Community Across Time: Robert Morgan’s Words for Home

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Most famous perhaps for his 1999 novel Gap Creek, which was selected by Oprah’s Book Club, Robert Morgan is the author of seven novels, 16 volumes of poetry, four short story collections, and three works of nonfiction. For Morgan, a North Carolina writer who grew up in poverty but went on to teach literature at Cornell University, the history and the people of the Appalachian region where he grew up remained central to his work throughout his writing career. Gap Creek, for example, was loosely inspired by Morgan’s own ancestors. The novel follows the story of a young woman whose early life was filled with hardship, as she marries and relocates to South Carolina with her new husband in search of a better life but encounters more hardship and difficulties there as well. Gap Creek is a continuation of the family story that began in Morgan’s earlier novel, The Truest Pleasure, and which he would continue to tell in later novels, creating a multigenerational family saga which looks at the lives of ordinary people in rural Appalachian communities and how those people and those communities are impacted by historical events. His works look at what changes and what stays the same in these communities across the span of many different time periods to give the reader a rich and nuanced picture of the region.

Over the past few years, several new books have appeared that have focused on Morgan and his work (Conversations with Robert Morgan in 2019, a book of interviews with the author, and Robert Morgan: Essays on the Life and Work in 2021, an edited collection of literary criticism which also includes two essays written and contributed by Morgan himself). Rebecca Goodwin’s new book Community Across Time, however, is the first full-length scholarly work published about Robert Morgan. Thoroughly researched and cited, it includes a wealth of biographical information as well as an in-depth analysis of Morgan’s literary works and his writing career. The book does not only look at his work as a novelist but also considers his career as a poet and writer of nonfiction as well.

Rebecca Goodwin, the author, is a professor of English at Barton College in Wilson, North Carolina, and a scholar of Appalachian literature. The book benefits from her personal interviews and correspondence with Robert Morgan throughout his writing career. She is able to draw on these interviews as well as many other sources to sketch out in great detail Morgan’s biographical information, the family history of his ancestors, and the history of the places where his works are set, all of which greatly influenced his writing. The book looks at the lives of his grandparents and parents and at the things that happened to them and other relatives—family stories passed down through generations which came to inspire and influence characters and events in his writings. Although it might seem like too much backstory, Morgan became an author whose work was often inspired by his own family’s history, and as such it seems especially important for the book to cover all of these aspects of his own life in such detail. The book is also careful to point out that while family history often inspired Morgan, the stories he tells are fictionalized versions with many invented details as well.

Each chapter of the book focuses on a different topic. The first chapter looks at the influence and inspiration of other writers on Robert Morgan’s work, including writers like Wolfe and Hemingway as well as Appalachian writers like Wilma Dykeman and John Ehle. The second chapter looks at Robert Morgan’s childhood biography. Subsequent chapters look closer at the impact of the early American history of the Appalachian region on his work and the ways in which his own family stories appear in his novels, his short fiction, and his poetry. The book contains a chapter just about his poetry, which seems appropriate, since even though he became famous for his fiction, Morgan began his writing career as a poet.
and overall has written more volumes of poetry than fiction. For libraries with collections in Appalachian literature or Southern literature, but especially for libraries that are located in the regions Robert Morgan writes about, this book will be an important addition. Even if libraries also have earlier volumes about Robert Morgan, they may also want to purchase this book, because it will add additional insight into the author for its readers.

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**Drifting into Darkness: Murder, Suicide, and a Death “Under Suspicious Circumstances”**

Mark I. Pinksy
Montgomery: NewSouth Books, 2022
ISBN: 9781588384577
380 p. $23.95 (Pbk)

Thanksgiving week 2004, wealthy couple Charlotte and Brent Springford Sr. were found brutally murdered in their Montgomery, Alabama, home. The prime suspect was quickly identified as their estranged son Brent Jr., who was subsequently sentenced to life imprisonment without parole. The first part of Pinsky’s book describes the years leading up to the murders, a vivid portrayal of the Springford family’s life, which seems (despite early tragedy involving the death of their infant daughter and of Charlotte’s parents in a house fire) to be largely unproblematic, with Brent Jr. and his sister enjoying a privileged lifestyle and indulgent parents. However, Brent Jr.’s young adult years started with a downward spiral of destruction with the onset of serious mental health problems, as well as a deterioration in his relationship with his parents. It was during this time in his early adulthood that Brent Jr. came to meet the main character in the tragedy, his spiritual healer “wife” Caroline Scoutt (a woman 24 years his senior who used many different aliases, claimed various Native American heritages, and practiced as a therapist despite no licenses or certificates). Pinsky summarizes the background of Caroline Scoutt and portrays the image of a con artist masquerading as a healer, preying on a vulnerable young man by financially abusing him and forcing him to live in poverty whilst she enjoyed a comfortable lifestyle funded by his parents. Tragically, as Brent Jr. became more dependent on the woman who his parents believed was helping their son (possibly the only thing keeping him from suicide), they parted with large sums of money, controlled by Scoutt, to provide them with housing and cars. The author states that the catalyst for the murders was when the Springfords decided to stop funding the couple; this marked a final tragic turn in the story, culminating in murder.

The first few chapters are therefore captivating yet uncomfortable reading, akin to watching a train wreck unfolding, as we are led through the deterioration of the family relationship against a backdrop of financial exploitation and Brent Jr.’s mental health decline. Pinsky’s insightful writing prompts the reader to ponder difficult questions: What is the best one can do to support adult children in crisis? Did the relentless bankrolling by the Springfords ultimately lead to the exploitation of a vulnerable young man? When was the line crossed from spiritual quest into a mental health crisis? If Brent Jr. had consistently taken his medication, would the tragedy have unfolded in the same way? These are questions that unfortunately have no clear answers.

Brent Jr.’s subsequent suicide in prison seemed to be the end of the saga. However, the author is in the privileged position of being the brother-in-law of defense lawyer Susan Wardell and was asked by her to investigate the case further. The second half of the book follows Pinsky and his fellow investigator’s research into Scoutt’s role and aims to find out how involved she was with the murder and to what extent she acted as “puppet-master.” Pinsky goes on to describe a suspicious suicide that happened on Scoutt’s property and the discovery that not only was this another vulnerable man living in poverty whose income she controlled, but that she was named as a beneficiary on his life insurance. Numerous other cases come to light of Scoutt taking money to be used to finance her women’s refuge/spiritual center despite it never being built. Despite several attempts by the team of investigators into Scoutt’s affairs, as well as accusations of fraud and witness intimidation (amongst others), the efforts fail to come to any real fruition as she manages to evade the law until her death in 2019.