

REFLECTION AGAINST THE DARKNESS

a review by Barbara Bennett

Jill McCorkle. *Old Crimes and Other Stories*. Algonquin Books, 2024.

BARBARA BENNETT is a Professor of English at NC State University. Her books include *Understanding Jill McCorkle* (University of South Carolina Press, 2000) and *Comic Visions, Female Voices: Contemporary Women Novelists and Southern Humor* (Louisiana State University Press, 1998). She is a frequent contributor to *NCLR*, including an interview with Lee Smith and Jill McCorkle in *NCLR* 2016, an essay on the adaptation of Daniel Wallace's *Big Fish* in *NCLR Online* 2019, an article on McCorkle's *Ferris Beach* in 2006, and several reviews. She was also a finalist in the 2021 Alex Albright Creative Nonfiction contest in *NCLR* 2021.

JILL MCCORKLE is the author of thirteen books, including *Creatures of Habit* (Algonquin Books, 2001; reviewed in *NCLR* 2003), *Final Vinyl Days and Other Stories* (Algonquin Books, 1998; reviewed in *NCLR* 1999), and *Life After Life* (Algonquin Books, 2013; reviewed in *NCLR Online* 2014), all published by Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill. She has won numerous awards for her fiction, including the New England Booksellers Award, the John Dos Passos Prize for Excellence in Literature, the R. Hunt Parker Memorial Award for Literature, and the North Carolina Award for Literature. She was inducted into the North Carolina Literary Hall of Fame in 2018. She is a faculty member of the Bennington College Writing Seminars and a participating faculty member in the MFA program at NC State. She grew up in Lumberton, NC, and now lives in Hillsborough.

Jill McCorkle tells us immediately what her new book of short stories is about with the epigraph, a quotation by Arthur Miller: "Maybe all one can do is hope to end up with the right regrets." Regrets, secrets, fears, and lies all populate these new stories, McCorkle's fifth collection of stories, to add to her seven novels. So, McCorkle is not a stranger to the short story genre, but this one feels a bit different.

If you expect to read about madcap adventures of an avenging woman, as in "Crash Diet," or the whimsy of the characters named Adam and Eve who fall in love at a slapstick wedding in "Paradise," you won't find that here. McCorkle is in her sixties now, and her perspective has grown more serious, sadder even. In "Low Tones," Loris Ward bemoans her postmenopausal body with "No one told her she'd lose her butt" and "Hair thins and disappears, and skin sags and also thins, bleeds and bruises over nothing" (35). A twenty- or thirty-something writer (even a twenty-/thirty-year-old Jill McCorkle) would likely not write these words. These are the reflections of a woman who has a different – older, wiser, sadder – perspective on life, which makes her writing richer.

McCorkle told me that this change has been coming for a long time, but she needed the confidence to make it, and we saw the beginnings of that change in her most recent novel, *Hieroglyphics* (2020). In a review of that novel, I wrote for *NCLR*, I commented that it "is definitely her darkest novel to date. Tragedies of all kinds abound in her earlier work, but they're always tempered by a wry sense of humor and scenes of comic relief. In *Hieroglyphics*, there is little to laugh at."* That trend continues in these stories where the pages are full of fears: fear of aging, yes, but also fear of not living up to expectations as a parent, as a partner. Fear of losing what you have and, of course, of illness and death. The stories tell of people remembering their painful pasts, like Lynn in the title story, who meets a young girl, abandoned by her mother in a Friendly's bathroom. The pain of the child reminds Lynn of her own battered past where belts were used "as weapons, narrow belts looped over rafters, belts wrapping and binding wrists and ankles – hog-tied and thrown away" (13). Startling and violent images occur at other places in the novel – as a matter of fact, belts as weapons occur more than once. The

* Barbara Bennett, "Jill McCorkle and Lee Smith Mine the Past, and Both Find Gold" a review of *Hieroglyphics* by Jill McCorkle and *Blue Marlin* by Lee Smith, *NCLR Online* 2021: [web](#).

image “[i]nside a room, behind a door, a man takes off his belt” (4, 13) repeats. In “Low Tones” and “Filling Station” an abusive husband and father tells his unknowing students that a “man needs a belt” (126). His has a “big hammer” on it (53).

This is not the McCorkle we are used to reading, though it’s a deeper one, more in tune with the ominous and fearful world around us. A husband has brain cancer in “Low Tones”; in “Swinger” a man falls dead, leaving behind his mistress of three years, homeless. A woman loses an older friend in “A Simple Question,” and the son of that woman commits suicide. In “Sparrow,” there is another suicide, and a woman dies of cancer. A man waits for his father figure to die in “The Filling Station” and keeps a list of those “*dead too soon*” (128).

Some stories stand out to me in this collection. “Act III” reminds me of McCorkle’s superb story “Intervention” in *Going Away Shoes* (2010) because it sets up a generational battle between parents and grown children. The title is a reference to a Capote quotation: “Life is a moderately good play with a badly written third act,” which sums up many of the stories in this collection. How does our third act play out? In this particular story, Vera and her husband Glen invite their three grown children with their families to a mountain vacation home. Unbeknownst to anyone else, Vera has cancer, and she wants to be around her family all together once more.



Unfortunately, the children all slide “back into their childhood roles” (183) and by the second day “have resurrected old sibling complaints, the jealousies, the competitions, full throttle” (187). And they are looking for someone to blame. Enter their parents, who despite admitting they are “Guilty! Crimes of passion! Will I get life or the chair?” (188), are still berated viciously by their offspring. Is this what’s left for our third acts, McCorkle asks? Can we never be free of past mistakes? Will our children ever forgive us for not having perfect childhoods?

Another excellent story is the one with the most quirkiness, flashes of McCorkle’s humor that has marked her earlier work, albeit a very dark humor in this collection. “The

Last Station” describes a mother who is known only as “Tori’s mother” – a fitting designation, since she believes motherhood martyrdom is all she is known for in her life. Every spring Tori’s mother “straps a makeshift cross to her back and begins her trek across the front yard, stopping twelve times,” at which points “she shouts out various social injustices she has witnessed during the year” (158). These may include a variety of “sins,” including hungry children or even “unfortunate fashion choices” (161). This particular year, however, the bizarre ritual becomes her platform to list the injustices piled on her own head. When she retired from being a librarian, for example, all she was given was a lamp. She complains, “My birthday

came and went, and no one remembered” (172), leaving her feeling “[i]nvisible and unloved” (174). As a mother and wife, she sacrificed her own desires for everyone else “without even asking why. Without asking those I was sacrificing for if it even mattered” (175). She eventually laments, “I was forsaken!” (179) and stretches out on the grass “arms spread wide, ankles crossed” like Jesus crucified (182).

Older women, “invisible and unloved,” McCorkle’s book is full of them, as is the world. But the stories are also full of secrets – secrets of characters of all ages. In “Confessional,” an old confessional is bought by a young couple as a conversation piece, but it ends up being the place where they tell each other their worst sins. The secrets eventually get darker and darker until the couple cannot look in each other’s eyes. “A Baby in the Pan” starts out as a disagreement about abortion between mother and

daughter, as well as an argument about the daughter’s illegitimate son. The mother can’t bring herself to love this child, instead pouring her attention on her doll collection – each doll comes with a “certificate of authenticity” (111), unlike her grandson. But the mother is also harboring a secret about a lost baby, and it keeps her distant and cold to the living daughter and grandson.

During a conversation with me about this new book, McCorkle described the way she writes a collection of short stories: she writes each story in and of itself, “its own little world.” Then she goes back and starts to weave threads through the stories – ideas, images, characters – making the process “more like writing a novel.” Besides the belts mentioned before, there are the Yde Girl, abandoned children and women, silence, domestic abuse, tattoos. Characters appear and reappear, as in the final story “Sparrows” whose narrator is Lynn from

“Old Crimes,” and “Patrick’s grandmother” seems to be Loris from “Low Tones.” Other characters appear in more than one story, but I’ll leave you to find those gems.

And loss, fear, regret. McCorkle’s characters struggle throughout these stories to find some sense of peace. Their creator is a master of the short story, and in these stories, she shows us people, mainly women, who feel “trapped, desperate” (114). Peace seems to be all they want, like Ben in “Filling Station,” who rents the apartment above a convenience store that used to be his grandmother’s house. He is trying “to escape” but is not sure from what (126). He just knows that this is the place “where he had felt loved” (138). In our troubled times, perhaps we are all like McCorkle’s characters: we just want a place to feel peace and love. This is not the amusing and quirky McCorkle of the past, but perhaps it is a truer one. ■



ABOVE Jill McCorkle at Flyleaf Books in Chapel Hill, NC, 13 Jan. 2024

ABOVE Jill McCorkle (right) talking with her Algonquin Books Editor Kathy Pories at Flyleaf Books, Chapel Hill, NC, 13 Jan. 2024