

TWO NEW CITY-SET NOVELS

a review by James W. Clark, Jr.

L.C. Fiore. *Coyote Loop*.
Adelaide Books, 2021

Terry Roberts. *My Mistress' Eyes Are Raven Black*.
Turner Publishing, 2021.

JAMES W. CLARK, JR.'s most recent honor is the 2020 John Tyler Caldwell Award from North Carolina Humanities. Read more about him in that award coverage in *NCLR Online 2021* and in the coverage of his 2018 induction into the North Carolina Literary Hall of Fame in *NCLR Online 2019*.

ABOVE Terry Roberts talking about the work of his friend and mentor John Ehle at the 2021 John Ehle Prize Celebration, a virtual event organized by NCLR and Press 53 of Winston-Salem, 24 Mar. 2021



What would Lee Roberts think of *My Mistress' Eyes Are Raven Black*, his son **Terry Roberts's** latest novel? Set on Ellis Island, it is a hard-boiled detective thriller, the type of book Mr. Roberts was addicted to, short chapters and all. Having died many years ago, he will not be reading *My Mistress' Eyes Are Raven Black*. Nor does Mr. Roberts know that his talented son's three previous historical novels are bringing distinction to the family name and to Western North Carolina in particular.

Stephen Robbins narrates the Hot Springs, NC, book about internment, *A Short Time to Stay Here* (2012), and this new book also. In each, the subject is processing alien people: first the German nationals detained stateside during the Great War and now the masses of immigrants pouring into Ellis Island in 1920 where US immigration policies and practices had become a hateful mixture of xenophobia and religious bigotry. Administrators as well as staff in the thriller become suspects in vicious

murders intended to preserve this country for white Christians and to spare the government the expense of caring for poor, tired newcomers and their offspring.

The narrator clearly details surges of hatred fueled by Christian hypocrisy and the fear of difference on Ellis Island. Simultaneously this troubled place fosters a sizzling love affair for him and a bold female detective. Both arrive to investigate the brewing cultural disaster.

Lucy Paul and her partner Stephen are themselves outside the American mainstream. She is a mulatto nurse working undercover for the American Medical Association to find out who is killing immigrants of color and other aliens deemed undesirable by Ellis Island insiders. Stephen, from the North Carolina mountains, had, until recently, been managing the restaurant in the Algonquin Hotel on West Forty-Fourth Street. A "mixed-blood mongrel" (176) by his own account, he can close his "eyes and imagine things other people couldn't see" (8). Gifted to know

TERRY ROBERTS's first two novels – *A Short Time to Stay Here* (Ingalls Publishing Group, Inc., 2012; the subject of an interview with Roberts in *NCLR* 2014), and *That Bright Land* (Turner Publishing Company, 2016; reviewed in *NCLR Online* 2017) – received the Sir Walter Raleigh Award for Fiction, given by the North Carolina Literary and Historical Association and the Historical Book Club of North Carolina. His other honors include the 2017 James Still Award for Writing in the Appalachian South, the 2016 Thomas Wolfe Memorial Literary Award, and the 2012 Willie Morris Award for Southern Fiction. Roberts grew up near Weaverville, NC. His family has lived in Madison County, NC, since the Revolutionary War. He is the director of the National Paideia Center in Asheville, NC.

"something before knowing was strictly possible" (185), Stephen is employed by the US Department of Justice to find, in particular, a missing pregnant Irish lass named Ciara McManaway. The federal agent from whom Stephen accepts his new assignment is blunt: "I think the fish ate her weeks ago" (6). He and Lucy suspect that some of the pious staff probably cooked Ciara in the laundry autoclave before she was served up to the fish.

They also share a narrow cot in the psychopathic ward "up under the roof of Building E on Island 3" (20). Lucy in her late thirties and Stephen in his forties, both are single, childless adults who despite having been damaged in earlier romantic liaisons seem to be willing to go through the fires of vulnerability again. After a forced abortion in England, Lucy had been told by her lover, the abortionist, that she would be unable to conceive another

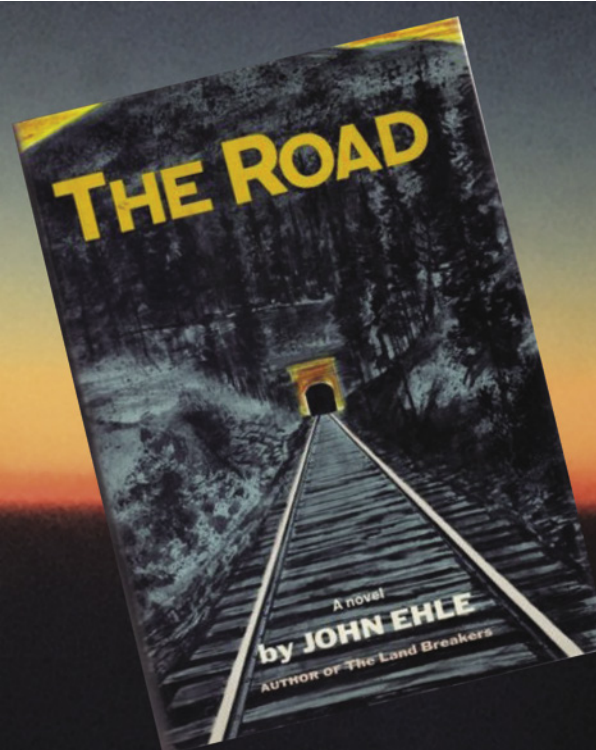
child. Formerly married, Stephen has very recently moved away from 1000 Fifth Avenue where since 1918 he had been living with his lover, the photographer Anna Ullman, whom he met in the earlier novel.

If Lee Roberts would expect his son's layered thriller to lead to any very clear answers, he would be shocked to see what Terry Roberts has done with both crime and romance in the hard-boiled form.

No one ever knows for certain what became of poor Ciara. The vicious and fanatical suspects in the disappearance of her and several other immigrants, plus one staff nurse, are not brought to court. The higher administration of Ellis Island remains largely in place. In the last three chapters, Stephen, badly injured, is having visions, talking to himself and an absent dog named King James on a train heading homeward to Western North Carolina.

As My Mistress' Eyes are Raven Black seeks its end in readers' imaginations, the thrust and momentum of the narrative are very personal for Stephen and Lucy. Poor Ciara is gone and forgotten. It is clear that Nurse Lucy is the "mistress" of the title. What do readers imagine the fate of the child they are expecting will be in Anderson Cove? Given the horrible torment some immigrants faced at Ellis Island due to their physical and racial differences, how will this child fare in the upland South? The narrative gifts attributed to the recovering father must now be employed by his readers.

Visiting a library with Daddy is one of the earliest memories of **L.C. Fiore**, author of *Coyote Loop*, set in Chicago. The "About the Author" note at the end of the novel reports, "Even today, the world never quite opens out for him the way it does when



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he renews his library card – the surging sensation that suddenly, through books, anything is possible” (333).

Fiore’s raw 2008 Christmas season tour in and around the Chicago Board Options Exchange in the Loop is guided by John Andrew Ganzi, or JAG, a “millionaire at twenty-six” (14) with a nasty gift of gab. He is a short, fat, greedy, parent of a high school basketball star named Jeanie or Jeans. Following her parents’ divorce when she was ten, Jeanie had lived with her mother until the late winter of 2008 as the economy in which her daddy is a hero is tanking. Just seventeen, she has moved in with him because her mother, a college professor of religion, was denied tenure at the University of Chicago and has moved to Florida. In the holiday chaos, will young Jeanie be able to meet Georgetown University women’s basketball coach New Year’s Day morning 2009?

In addition to madly loving his rambunctious daughter and trying in a broad spectrum of unseemly ways to be her sufficient, single parent, JAG has long experience as the father figure to the mostly male, aggressive traders who work with him in the pit where until now he spent most of his time. Indeed, before Jeanie came to live with him in his eighteenth-floor apartment, the trading pit was the center of JAG’s beastly world.

The clerk of the pit scene is Pasternak, a large Polish man. Eager himself to become a

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trader, while JAG prefers him as his experienced clerk, this financially underwater, lifelong friend from the old neighborhood drowns himself in the Chicago River after the office Christmas party, a boozing fest held at the Art Institute. When Jeanie and JAG attend Pasternak’s wake, options traders from the pit learn for the first time that JAG even has a daughter.

Lucas, now a Chicago policeman, is a former pit trader who left that job because he could not take the stress: “his soul was too pure for finance” (159). In his public safety position he intervenes several times during Jeanie’s Christmas season with her father. This impressive black officer uses his position and his knowledge of JAG to keep as much adult and juvenile misbehavior as possible from destroying his former boss’s parenting experiment in its first weeks. It is Lucas, for instance, who kindly

comes to the pit to inform JAG about Pasternak. For reasons of his own, JAG soon makes up an elaborate false account of the suicide of his friend Pasternak.

JAG and Jeanie do have less fraught moments. While making pancakes for dinner, they explore the “practical application of mathematics to real-world issues” (109). Laptop open, Jeanie asks her father to “guess how many cattle are lost to coyotes every year?” (109). He flips pancakes while crunching numbers in his calculator brain. The answer he comes up with is 0.20 percent of all US cows. She checks the laptop and confirms that he is close; the online answer is 0.23 percent. “No big deal” (110). But then he goes into a brief lecture about percentages during which the smoke alarm goes off. When the smoke clears with part of their dinner burned to a crisp, JAG switches from numbers to just plain words. If

the number of cows killed by coyotes each year is roughly equal to the population of Ann Arbor, he adds, “you can work up some indignation that way” (110).

In subsequent references to coyotes, Board Options Exchange Chairman Sar reports that coyotes are killing cattle and other animals in South Dakota, JAG wonders if Jeanie can see coyotes from the “L” at night, and she asks him if he knew that coyotes mate for life. This motif earns the novel its title when JAG addresses the whole options trading force in the cafeteria of the Exchange in the Loop. His rambling speech, of course, is extemporaneous, like his entire life, but his serious topic is “Adapt or die” (284), code words for their becoming “a publicly traded company or risk losing this beautiful industry entirely” (283). He says in his characteristic idiom: “I tell you who I see when I look in the mirror. A fucking coyote. That’s right. And here’s why: coyotes adapt to their environment. City, country, woods – they don’t give a fuck” (287). The traders, despite the financial losses coming their

way, vote overwhelmingly to do as JAG has advised. He thinks to himself as the session concludes: “sometimes, it’s in your best interest to let yourself be fucked” (288). Happy holidays.

Remaining to be considered in *Coyote Loop* is the New Year’s Eve party JAG allows Jeanie and her underage friends to celebrate in the apartment he shares with her. She ends up naked with alcohol poisoning and is rushed to a local hospital’s emergency room. Lucas shows up there, as before, to help this most irresponsible parent and his child, whose alcohol level was 0.32. Her doctor says she will recover. Later that early morning, the cop hands JAG an order for him and his daughter to undergo rehabilitation. This order is on top of the alcohol counseling JAG has been receiving since his recent DUI.

Finally allowed outside the hospital to smoke, JAG is improvising the next act of his tragic parenthood. A getaway for him and Jeanie. Lucas is speaking, but JAG is oblivious.

Then daddy-o bolts away in pursuit of a lone coyote and follows it into and up to the top of a parking deck. All alone there this rich, desperate forty-four-year-old Chicago addict greets the dawn of January 1, 2009, “like a new born-scavenger” (330).

How he gets safely down from there, where helpful Lucas has gone, when and how JAG gets Jeanie out of the hospital and to their trashed apartment: all these parenting roles are left up to chance and the readers’ imaginations. The coyote JAG was following is unaccounted for, too.

These two novels set respectively in New York City and Chicago show the creative energy of North Carolinians Terry Roberts and L.C. Fiore. In late 1920 an unborn and unexpected child is on its way to life in Western North Carolina. Seventeen-year-old Jeanie Ganzi of Chicago could as easily be on her way to an early grave as to basketball stardom in 2009 at Georgetown University. ■

ABOVE L.C. (Charles) Fiore at the North Carolina Literary Hall of Fame induction ceremony, Southern Pines, NC, 2018

L.C. FIORE hosts the A440 Podcast and is the Communications Director for the North Carolina Writers’ Network. His work has been published in such venues as *The Good Men Project*, *Ploughshares*, *Michigan Quarterly Review*, *New South*, *storySouth*, and *The Love of Baseball: Essays of Lifelong Fans* (McFarland & Company, 2017). His novel *The Last Great American Magic* (Can of Corn Media, 2016) won *Underground Book Reviews’* Novel of the Year award, and *Green Gospel* (Livingston Press, 2011) was First Runner-Up in the Eric Hoffer Book Awards in General Fiction.

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