

GIVING FICTIONAL SHAPE TO HISTORY

a review by Kristina L. Knotts

Robert Morgan. *As Rain Turns to Snow and Other Stories*. Frankfort, KY: Broadstone Books, 2017.

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ROBERT MORGAN is from Hendersonville, NC, and is now living in Ithaca, NY, where he is the Kappa Alpha Professor of English at Cornell University. He has published fourteen collections of poetry, nine books of fiction, and three of nonfiction. He has been inducted into the North Carolina Literary Hall of Fame and the Fellowship of Southern Writers, and his other honors include the Thomas Wolfe Memorial Literary Award, the O. Henry short story award, the History Award Medal from the DAR, the R. Hunt Parker Memorial Award for significant contributions to North Carolina literature from the North Carolina Literary and Historical Association, and the North Carolina Award for Literature. *NCLR* has published his poetry and fiction, interviews with him, and articles about his work for many years.

As readers may have noticed, Appalachia has garnered attention lately – journalists, politicians, pollsters, all have tried to tap into the values and needs of rural Americans. Robert Morgan’s latest collection of short stories, *As Rain Turns to Snow*, would be a good place to start. Similar to Morgan’s other writings, this work shows the diversity of life in Appalachia, in particular his own postage stamp of soil, the Green River area in Henderson County, NC. This collection, however, is not a study in demographics. His stories share a strong sense of characters rooted in the geography, tradition and folklore of western North Carolina. More so than some of Morgan’s previous fiction, many of these stories look at the difficulties posed by chronic illness and aging, but all show Morgan’s impressive range as a writer.

An inductee of the North Carolina Literary Hall of Fame, Morgan is often praised for his female characters, most notably in *Gap Creek* (1999). Many of the works in this collection, however, depict men experiencing significant transitions in life, whether it be starting over after war or facing the end of life. Two works in particular, “The Burning Chair” and “The Calm,” portray older men who are alcoholics and whose addiction isolates them emotionally and socially. In “Burning Chair,” the collection’s opening story, a narrator describes in present tense as a man’s cigarette burns into his armchair while he sleeps. As the chair slowly catches on fire, the narrator explores the setting: the sleeping man, Elmer, probably a World War II veteran, is alone, weakened by illness and surrounded by clutter: stacks of books and magazines, bills, a vast array of medicine bottles and painkillers as well as a

few gin bottles. Morgan describes the man’s isolation and vulnerability thus: “Where the rim or the bottom of a bottle is found by the firelight it seems the wet eye of an animal watching from the floor or the corner” (5). Morgan’s description is dispassionate but manages to invite empathy as the reader waits for Elmer to be rescued.

“The Calm” also explores a man’s vulnerability but, unlike Elmer, this character, the narrator’s father, violently defends his right to drink himself to death, guarding his downfall with a .44 magnum. Unlike Elmer in “The Burning Chair,” who seems alone until the story’s end, the father in this story rigidly defends his self-destruction in full view of his immediate family. The father’s defiance against accepting help from his son begs the question that any family member would wrestle with: “Did Daddy have a right to die any way he wanted to? What was my ultimate responsibility? Was Daddy in his right mind enough to know what he was doing? Was I guilty already for not taking the pistol away from him?” (167). As Morgan’s story gives visceral punch to the father’s anger and self-destruction, the narrator’s son struggles to both support and intervene with his father.

As Rain Turns to Snow also confronts aging and the transitions it presents, as seen in the death of a spouse in “Halycon Acres” or generational rifts in “Bird Wars.” Two stories, “Dans Les Hautes Montagnes De Caroline” and “Happy Valley,” depict senior citizens in nursing homes. While earlier Morgan stories have described aging characters such as “Death Crown” (from *The Balm of Gilead Tree: New and Selected Stories*, 1999), these new stories



articulate the aging person's perspective. Aging, the stories suggest, presents another kind of isolation. For Annie in "Happy Valley," her dementia causes her confusion about why she's confined to a nursing home. (Readers of Morgan's *Road from Gap Creek* (2013) will be pleased to hear about Annie again, though displeased to see her in this condition!) "Dans Les Hautes Montagnes De Caroline" is narrated by Stephen Morris, a senior citizen disabled by a stroke that causes him pain and has taken his ability to walk and communicate effectively to others. The story's first sentence, like much of Morgan's short fiction – establishes the conflict and the pathos immediately. Stephen says, "If Dannie would come home I could tell her" (83). Estranged from his daughter Dannie and with his second wife in the hospital and robbed of the ability to communicate, Stephen struggles to maintain his dignity in

his current setting. Like Annie in "Happy Valley," this story too recalls an earlier Morgan work, the poem "Lost Flower" from the book *Groundwork* (1978), which recounts the journey American botanist Asa Gray took during the nineteenth century to find the flower that French botanist Andre Michaux

cataloged a century prior. "Lost Flower" describes a flower thought to flourish in the higher elevations, but in fact flowered in profusion in the foothills and on the slopes. As Stephen tells us, the things we need are sometimes nearer to us than we are aware. This story's added pathos comes from a character who can't adequately communicate his needs and who is alienated from his family. At the story's end, Stephen contemplates the mountain landscape he misses and while the story in some sense gives voice to a bitter man, we also see, as we do in so much of Morgan's work, how his characters' humanity is nourished by their love of the landscape around them.

As *Rain Turns to Snow* is not just about aging and its extreme challenges, however. Many of its works return to Morgan's reliable but nevertheless powerful themes about characters' connection to the natural world as well as the

dignity of work. Many of his most evocative pieces in this collection are those set in the past. "The Dulcimer Maker" is set just after World War Two and portrays a young mother, Annie (not the same Annie from "Happy Valley"), whose child is stricken with a high fever. Her situation is problematic: she and her husband, a dulcimer maker, live far from town and have no vehicle. Annie's husband continues to labor over making his latest dulcimer, oblivious and seemingly unconcerned about his child's feverish state. Her brother and brother-in-law are preoccupied with harvesting their bean crop. With dread, she urges her volatile brother Edward to drive her to town so she can take her baby to the doctor. Ironically, Edward, whose persistent anger, according to his family, is tied to an untreated fever as a child tells Annie that "[f]ever . . . never hurt a baby" (65). "The Dulcimer Maker" presents a study in kinds of work: Annie and the doctor who treats her child both work incredibly hard to do what must be done for others while the men in Annie's immediate family are constrained by their own duties and, to some degree, their own self-interest. The young mother's heroics in "The Dulcimer Maker" recall Julie Richards' work ethic and determination in *Gap Creek*. "Distant Blue Hills" is placed just after "The Dulcimer Maker" and portrays a young white settler who is farming and hunting, all while hiding from natives who wander by, one with a blond scalp in his belt. Set in 1752 and written in present tense, the story imagines the mountains when the first

European settlers farmed its hills where an uneasy peace with the native peoples existed.

The collection's final story, "The Jaguar," also highlights Morgan's penchant for setting his works in the past. This one, set just after the end of the American Revolution recalls some of Morgan's best historical fiction like "Brightness New and Welcoming" and "The Tracks of Chief de Soto" (both published in *The Balm of Gilead Tree*). "The Jaguar" recalls Morgan's recurring theme of the courage of starting anew. This story shows a young person starting out alone in the mountains, working, trapping, hunting, building and fixing, making way for a home. The story's protagonist, Nathaniel, back from the Revolutionary War, dreams of gaining

success and making his fortune and marrying a woman in Virginia he'd encountered. However, as he goes further into the forest, he "hoped the trail would lead into the mountains and all he'd have to do was follow it" (170). Of course, the trail isn't so clear, literally and figuratively. Finding supplies and hanging onto his property prove challenging – his horse is stolen and trapping is difficult without multiple traps. The conflicts and difficulties he encounters – human in origin or natural – show that he must adjust his thinking. His persistence and the help he receives from a Coosa woman he encounters give him hope that he can carve out a place for himself. Morgan's characters, whether it be Annie from "The Dulcimer

Maker" or Nathaniel in "The Jaguar," keep persisting through hardships – work sees them through.

Morgan's fiction is often praised for its ability to give shape to our historical past. The strength of this collection, and certainly visible in so much of his other works, is providing a narrative for histories we once knew or just barely know. Whether it be the stories of those confined to nursing homes or the earliest settlers of North Carolina, Morgan's fiction gives dignity and a voice to ordinary citizens who want a chance to see their dreams take shape. Like Nathaniel in "The Jaguar," Morgan can take a tiny, fading trail in the mountains and provide a vibrant, authentic story. ■

WOLFE AWARD GOES TO DEBUT NOVELIST

Julia Franks, who grew up in the Appalachian Mountains, is the 2017 winner of the Thomas Wolfe Memorial Literary Award from the Western North Carolina Historical Association for her debut novel, *Over the Plain Houses* (Hub City Press, 2016). The novel is set in western North Carolina during the Depression; the main character, USDA agent Virginia Furman, works to help the mountain people adapt their homes and work to the modern world. The Selection Panel noted, "Without being the least bit sentimental or giving in to any stereotypes about Appalachian people, [*Over the Plain Houses*] tells an utterly compelling story that is deeply rooted in place."* This novel has also been named one of *Bustle's* Fifteen Great Appalachian Novels and was included on *Atlanta Journal Constitution's* Ten Best Southern Books of 2016. Franks, who lives in Atlanta, was also named Georgia Author of the Year in 2017 for the category of Literary Fiction. She formerly taught AP English at The Lovett School in Atlanta and is the founder of Loose Canon, an online tool for teachers and students that promotes free-choice reading in the classroom and builds literacy and communication skills in students of all ages. ■



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* "Thomas Wolfe Memorial Literary Award Goes to Julia Franks," *A Guide to Hendersonville, NC*, 11 Oct. 2017. [web](#).

ABOVE Julia Franks with the Western North Carolina Historical Association President Alan Tarleton and the Wolfe Award reading committee chair, Michael Sartisky, Asheville, NC, 11 Nov. 2017