



THE GREAT JOY IN READING AN INTERVIEW WITH PAMELA DUNCAN, CONDUCTED BY HER FRIEND (AND FELLOW AUTHOR) SILAS HOUSE, IS IN KNOWING THAT AS APPALACHIAN WRITERS, THEY HAVE CERTAIN SHARED COMMITMENTS, CERTAIN INSIGHTS, CERTAIN PRIORITIES IN FOCUS. DUNCAN, WHO IS FROM WESTERN NORTH CAROLINA, OFFERS AN UNDERSTANDING OF THE OFTEN “INVISIBLE” PEOPLE OF APPALACHIA AND THE APPALACHIAN OUTMIGRATION.

House, from Lily, Kentucky, also looks at Appalachians suspended between agrarian and urban lifestyles. House has been the recipient of numerous awards and honors, including the 2009 celebration of his literary achievement at the Emory and Henry Literary Festival, an annual event that honors a single Appalachian author. Duncan was the featured author of *Appalachian Heritage* in 2009. Both were recognized as “Emerging Writers” at the Millennial Gathering of the Writers of the New South, hosted by Vanderbilt University in 2000. That event marked the beginning of a friendship that has led to their calling each other “brother-man” and “sister-woman.”¹ Both were mentored by Lee Smith, perhaps the most widely recognized contemporary

Appalachian author at work today, and both have received the James Still Award for Writing about the Appalachian South from the Fellowship of Southern Writers (House in 2003 and Duncan in 2007).

House and Duncan are not writing about the most obvious outmigration subjects, the people who moved to Cincinnati or Detroit in great numbers and created a massive work force within the big cities; instead, they write about the people who moved not far down the mountain to work in a plant or who let the plant come to them and provide a livelihood. Sometimes the work involved exporting the mountain itself, as in the coal industry, or reshaping its products, as in the furniture industry. Or the work required moving down to the

“LOOK HERE, WORLD, LOOK WHO THIS WOMAN (IS)”:

SILAS HOUSE INTERVIEWS PAMELA DUNCAN

introduced by
Joyce Compton Brown



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¹ Silas House, “Appalachia in Her Hands,” *Appalachian Heritage* 37.2 (2009): 12–13.

² Some interesting sources on the migration referenced here include Victoria Byerly, *Hard Times: Cotton Mill Girls: Personal Histories of Womanhood and Poverty in the South* (Cambridge, MA: Southend Press, 1985); Ronald D. Eller, *Miners, Millhands, and Mountaineers: Industrialization of the Appalachian South, 1880–1930* (Knoxville: U of Tennessee P, 1982); Dowd Hall, *Like a Family: The Making of a Southern Cotton Mill World* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 2000); and Liston Pope, *Millhands and Preachers* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1942).

LEFT In Horace Kephart’s album, this photograph is labeled “mountaineers who have moved down to the cotton mills.”



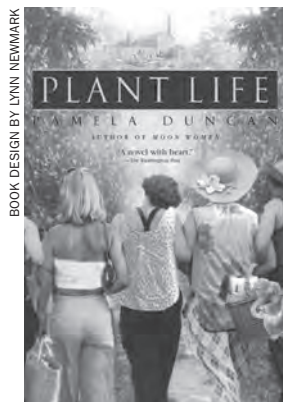
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textile plants in the foothills or Piedmont to process cotton for the big mill owners.² Sometimes such families kept moving; at other times, they created lasting new communities. Pamela Duncan's family moved to Cleveland County, North Carolina, in the Appalachian foothills, where, after Duncan's father died, her mother worked in the local cotton processing industry.

House's characters, like House himself, live in a mountain community in Kentucky where coal is at the economy's core. His *Clay's Quilt* (2001), like Duncan's *Moon Women* (2001) and *The Big Beautiful* (2007), reflects the emphasis on family still extant in Appalachia. As Duncan writes of sisters in *Moon Women*, House's *The Coal Tattoo* (2004) focuses on two sisters whose lives are imprinted by coal as they struggle between old and new. Both of their 2003 novels, Duncan's *Plant Life* and House's *A Parchment of Leaves*, deal with women caught up in and living with change. House's delicate unfolding of the levels of complexity within his women characters in his latest novel, *Eli the Good* (2009), offers another perspective in common with Pamela Duncan. Surely, he is a perfect person to interview this North Carolina Appalachian writer.

Not since Wilma Dykeman's *Tall Woman* (1962) has a Southern Appalachian novelist focused with such intensity on the often unrecognized strength of Appalachian women. These women's families, largely Scotch-Irish in background, moved from the mountains to the mill villages in search of a better life. They were among those who fought for that better life in the infamous Carolina textile strikes in 1929. Life within the cotton mill community has been the subject of two fine poetry collections, both published in 1998: Michael Chitwood's *The Weave Room* and Ron Rash's *Eureka Mill*, but until Duncan, no author has looked so closely and clearly at the lives of the women who were a part of that diaspora. Duncan gives them the center stage in her novels; she knows better than to cast them in secondary roles. Hers is a special insight, through personal experience, of these moving, searching, surviving mountain women who return (physically or psychologically) again and again to their Appalachian family origins. They carry their strength wherever they go, but still, like Lottie Mae in *Plant Life*, they need to feel the wind "blowing toward Home."³

These women's families . . . moved from the mountains to the mill villages in search of a better life. . . . They carry their strength wherever they go, but still, . . . they need to feel the wind "blowing toward Home."—Joyce Compton Brown



BOOK DESIGN BY LYNN NEWMARK



COURTESY OF PAMELA DUNCAN

ABOVE TOP **Graham Cotton Mills** in Asheville, NC, circa 1890–1910

ABOVE RIGHT **Pamela Duncan** (far right) with **Silas House** at the 2007 Appalachian Writers Workshop in Hindman, KY; also pictured, **Lee Smith** (center), **Brooke Carlton** (left), and **Darnell Arnout**

³ Pamela Duncan, *Plant Life* (New York: Delacorte, 2003) 317; subsequent quotations from this novel will be cited parenthetically. *Plant Life* received the Sir Walter Raleigh Award for Fiction in 2003.

...“YOU CAN’T GO PUTTING A WHOLE LIFE IN ONE DRAWER, GOOD OR BAD.”
(*Moon Women* 307)

All three of Duncan’s novels reveal women trapped, whether within economic confines or within the confines of their own bodies. *The Big Beautiful*, a wonderfully brazen novel, dwells with intensity on the ways in which women readily become locked into roles defined, not only by surroundings, but also by appearance. Community and family can, perhaps unwittingly, become instruments of entrapment. In *Plant Life*, Laurel’s fate is determined by her own mother’s determination to shield her from what Laurel’s grandmother considered impossible dreams. Duncan knows how to find the heroic in families neither rich nor famous. She writes of the shifting currents of Appalachian families in transition. Hers are the stories of women who held their families together, as Laurel says in *Plant Life*: “Scanning the [book] titles around her, she knew she wouldn’t find any to match the stories she’d found in her friends. They hadn’t been written, might never be written, a thought that made her ache. Didn’t women like her mama . . . deserve to have their stories told, the same as Scarlett O’Hara or Jane Eyre?” (313). These are the women who hold down jobs, do family chores, brace for family crises. They usually do not become famous; their goals are often the survival of their children. In *Moon Women*, as she looks at her grandmother’s grave, Ashley ponders the old worn stones in the cemetery surrounded by mountains: “She was lucky, her granny was, because she didn’t need no marble or granite, or no words written in stone. Her markers walked the earth still, her children and grandchildren and great-grandchildren.”⁴ And from the grave, Marvelle sums up her vision of life: “you can’t go putting a whole life in one drawer, good or bad. They’s a whole chest full of drawers and all kinds of things in there, little scraps of happiness, wads of sorrow, every now and then a whole bolt of joy” (307).

COVER ILLUSTRATION BY MELODY CASSEN



Marvelle’s granddaughter worries as she ponders life without her grandmother:

It was too soon to forget, but Ashley was scared one day she wouldn’t be able to remember the sound of [her grandmother’s] voice, her laugh, or the way she looked when she was talking to the TV or how she rolled out biscuit dough. What would it take to remember? How would she do justice to that woman? Ashley wanted the world to know, the world needed to know. . . . Ashley wanted to say, look here, world, look who this woman was. She was something, by God. (323)

Such women were something. They are something. And Pamela Duncan is saying, “[L]ook here, world, look [at] these women.” She is determined to tell the stories not yet told about the people from home, her mountain home.

In October, 2009, Pamela Duncan interviewed Silas House at the Emory and Henry College Literary Festival. They planned then to “switch seats” for the *North Carolina Literary Review*’s special feature section on North Carolina Appalachian writers, and in January 2010, House prepared to interview Duncan. They got together and talked about her work and then followed up their conversation via emailed questions and answers.

PHOTOGRAPH BY FELICIA MITCHELL



ABOVE Pamela Duncan interviewing Silas House at the Emory and Henry Literary Festival in Oct. 2009

⁴ Pamela Duncan, *Moon Women* (New York: Delacorte, 2001) 322; subsequent quotations from this novel will be cited parenthetically. *Moon Women*, reviewed in *NCLR* 12 (2003), is a Southeastern Booksellers Association (now Southern Independent Booksellers Alliance) Award Finalist.