

HISTORICAL TRUTH IN FICTIONAL FORM

a review by
Rebecca Godwin

**Miriam Herin. *A Stone for Bread*.
Livingston: University of West
Alabama Livingston Press, 2015.**

**Robert Morgan. *Chasing the North
Star*. Chapel Hill, NC: Algonquin
Books, 2016.**

**Terry Roberts. *That Bright Land*.
New York: Turner Publishing
Company, 2016.**

Read more about reviewer and NCLR editorial board member REBECCA GODWIN with her interview with Robert Morgan, published in the special feature section of this issue.

ROBERT MORGAN was born in Hendersonville, NC. He is the Kappa Alpha Professor of English at Cornell University, but he has returned to his native state over the years to teach as a visiting professor in various North Carolina universities. The author of numerous books of fiction, poetry, and nonfiction, his work has been featured often in NCLR.



In accomplished literary voices, three North Carolina writers draw on history in their latest novels, portraying the ravages of war and human cruelty as well as resilience and the healing effects of love. Robert Morgan's *Chasing the North Star*, Terry Roberts's *That Bright Land*, and Miriam Herin's *A Stone for Bread* take us to dark days. Antebellum American slavery, post-Civil War murders in the North Carolina mountains, and a Holocaust death camp bring us face-to-face with "the worst humankind has to offer," as Roberts's protagonist judges what he saw during the Civil War (281). Yet humor in Morgan's and Roberts's narratives and references to the literary arts' significance in all three books mitigate the anguish to some extent. Sharing motifs such as dreams and religion, these fine novels shape our sense of history, creating the "community across time" that Morgan articulates as a special purpose of his work.¹

***Chasing the North Star* is Robert Morgan's** seventh novel and his first dealing with American slavery. One inspiration for this fictional

escaping slaves' journey northward comes from Morgan's family history, as recounted in his short story "Little Willie," published in *The Balm of Gilead Tree: New and Selected Stories* (1999). In the 1850s, his great-grandfather's family gave food to four slaves who traversed the Pace farm in Henderson County while fleeing, probably from Georgia or South Carolina owners. They left with the Pace family a crippled child who could no longer run. To avoid charges of harboring an escaped slave (the Fugitive Slave Act had passed in 1845), the Paces pretended that they had bought Willie, who died not many years later when hit by a falling tree. Hearing the story and seeing Willie's grave marker in the family cemetery brought slavery's realities home to Morgan, driving him to put himself into the place of individuals running toward freedom.

Morgan writes from both male and female slaves' perspectives but gives more chapters to the young man, who at eighteen sets out from the South Carolina foothills after his owner, wrongly accusing him of stealing a bible and Dickens's *David Copperfield* from the white

¹ Tal Stanley, Interview with Robert Morgan, *Appalachian Journal* 29.4 (2002): 497.

ABOVE **Robert Morgan (second from left) with writers Wayne Caldwell and Ron Rash and Malaprop's Bookstore owner Emöke B'Racz, at Malaprop's, Asheville, NC, 17 Apr. 2016**

family's library, whips him brutally. As did many slaves, Jonah Williams learns to read by listening to white children's lessons, and the deception the white mistress practices when she keeps Jonah's literacy secret from her husband reflects the moral miasma that human ownership created, as slave narrators such as Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs make clear. Morgan comments in a *Bookwatch* interview that Jonah's ability to read people aids his successful escape, for he must determine how to manipulate individual whites, many of whom consider themselves fair-minded in their upholding of legal and social institutions.²

While still in the South, Jonah knows to speak in dialect, countering the Standard English Morgan uses to convey the runaway's thoughts in his third-person limited omniscient chapters. Jonah's keen reading of the natural world also facilitates his movement, with Morgan's lyrical descriptions of physical landscape reminding fans of his poetry and earlier Appalachian fiction that he is a master at detailing nature's wonders and power.

Jonah gains a helpmate in his escape efforts when a stout female slave follows him from North Carolina's mountains. Worldly-wise Angel, tired of being her master's sexual playmate, is often hilarious in her putdowns of Jonah's posturings. When he covers himself in clay, hoping that people seeing him float in a stolen boat on the French Broad River will think him a white man, Angel thinks, "a colored boy covered with clay didn't look like anything but a colored boy covered

with clay" (112). Her six chapters of first-person narration and her witty comebacks provide a counterpoint to serious-minded Jonah's accounts of their travails, adventures they sometimes experience separately, for Jonah leaves Angel four times, sure that he can travel more quickly and safely alone. Their private getaway-and-pursuit escapades parallel their more serious flight from bondage and slowly evolve into a love story as well.

While the runaways' episodic encounters lend a picaresque aspect to the book, Morgan does not diminish the dangers Jonah and Angel face as they steal food to avoid starvation, work wherever they must (including in a Virginia whorehouse, where horrific scenes occur), break out of jail, and drop through the trapdoor of a train boxcar. The humor and adventure simply make the grim story of fleeing the American South of 1851 more bearable. Jonah's nightmares of being pursued by dogs and daydreams of having the rights of a white man, Angel's sexual use, their dodging of bullets, and the methodical pacing of sentences that Morgan uses to portray Jonah's careful movement when detection seems imminent make *Chasing the North Star* an authentic portrayal of this turbulent period.

The book's richness includes as well religion's ambiguous role in antebellum America. Jonah, for instance, throws away a precious penny because the \$6.66 that he stole from his mother represents the Mark of the Beast, according to Revelations. Yet he knows that God's plan makes no sense and

questions, as have other slave narrators, "If Jesus loved everybody the same way, why had he made some masters and some Negroes?" (47). Morgan nods to Christianity's positive impact when a white minister working with the Underground Railroad befriends Jonah, printing a false document saying that he has paid five hundred dollars for his own freedom. And along the way of his journey, Jonah claims several different biblical names as he shifts his identity.

Terry Roberts's second novel tells of violent times in Madison County, NC, where Roberts grew up and where Morgan's runaways might have camped as they headed north. *That Bright Land* takes its title from the nineteenth-century American song "Wayfaring Stranger," a lament that could describe Morgan's escapees' travels through "this world of woe" on their way to "that bright land" of freedom. *That Bright Land* encompasses the Shelton Laurel massacre that Ron Rash depicts in his novel *The World Made Straight* (2006) but goes beyond those true Civil War killings to later fictional murders. Roberts's historical references flow beautifully into his storyline that,

PHOTOGRAPH BY LINDA FOX; COURTESY OF NC DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL AND CULTURAL RESOURCES



² D.G. Martin, Interview with Robert Morgan, *North Carolina Bookwatch*, 15 July 2016.

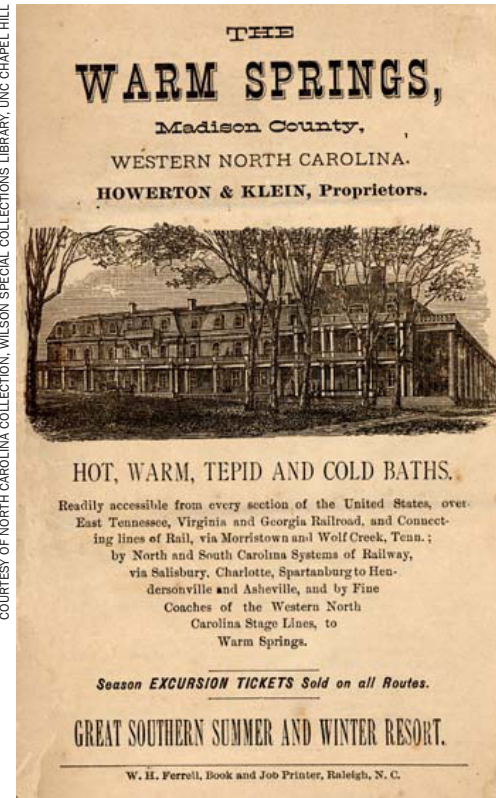
RIGHT Terry Roberts receiving his second Sir Walter Raleigh Award for Fiction for *That Bright Land*, Raleigh, 18 Nov. 2016; presented by Judith Williams, representing the Historical Book Club of North Carolina

like Morgan's, counters violence with humor as well as a love match showing humans' need for home.

Roberts's story comments not just on the past but also on the demons facing soldiers of every war. Former Union soldier Jacob Ballard, twenty-four, arrives in the Southern Appalachian towns of Barnard and Warm Springs in 1866, sent there by his uncle, North Carolina governor Zebulon Vance, to investigate the continuous killings of local men who fought for the North. On the pretense that his main task is to investigate federal disability claim fraud, Ballard interviews Yankee veterans in the home of clerk of court Obadiah Campbell, a man whose two sons served in the 64th North Carolina Regiment. In 1863, this Confederate troop murdered at Shelton Laurel at least thirteen males thought to be Union sympathizers or military defectors, the youngest a lad of thirteen. Ballard, assuming that the current violence might relate to those civilian killings, learns the true story, beginning with the reality that many mountain men went off to war on a lark, just to see the world, and left the battlefield without considering themselves deserters. Readers learn historical fact along with Ballard, including the real names of Confederate colonels and the horrific events that led to and resulted from orders to quell the insurgency that Shelton Laurel outliers represented to Confederate leaders. In the Northern army, Ballard himself had been on the same kind of firing squad that 64th soldiers found themselves on, ordered to murder acquaintances, neighbors, even kin.

He concludes that the shooters will "spend the rest of their lives hating the men they shot," for that is "the only way to survive with your mind in one piece" (72). But the unraveling of this detective story proves that hatred cannot necessarily keep soldiers' minds intact. War and firing squads might just as readily "[eat] the soul out of a man" (216), leaving him fighting after the peace is signed.

Roberts complicates the murder mystery when Ballard finds lingering sentiment for the Lost Cause of the Confederacy and quickly recognizes its ties to religion. Obadiah Campbell considers his son killed by Yankee enemies a "Christian martyr" (34) and in fact feels that the Unionist murders are "the playing out of God's will" (157). When Campbell shares the death letter's assurance that his boy "was not afraid to die, because he had made peace with God above and was ready to ascend to his maker," Ballard thinks of the many such letters he wrote on battlefields and in Union hospitals, "for men who died cursing God and screaming in pain. I had heard the chaplains natter on about a *good death* so many times that it made me sick in my stomach" (34). The Campbell family's ties to Abednego Rogers, Shepherd of the Mountains, represent Southern religion's links to Lost Cause ideology, and Ballard's initial mispronunciation of the evangelist's name as "Abedbug Rogers" (35) reflects the book's negative assessment of religion as it introduces the humor that lightens the murder and intrigue. Rogers's camp meeting late in the novel draws people continuing to



COURTESY OF NORTH CAROLINA COLLECTION, WILSON SPECIAL COLLECTIONS LIBRARY, UNC CHAPEL HILL

use Christianity to rationalize their evil deeds. Rather than institutionalized religion, nature reflects the baptism of Jacob Ballard into a new identity as saved man when he and young war widow Sarah Freeman consummate their love on a creek bank, feeding each other water from cupped hands. Ballard falls in love not only with Sarah but also with the natural beauty of these mountains where he was born. This place that he earlier thought as savage as Obadiah Campbell describes it becomes the home that Ballard wants to save from carpetbagging opportunists by the novel's end.

Dreams, humor, and literary references in *That Bright Land* show

TERRY ROBERTS was born in Asheville and raised in Weaverville, NC. He is the Director of the National Paideia Center at UNC Chapel Hill. His debut novel *A Short Time to Stay Here* (Ingalls Publishing Group, 2012) won the Millie Morris award for Southern fiction and both that novel and this second novel won the Raleigh Award for best new fiction by a North Carolina writer. Read an interview with Terry Roberts in *NCLR* 2014

ABOVE Flyer for the Warm Springs Hotel in Madison, NC, circa 1880

Roberts to be a deft weaver of action, characterization, and local culture. Ballard's recurring nightmare of the wartime surgery that saved part of his mangled left hand paints a true portrait of Civil War medicine, and Sarah's secretly "eating" that dream nods to folklore, an aspect of the novel complementing the convincing portrayal of setting in every way: dialogue, landscape and townscape, moonshining, fiddle-playing, foodways, poke tonics, sheep-shearing, attitudes toward law and wives and neighbors – all hit a perfect note of authenticity. Like Morgan in his escaping slaves' story, Roberts injects humor to create character, make suffering tolerable, and keep readers engaged with the full range of human emotion the story depicts. Sarah's young son Sammy adds a delightful element to the narrative, as he presses Ballard for a position as his investigative assistant and naively fails to understand the sexual attraction that develops between his mother and this young man who urges him to stop cursing and saying "ain't." Sammy's grief for the loss of his soldier father also parallels Ballard's confrontation of his own sorrow for his father's death. And Roberts's many literary references – to Shakespeare, Whitman (as war nurse), Dickens, Faulkner (in the character of Tom Boon, who smells like the bear grease lubricating his rifle) – join connections to American history, such as references to Lincoln's assassin, to situate this place and time within the larger world.

A Stone for Bread, Greensboro writer **Miriam Herin's** second novel, successfully intertwines time

periods extending from 1917 to 1997 to create complex historical fiction that is as much detective story as Roberts's *That Bright Land*. Chapters weave back and forth in time, with three third-person point-of-view narrators experiencing or learning about the sad cruelties of war and their aftermath in continued political upheaval. With parallel imagery creating smooth transitions from Paris to a Nazi death camp in Austria to Chapel Hill or Shelby, NC, Herin reinforces the commonality of human emotions across time and space. She also highlights the role of the spoken and written word in the long arc of history, with memory and the impossibility of truly knowing other people forming additional thematic threads.

Beginning with World War I's effects on four-year-old Rene, who innocently buries in his French village a grenade that kills his older brother, Herin establishes the violence, guilt, and self-confrontation that form, along with poetry, the novel's core. The second chapter shifts to 1997 North Carolina, with English graduate student Rachel Singer learning of Henry Beam, a former Duke University student and teacher who becomes the book's third narrative consciousness. Shifting then sequentially from Henry to Rene to Rachel, Herin reveals the story of the Holocaust poetry that connects these three people. Ironically, the poetry of *A Stone for Bread* links this book to Robert Morgan, whose fifteenth poetry collection appeared in 2015. And readers familiar with Morgan's "Go Gentle," a reply to Dylan Thomas's "Do Not Go Gentle" appearing in *Terroir* (2011), wonder whether

PHOTOGRAPH BY TOM HERIN



Henry Beam's poem "Going Gentle" nods to Morgan as well as the Welsh poet.

Dreams and religion come into play, reminiscent of *Chasing the North Star* and *That Bright Land*, as Rene realizes that his brother's death was not strictly a wartime accident, as the local notary recorded, but his own fault. Dreams of his brother standing armless and bleeding correspond to those Roberts's Ballard and Morgan's Jonah endure, but Rene's having them as a child portends that the earlier books' nineteenth-century horrors will culminate in darker brutality in *A Stone for Bread*. Rene's *ange noir*, or black angel, makes him turn for solace to both reading and religion. Obsessed with death, he studies anatomy and chloroforms small animals before gently cutting them open. But he turns from science when he senses Christ's arms reaching to him from a church crucifix and connects this sign to priests' assurance that his brother's death was God's will. Rene's time in seminary results

in institutionalized religion's coming off as badly as it does in *That Bright Land*: church leaders decide that Rene's detached personality makes him unfit for the priesthood, and they conspire to throw him out of school. Their mistake becomes painfully evident as Rene's life unfolds. When France falls to the Third Reich, Rene is arrested for unknowingly transferring messages among resisters as he works at a Paris hotel. Comforting fellow victims of the Nazi regime, he takes on a pastoral role, giving his morsels of food to others packed into train cars or starving in the Mauthausen slave labor camp in Austria, holding dying men in his arms. Rene concludes that he has been "chosen for this dark journey" (141), and after toiling in Mauthausen's horrific rock quarry, he uses his earlier scientific study in its hospital, operating on sick prisoners not yet murdered with the camp's famous phenol injections. That he is "willing to pay" (98), obviously for his brother's death, makes a poignant, complicated comment on religion, especially as it relates to the Holocaust.

A Stone for Bread focuses particularly on the role of artist as historical witness, with narrator/writer Henry Beam changing his youthful belief that "the artist . . . observes history, comments on it, perhaps reveals history," but does so apolitically (79). Escaping a childhood of poverty in Cleveland County, NC, through a Duke University education, Beam goes to Paris on a fellowship in the 1950s, when the Communist party is gaining power. He gets involved with a political movement led by a man many consider a fascist, falls in love with a French shop girl devoted to the revolutionary group, and confronts his own capacity for violence during a riot. Skillfully bringing plot lines together, Herin slowly reveals the connection of the 1950s neo-fascist leader to poetry written in the Mauthausen death camp, poetry that Rene recites to Beam not long after stopping him from killing a boy. When Beam publishes that poetry in 1963, he does so with a political purpose, as "witness to human depravity and the murder of souls" (299). The cycle of literary witness continues when

Rachel, who also has confronted truths of her own past and present while learning of Henry's story and Rene's, decides to search for more truth concerning the poems' composition, even if she discovers additional human degeneracy along the way.

Herin's research into the Mauthausen death camp as well as into 1950s political unrest in Europe and Great Depression rural Cleveland County creates an impressive novel whose portrayal of deeply felt human connection makes tolerable the insufferable evil it recounts. Vivid descriptions of place and convincing characterization draw readers into each plot strand, and her characters' realizations that people recast their identity in response to events deepen readers' understanding of the world's complexity.

Henry Beam's conviction that he must use his art to tell truths of the past applies to Herin, Roberts, and Morgan. Bringing history to life, they instruct as well as entertain in first-rate storytelling style. ■



PHOTOGRAPH BY TOM HERIN

ABOVE LEFT AND ABOVE **Miriam Herin reading and signing books with Gregg Cusick** (his last book reviewed in *NCLR Online* 2016), at Quail Ridge Books in Raleigh, NC, 15 Jan. 2016