

## 2021 JAMES APPLEWHITE POETRY PRIZE FINALIST

BY MICHAEL LODERSTEDT

### *The Eye*

How many warm nights  
I'd lie awake listening  
to waves crashing  
into troughs, a rising hiss  
then falling softly, always  
beckoning *I am here, I  
am always here*, this  
unwavering sea.

I never thought you'd  
come for us, breach  
thin dunes and lift this house  
from its blocks. Even as winds  
roared and beds shook,  
oak branches slamming  
their fists all around us.

A heavy silence fell  
when the eye passed over,  
the sky a pale yellow.  
Children wandered  
the tangled yard, lost  
like drunks, waiting  
for another wind to switch  
and blow us back inside.

We'd pull groaning  
nails from boarded windows  
and drain the tub  
as lights flickered back.  
Pots on the stove, water salted,  
the broken bay tree gave leaf  
to our unholy sauce. Outside  
the sound of many hands  
clapping, the sea's  
distant applause.



*Entrance (after Florence), Atlantic Beach, NC, 2019*  
(silver gelatin print, 16x16") by Michael Loderstedt

**MICHAEL LODERSTEDT** is Professor Emeritus of Kent State University where he taught printmaking and photography. He received an Ohio Arts Council Fellowship in Non-Fiction Literature for his book, *The Yellowhammer's Cross* (PHOTOcentric, 2020). His work has been published in *Neighborhood Voices*, and he has written for *The Land* and *CAN*. His visual work can also be found in the public collections of the Cleveland Museum of Art, the Akron Art Museum, the Kupferstich-Kabinett in Dresden, Germany, and others. He has completed international artist residencies at the Frans Masereel Centrum and at AIR Antwerpen in Belgium, Grafikwerkstatt in Germany, and the Vermont Studio Center, among others. The poet/artist grew up on the Outer Banks, a region that continues to inspire his art and now his poetry. His poem "Why We Fished" won the 2021 James Applewhite Poetry Prize. Read it in the 2022 print issue.

## AN UNSUNG LEGEND

a review by Max Kilgore

Tracy Deonn. *Legendborn*.  
Margaret K. McElderry Books/  
Simon & Schuster, 2020.

**MAX KILGORE** earned his M.A., with a concentration in Creative Writing from East Carolina University, where he also earned his BA in English. As an undergraduate, he served as an *NCLR* intern, and during his graduate program, he served as an editorial assistant and then as Senior Editorial Assistant.

**TRACY DEONN** is a central North Carolina native. *Legendborn*, her debut novel, is a *New York Times* bestseller and recipient of the 2021 John Steptoe New Talent Award. A sequel, *Bloodmarked*, is forthcoming in 2022. She earned bachelor's and master's degrees in Communication and Performance Studies from UNC Chapel Hill and has worked in theater and video game production, as well as teaching at both K-12 and university levels.

Tracy Deonn's 2021 John Steptoe award-winning novel *Legendborn* whisks readers away on an Arthurian epic set in today's urban North Carolina. This story follows rising high school freshman Briana "Bree" Matthews as she mourns the death of her recently deceased mother, who died tragically in a hit-and-run car accident. Determined to honor her mother's death, Bree enrolls herself in the early college program of UNC Chapel Hill, her mother's alma mater. However, upon her student-led (and school-prohibited) initiation night in the woods, Bree finds herself in the middle of what can only be described as a demon attack as strange creatures suck the energy from those around her. This attack is thwarted by a group of mysterious students who beat back the beasts and place a spell over the students, causing them to lose any memory of the altercation. For Bree, this spell evokes a memory of a moment after her mother's death when a doctor performed a similar incantation on both her and her father.

Realizing that there may be more to her mother's death than a mere car accident, Bree becomes determined to solve the mystery of what actually happened to her mother and what these magical men-in-black types have to do with it. This quest – and Bree's unaccounted for time in the woods – leads Bree to Nicholas Davis, the Dean's golden boy and Bree's new peer mentor. At first, Bree cannot stand to be around Nick but that quickly changes when Bree is attacked by yet another demonic entity and Nick rescues her. It is here Bree learns of Nick's connection to a

magical force called ether and a clandestine organization known as the Order of the Round Table whose members, the Legendborn, are tasked with upholding the safety of the human realm from an onslaught of demonic creatures known as the Shadowborn. Nick is a descendant of the fabled King Arthur and is destined to lead the order against the forces of the Shadowborn in a battle known as Camlann.

Bree decides that the best way to unravel the mystery behind her mother's death is to infiltrate the order under the guise of Nick's squire. Once in, she plans to question the regents about why she and her father's memories of her mother's death were tampered with and how the event intertwines with their organization. Nick grudgingly agrees to Bree's offer but warns the process will not be as easy as she believes. To become a squire, Bree must undergo three trials. In these trials, Bree will be faced with the children of vassal families who have spent their entire lives training for the battle to come, and she will be expected not only to hold her own but to best them in each category to achieve her place by Nick's side and find the answers she seeks. Nick goes on to explain that the order is one of bloodlines and that outsiders are rarely admitted, painting even more of a target on Bree's back as she is not only seemingly unrelated to the order through blood but will also be the only non-white prospect undergoing the trials.

The utilization of an early college program in this novel not only serves the purposes of setting the stage for the plot and adding an element of contem-



COURTESY OF MAIN STREET BOOKS

porary realism to the setting but also sets up one of the novel's sources of conflict. For those unaware, early college programs are one that students can apply for at the end of their middle school career and, if accepted, begin at the start of their freshman year in high school. These programs streamline the learning process of high school classes, condensing courses, and preparing students for their junior and senior years when their class schedule will be entirely comprised of college-level courses taught in college classrooms, earning these students the equivalent of an associate degree by the time they graduate high school. While programs like these have taken off and are available across twenty-eight states culminating in over 230 different schools, 133 of these programs exist within the North Carolina public school system, making this state one of the most influential pioneers in this education program.<sup>1</sup>

These programs were developed to help a diversity of students achieve a more well-rounded and fast-tracked

education, and one of the program's main goals is to aid in the acquisitions of college-level degrees by first- and second-generation college students, specifically looking for students whose parents had earned no higher than an associate degree themselves. This idea would theoretically aid in both the college readiness as well as the college acquisition of many in lower-income communities, thus providing an important tool in helping these children out of such communities later in life. While Briana Matthews is by no means a "lower-income" or "first-generation" student at the university itself, her story within the Order of the Round Table mirrors that of someone who is. Bree is surrounded by students her age who look nothing like her and have been trained in the art and history of their craft since birth, whereas she is just now stumbling upon it. It is here the character's mournful "After Bree," a self-designated persona showcases the walls put up after her mother's passing, takes hold and, with each glare from the Legendborn order members,

becomes more entrenched in her own self-doubt, perceiving herself to be viewed as a charity case. With this plot, then, the author explores the "imposter syndrome" often experienced by people of color in collegiate settings but especially minority women as they or those around them begin to devalue their own accomplishments in favor of believing that this success was achieved by "chance."<sup>2</sup> At first, this syndrome takes hold in Bree, who believes mere chance resulted in her place by Nick's side. However, as the story unravels, Bree uncovers a secret that reveals her rightful place within the order even as some of her classmates' parents express vicious slurs – *Her blood is dirty, She'll taint the Line!*" (417) – against the young girl, accusing her of having stolen their child's rightful place in the order.

Deonn employs the real-world history of the UNC Chapel Hill campus as she develops the lack of appreciation for her black protagonist's achievements. For example, Bree meets with her therapist, Patricia, seat-

ed at the university's Unsung Founders Memorial described as a table "Underneath [which], bronze figures reach their hands high to the thick granite tabletop as if holding its weight up in the air. The figurines are staggered in rows that disappear under the slab, giving the impression that there are more

with the infamously brutal Carr. Through both monuments, Bree comes to learn of her ancestors, their unsung history with the university, and the forgotten atrocities they faced at the hands of men like Carr. It is after such revelation that Bree finds herself standing before the Confederate monument, affirming,

supremacist attitudes. The novel won the 2021 John Steptoe Award for New Talent, which is "given annually to outstanding African American authors and illustrators of books for children and young adults that demonstrate an appreciation of African American culture and universal human values."<sup>3</sup> Briana's story is one of triumph in the face of adversity, the source of which comes from both in and outside of herself, building a character from a mournful child into a warrior leading her own chosen family into a brighter future. By the story's end, Bree finds the courage to lift herself up, place one foot in front of the other, and dive headfirst into the future, letting whatever may happen wash over her but not drown her. ■



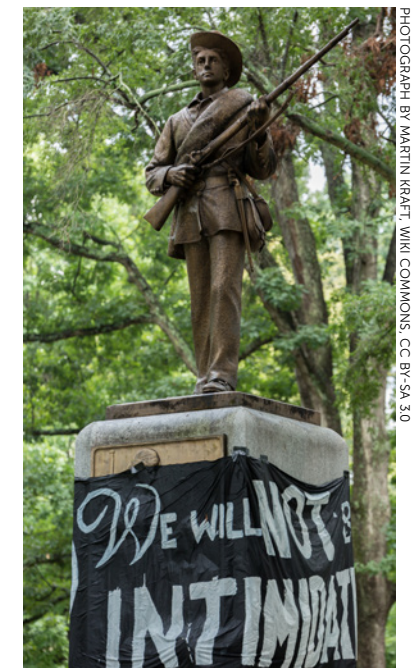
COURTESY OF UNC CHAPEL HILL

bodies lifting the table than the eye could ever see" (160). Patricia explains, "I find it difficult to sit here and do anything else but get sad. . . . Carolina's way of acknowledging the enslaved and servants who built this place . . . how can I be at peace when I look down and see that they're still working" (160–61).

The story also features the infamous Silent Sam, a Confederate monument unveiled in 1913 with a speech by former Confederate General Julian Carr. The statue has received much criticism in recent years due to its implicit support of the white supremacist values of the Confederacy and its association

"I stand at that statue and claim the bodies whose names the world wants to forget. I claim those bodies whose names I was taught to forget. And I claim the unsung bloodlines that soak the ground beneath my feet, because I know, I just know, that if they could, they would claim me" (240–41). Then, with two palms pressed firmly on unyielding granite, Briana Matthews sends a push.

Through complex discussion of psychological phenomenon, the harsh stories of enslaved people, and an appropriate real-world setting rich with history, Deonn shows readers the continued prevalence of white



PHOTOGRAPH BY MARTIN KRAFT, WIKI COMMONS, CC BY-SA 3.0

<sup>1</sup> Joel H. Vargas and Marc S. Miller, "Early College Designs: An Increasingly Popular College-readiness Strategy for School Districts to Reach More Traditionally Underserved Students," AASA: [web](#); Liz Bell, Rupen Fofaria, Alex Granados, and Molly Osborne, "A Look at NC's Early College Model," NC Center for Public Policy Research 27.2 (20 Dec. 2019): [web](#).

<sup>2</sup> Darlene G. Miller and Signe M. Kastberg, "Of Blue Collars and Ivory Towers: Women from Blue-Collar Backgrounds in Higher Education," *Roeper Review* 18.1 (1995): 27–33.

OPPOSITE Tracy Deonn (right) in an interview with Hilary Green, hosted by Main Street Books in Davidson, NC, 22 Apr. 2021.

ABOVE The Unsung Founders Memorial at UNC Chapel Hill

ABOVE RIGHT Silent Sam at UNC Chapel Hill, draped during the protests demanding its removal

<sup>3</sup> The Coretta Scott King Book Awards, "American Library Association 18 Jan 2009: [web](#)."