

NORTH CAROLINA *Disability Literature*

Just Some of the “many experiences of disability” in North Carolina Literature

by Casey Kayser, Guest Editor

I am very pleased to present the special feature section of the *North Carolina Literary Review's* 2024 print issue on North Carolina Disability Literature. It represents the culmination of a nearly two-years-long process, with much hard work on the part of the writers and artists featured inside, as well as the *NCLR* editorial team and staff. We are especially proud that the issue features the work of many artists and writers with disabilities and that it highlights disability experiences throughout.

The feature section begins with an essay by Delia Steverson which illuminates the life of Mary Herring Wright, as told through her memoirs *Sounds like Home: Growing Up Black and Deaf in the South* (1999, 2019) and *Far from Home: Memories of World War II and Afterward* (2005). As Steverson notes, Wright's life writings are worth examining for their literary merit but are especially important for their documentation of a Black deaf Southern woman's experiences from childhood and adolescence in the Jim Crow South to adulthood post World War II. They are also some of the few existing historical accounts of life and education at the North Carolina State School for the Blind and Deaf, which Wright attended from 1935 to 1941. Steverson's essay is significant as well, for recovering the work of a neglected North Carolina writer and centering the experiences of a Black deaf Southern woman.

The section also includes Audrey Jennifer Smith's interview with James Tate Hill, a writer who was diagnosed with Leber's hereditary optic neuropathy at the age of sixteen, a condition that rendered him legally blind. His recent memoir *Blind Man's Bluff*

(2021) outlines his journey from hiding his blindness from family and friends for fifteen years to finally disclosing it and reaching self-acceptance. The piece is paired with art by RaeAnn MacDonagh, an artist who was born legally blind and lives with optic atrophy and cone/rod dystrophy caused by a rare genetic mutation, which leads to low vision and trouble differentiating colors.

Next, in Ashley Harris's essay “Buy Now! The Summer of My Shoe Obsession,” a finalist in the 2023 Alex Albright Creative Nonfiction Prize contest, the author shares how one particular shoe brand and style helped her to walk better with her multiple sclerosis symptoms. She details how she worked through an unhealthy shoe buying obsession to ultimately find a happier, more balanced life. Art by Max Herbert, who lives with the chronic pain disorder fibromyalgia; Meniere's Disease, which causes hearing loss and vertigo; ADHD; and clinical depression, punctuates Harris's piece.

Two essays of literary criticism end the section. First, in a fascinating essay, Taylor Hagood explores Ron Rash's novel *Serena's* focus on the wound and wounding, which evokes the historical practice of *Mensur* fencing among male elite university students in early twentieth-century Germany, in which facial flesh wounds were seen as badges of honor. Hagood argues that Rash's use of the wound “captures and conveys the novel's dynamics of courage, cruelty, exploitation, endurance, and vengeance within a larger poetics of ablement and disablement.” The essay is complemented by illustrations by Joan Mansfield and historical photographs from the digital collections of Hunter Library at Western Carolina University.

Finally, Donna Summerlin's essay on Lee Smith's novel *Guests on Earth*. Smith was inspired to write her novel by the history of Asheville's Highland Hospital, a mental health facility perhaps best remembered for the 1948 fire which claimed the lives of Zelda Fitzgerald and eight other female patients. Summerlin explores how Smith's novel is in dialogue with the hospital's history and larger issues related to the mental health treatment of women. Her essay is interspersed with Catherine Edgerton's mixed media art, including a mixed media and stained glass piece called Giant Kaleidoscope, which calls to mind Smith's symbolic use of the image of a kaleidoscope throughout *Guests on Earth*. This artist, featured with another essay on Smith, in *NCLR* 2021, helped to create the Durham Art Asylum, “which builds creative pathways and reduces isolation among folks who struggle with mental health and addiction,” according to her website.

I would like to thank the authors I collaborated with for their hard work in drafting and revising, and for considering my feedback throughout the editing process. I learned so much from their adept research and compelling writing! I did not know much about *Mensur* fencing practices or the history of the Highland Hospital fire, and it was eye-opening to learn about the racial and other dynamics that shaped deaf education in the early twentieth century. I would also like to thank *NCLR* Editor Margaret Bauer for her guidance and express my appreciation to the *NCLR* editorial staff for their efforts as well. It has been an honor to serve as Guest Editor for the 2024 special feature sections and I am grateful to have had this opportunity to learn about and honor the voices and experiences of people with disabilities. ■

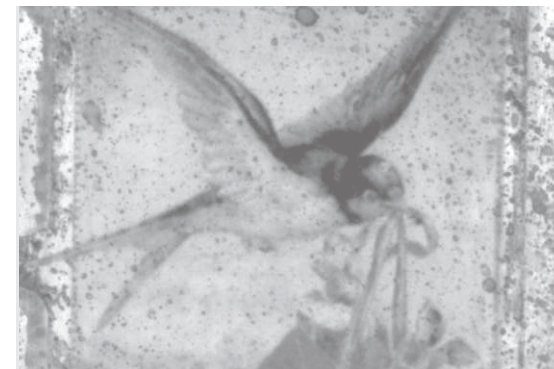
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