

TALLYING THE COST OF ADDICTION IN APPALACHIA

a review by Dale Neal

David Joy. *When These Mountains Burn*. G.P. Putnam's Sons, 2020.

Meagan Lucas. *Songbirds & Stray Dogs*. Main Street Rag, 2019.

DALE NEAL is a novelist, teacher, and veteran journalist. His most recent novel is *Appalachian Book of the Dead* (reviewed in this issue). His previous novels are award-winning *Cow Across America* (Novello Festival Press, 2009) and *The Half-Life of Home* (Casperian Books LLC, 2013; reviewed in *NCLR Online* 2014). He currently teaches fiction and nonfiction at Lenoir-Rhyne University's Asheville Center for Graduate Studies.

DAVID JOY was born in Charlotte, NC, and is the author of three other novels published by Putnam: *The Line That Held Us* (2018; reviewed in *NCLR Online* 2019), *Where All Light Tends to Go* (2015; reviewed in *NCLR Online* 2016), and *The Weight of This World* (2017), as well as the memoir *Growing Gills: A Fly Fisherman's Journey* (Bright Mountain Books, 2011), which was a finalist for the Reed Environmental Writing Award.

MEAGAN LUCAS has a BA in History from Wilfrid Laurier University, an MEd in Curriculum and Instruction from Ferris State University, and an MA in English and Creative Writing from Southern New Hampshire University. She teaches English and Creative Writing at Asheville-Buncombe Technical Community College.

Novelists have always wrestled with story and plot, knowing that something has to happen to keep a reader enthralled with a book. In *Aspects of the Novel* (1927), E.M. Forster sketched out the rough difference between story as one damn thing happening after another, much like raw life, and the added refinement of plot, where characters take actions based on impulses and feelings. But too often plot is a woodchipper that characters get tossed into, as the poet-turned-novelist Ocean Vuong has observed.* Good novels, whether tightly plotted or loosely lyrical, reflect their settings and society. Now in Appalachian writing, we find more writers wrestling with the region's ongoing opioid crisis. Addiction raises the narrative stakes, since addicts are doomed to repetitive, even boring, behaviors. They rarely change. A plot built on addiction feels like a merciless woodchipper that characters fall into.

Accomplished Appalachian novelists like David Joy of Cullowhee and debut novelist Meagan Lucas of Hendersonville show they can create cinematic page-turners with suspenseful, remorseless plots while still offering their characters a glimpse of possibility or the call for change. They aren't peddling happy endings, but emotionally true turning points.

In his fourth novel, ***When These Mountains Burn***, David Joy extends his mastery in a style that's become known as Appalachian Noir, exploring the low lives in the high mountains of

the Southern Appalachians. This is not the sentimental, stereotyped South of front porches and country churches, but a region hit hard by changes in American society, devastated by climate change and the economic impacts of tourism trying to replace lost manufacturing jobs. Out-of-control wildfires that ripped through the Pisgah and Nantahala National Forests in the fall of 2016 provide the smoldering backdrop for Joy's novel. But the real holocaust Joy portrays is the horrific consequences of drug addiction on broken families and small towns.

Raymond Mathis is a no-nonsense mountain man and former Forest Service employee, keeping company with his faithful hound dog, Tommy Two-Ton, which is pretty much the only family left to him. A widower, Mathis has poignant memories of his late wife, Doris, buried in a small family plot up the mountain, while his son, Ricky, has been lost to drug addiction. After endlessly bailing his son out of trouble, but only enabling Ricky's insatiable need for the needle in his arm, Mathis has largely given up. "I've thrown you ropes til my arms is give out and I ain't got no more to give," Mathis warns his son (56). But Ricky is caught up on the wrong side of a local drug ring, owing its sinister ringleader ten thousand dollars, which Mathis grudgingly coughs up. The face-off comes early, but we know that the mountain man and the drug dealer will tangle again. Meanwhile, drug agents are zeroing in on the operation, which they suspect has the backing of corrupt local law enforcement.

* Ocean Vuong, Reading at Seminary Co-op Bookstore, 3 Sept. 2019.



Joy expands into other characters' points of view. Denny Rattler, a member of the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians, is breaking into homes on the Qualla Boundary, trying to feed his own heroin habit. Through Denny, Joy gives a sense of the rush and relief that every addict is chasing. We see Denny finally score his fix and shoot up on the mountainside, as close to ecstasy as he can come: "Night-glow narrowed into starlight that shone like broken glass and he lifted his hands as if to dip his fingers into the firmament and wash them in that quicksilver shining. The world settled onto him like fog on a mountain, and, in that moment, was as close a thing to love as he'd felt in forever" (32).

Through Denny's eyes, we see the harrowing necessity of the addict's life as he rides around on a motor scooter, trying to rob a convenience store armed only with a candy bar. At least, Denny has the remnants of a conscience, a spirit not completely erased by his addiction. He was raised on the reservation with an uncle who had to sell a fake Indian heritage to tourists by "chiefing" – parading around

in the headdresses of Hollywood Indians rather than the authentic Cherokee culture. Denny's plight underscores how too much of authentic Appalachian life has been traded for a quick buck.

In short, fast-paced chapters, Joy keeps his narrative moving to its terrible ends, cranking up a page-turning tension along the way. There's heart-stopping action when an addict comes back to shuddering life, nodding off with a needle in his neck.

Joy stays true to Western North Carolina in his details of the landscape and the customs of our contemporary country. No log cabins or white chapels in the laurel, but delapidated trailers and dollar stores out on trash-strewn highways. Joy has a sharp eye for the class and economic differences that define our contemporary society, where mountain counties have long been left behind more prosperous urban centers.

Women can get short shrift in Joy's criminal world of weak but toxic masculinity. We first encounter a female, a nameless drug addict who is unmercifully and graphically beaten in a trailer. Mathis's late wife Doris is a mere memory. And there is

Leah, a green-eyed blonde who works in the sheriff's department and serves as a surrogate daughter for the lonely Mathis.

A good novelist is also a good reporter, and Joy offers up the kind of firsthand details that make for a believable and authentic story versus the Hollywood crime versions that can limit too many books. We learn for example a hunter's trick of affixing reflective strips on trees that can offer an easy exit up or down a mountainside, which will come in handy when Mathis decides it's time for rough mountain justice against the drug dealers who have stolen his boy from him.

Joy is after more than a quick crime caper. What fuels his novel is a burning righteous anger at the waste of the drug epidemic that has ravaged the small towns and mountain communities of the Appalachians, which has a long, sad history of poverty and national misunderstanding. Looking back, Mathis figures the problem started with the advent of television. Mountain folks understood they talked differently than other Americans. From the loss of local speech to the loss of familiar landscape as mountainsides are clear-cut to the loss of good manufacturing jobs as factories were closed and shipped offshore, the residents of Appalachia lost their sense of identity and worth. The promise of a quick drug fix seems to offer the only escape from a poverty of imagination.

There's no happy ending to such a tale, but Joy does offer a lyrical uplift to a broken family regathered if only in remembrance: "When the days grow shallow there are only the memories, the stories that remain

scattered like seed, the tales that bind us in this world” (255).

In her debut novel, ***Songbirds & Stray Dogs***, Meagan Lucas demonstrates a talent for page-turning plot worthy of more experienced writers. The title at first glance might sound sentimental, until you note the Pat Conroy epitaph: “Eternal life seemed sweet to folk who had eaten songbirds & stray dogs for dinner and who tried to coax measly crops from fields more granite than loam.”

Like Joy, Lucas has a clear-eyed vision for the costs of drug addiction, small town corruption, societal hypocrisy and male violence, while underscoring how women in particular can bear the brunt of those injustices. Her protagonist, Jolene, has been handed a raw deal from the get-go, abandoned by her addict mother, Leah, on the doorstep of a rigid aunt, Rachel, who never lets the girl forget her background. Rachel’s Christian charity comes with a frown, and Jolene lives in years of fear of her aunt’s perpetual frown of disapproval.

Plain, plump, with crooked teeth, Jolene, with her sweet, if naïve, personality, draws the unwanted attention of some no-good men, including the loser shrimp fisherman who runs off to sea rather than take fatherhood responsibly. Fired from her restaurant job, kicked out of the house by her aunt, who is mortified by the pregnancy, Jolene hitches a ride with a supposed Good Samaritan from Beaufort, SC, to the hills of Hendersonville, NC. But her would-be rescuer turns out to be an ongoing stalker.

In the course of this novel, Lucas isn’t afraid to put her characters, if

not into the woodchipper, certainly through a cruel wringer. Jolene will face and survive an attempted rape, physical assault with a hair-dryer in a bathtub, choking, attempted drowning, even a house fire. But Lucas steers clear of melodrama by grounding her characters in physical detail, particularly Jolene’s pregnancy with its morning sickness, strange pains and dreams and the added bulk: “It had been creepy at first, feeling something moving inside her, something she didn’t control. But then the movement found a pattern and it was easy to imagine it was a person. A tiny person getting excited when Jolene ate something sweet or doing a dance for her attention when she lay down at night” (152).

Lucas expands her cast of characters to include Chuck Hannon, a recovering addict who runs a landscaping business in Hendersonville. He’s caring for his nephew, Cash, who’s been abandoned by his mother. When Jolene shows up in town lost and alone, Chuck comes to her rescue, the one good man in a world of predators.



COURTESY OF MEGAN LUCAS

Lucas is particularly good at sketching out the authentic details of Appalachian lowlife, that ever-present scourge once known as white trash. Roy Gamble makes a creepy villain, menacing to Chuck even though he’s half Chuck’s size. Lucas isn’t afraid to show the world toxic testosterone at its worst.

Evil masquerades its banality in Roy’s boss, the nondescript drug kingpin Jackson:

if a person didn’t know who they were dealing with, Jackson would fool them. He looked chubby and soft in his corduroy jacket and unbuttoned thermal undershirt but the broad shoulders hinted at the sneaky strength underneath. Too much beard and too little hair covering his shiny dome, he was a holdover from a decade past, like almost everything else in Southern Appalachia. (71)

Chuck will find himself beaten and thrashed, with everyone he holds dear under threat from these drug dealers.

Two lost souls trying to find their way in a fallen world, Jolene and Chuck find themselves drawn inextricably together, but Lucas keeps their growing relationship believable and authentic. Abandoned by relatives, cheated by society, victims of their own bad decisions, these characters not only endure their circumstances but begin to prevail, forming a new family. Lucas taps into the novel’s deep history of a naïve and innocent protagonist tested by society and circumstance. Jolene escapes the woodchipper of plot to make her own life and way in the world. *Songbirds & Stray Dogs* is a satisfying read, and Lucas proves herself a writer to watch in this ever-changing Appalachia. ■