

Spring 2012

Book Review: Chinaberry

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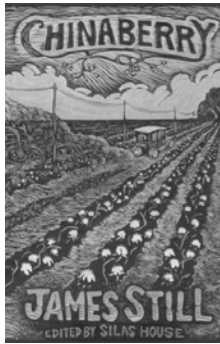
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Recommended Citation

Faix, Allison (2012) "Book Review: Chinaberry," *The Southeastern Librarian*: Vol. 60 : Iss. 1 , Article 14.

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Still, James, and Silas House. *Chinaberry*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2011. 153 p. ISBN: 978-0-8131-3372-6. \$21.95

James Still (1906-2001), widely known as the “Dean of Appalachian Literature”, was a librarian, poet, writer, scholar, teacher, and author of many books, including *River of Earth* (1940) and *The Wolfpen Poems* (1986). At his death in 2001, the manuscript for his novel *Chinaberry* was still unfinished, and was entrusted to the novelist Silas House for editing. Armed only with a brief outline from Still’s personal papers that showed how the novel’s first few unnumbered chapters should be arranged, Silas House carefully and thoughtfully set about putting together the rest of the story. His goal as an editor was to always remain as true as possible to James Still’s vision and intentions for the novel.

Chinaberry is narrated by an unnamed thirteen-year old boy who sets off on a summer road trip with family friends. The group travels from Alabama to Texas, seeking work in cotton fields. Small for his age, the boy attracts the attention of a rancher, Anson Winters, who is still mourning the untimely loss of his first wife and his own young son. Anson invites the group to work on his ranch, Chinaberry. Instead of letting the boy work in the fields,

however, he keeps him at the house as company for himself and his new wife, Lurie, and it isn’t long before the couple begins to treat the boy as if he is their own small child.

There is a sense of mystery throughout the book, but part of the book’s mystery also involves the question of exactly how autobiographical the novel is meant to be. The book is set around the time period when James Still himself was a teen, and many of the book’s details mirror facts about the author’s early life. In his introduction to the novel, Silas House mentions that James Still told versions of many of the stories from the book to friends and acquaintances who often wondered whether or not any parts of these stories might be true.

This final novel from a master storyteller deserves a place in all southeastern libraries, but libraries with special collections in Appalachian literature or Southern literature will be especially interested in purchasing a copy.

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