiscent of Harper Lee.



Many of Still's stories center around Troublesome Creek and nearby hollows in eastern Kentucky. A map of the area with rivers, hollows, and coal mining towns labeled would have been helpful. Editor Olson includes a comprehensive bibliography of a complete publishing history of each story as an appendix, but a short note (or even a simple publishing date) at the beginning of each story would have been appreciated.

A challenge with all short fiction is that soon after the reader is engaged with new characters and situations, the stories end. Unfortunately, the longer stories in *The Hills Remember*

("Chicken Roost" and "The Run for the Elbertas") are less interesting than some of the very short ("Hit Like to 'a' Killed Me"). Two of the stories are epistolary in style and prove some of the most interesting and entertaining ("Pattern of a Man" and "The Sharp Tack").

Libraries and media centers throughout the American South will want to include *The Hills*

*Remember* in their collections. Even those without other Still works would be smart to purchase this volume and then acquire the rest of Still's works (poetry and novels) to round out this important Southern author's bibliography.

*Eli Arnold is Reference Librarian at  
Oglethorpe University*