

MONSTERS, PREACHERS, AND YOUNG LOVERS IN SOUTHERN APPALACHIA

a review by Evelyn Berry

Andrew K. Clark. *Where Dark Things Grow*. Cowboy Jamboree Press, 2024.

—. *Where Dark Things Rise*. Quill & Crow Publishing House, 2025.

EVELYN BERRY is the author of the poetry collection *Grief Slut* (Sundress Publications, 2024) and the chapbooks *Buggery* (Bateau Press, 2020) and *T4T* (Small Harbor Publishing, 2026). She is the recipient of a 2023 National Endowment for the Arts Poetry Fellowship and a 2024 South Carolina Individual Artist Fellowship for Poetry. She lives in Columbia, SC.

ANDREW K. CLARK is from Western North Carolina where his people settled before the Revolutionary War. His poetry collection, *Jesus in the Trailer* (Main Street Rag Press, 2019), was shortlisted for the Able Muse Book Award. His debut novel, *Where Dark Things Grow* (Cowboy Jamboree Press, 2024) was shortlisted for the Manly Wade Wellman Award and won an IPPY from the Independent Book Publishers Awards was followed by a sequel, *Where Dark Things Rise* (Quill and Crow Publishing House, 2025). His work has appeared in *The American Journal of Poetry*, *Appalachian Review*, *Rappahannock Review*, and many other journals. He received his MFA from Converse College.

A fresh voice has emerged from the southern Appalachian Mountains with two linked novels in just two years that blend the folklore horror of the *Old Gods of Appalachia* podcast, the historic lens of Taylor Brown's *Rednecks* (2024), and the social analysis of David Joy's *When These Mountains Burn* (2020). Andrew K. Clark, a poet and writer living in Candler, NC, has followed up his debut Southern gothic horror novel *Where Dark Things Grow*, set in the 1930s, with *Where Dark Things Rise*, set in the 1980s. Drawing on elements of supernatural horror, the novels center teenagers who, while dealing with family problems and teenage crushes, must confront malevolent forces with newfound (possibly nefarious) powers. Both novels also offer smart critiques on class, religion, and patriarchy.

Leo, the fifteen-year-old protagonist of *Where Dark Things Grow*, cares for his mentally ill mother and sick sister in his alcoholic father's absence during the Great Depression. After a terrifying encounter with a Shadow Wulver, Leo discovers he can command the terrifying beast. With this new powerful ally, Leo takes revenge on those who have terrorized him. He sics the Wulver on his cousin, who claimed to have kissed Leo's tomboy best friend and crush, Lilyfax. With the Wulver's influence, he reduces a local priest, Reverend Wormley, to a sniveling heap in retribution for preying on Leo's mother. The novel's central conflict revolves around a cadre of missing girls (mostly

sex workers from a local brothel, friends to Leo since his father frequents there) who have been kidnapped and taken to a secret lodge, where the mysterious Blue Man imprisons them. With the Shadow Wulver at his side and Lilyfax along for the journey, he ascends the mountain on a mission to free the girls. Ezra, whom Leo nicknames the Little Priest, and Mattis, a young Black boy searching for a friend, round out the group who venture to The Temple.

At its core, *Where Dark Things Grow* is a classic story of Good triumphing over Evil. The majority of the characters we meet are divided into these camps: Mr. Goodman, an old man building a church in the forest, is (as one might infer) Good, while Reverend Wormley is selfish and cowardly. As the naming here implies (Good, Worm), sometimes Clark's name choices are a bit overt in their categorization. In contrast to the Shadow Wulver's dark influence, he introduces the Silver Wulver, a wolf-like creature who represents Goodness.

Clark manages to portray a more nuanced conflict between good and evil through Leo's internal character arc. To save the girls on the mountain – where they have been trapped inside of trees – he must overcome his desire for revenge, quickness to anger, and resentment. If he hopes to save his friends, he must confront the evil within himself, and the stark realities of the adult world. Clark uses themes of light and dark to critique organized religion and its predatory nature and

to introduce a horror element to what might have otherwise been a young adult romp. The Blue Man's actions are horrifying; fundamentally, *Where Dark Things Grow* focuses on the twin threats of institutionalized faith and rape culture. Leo's character arc depicts his embrace of a healthier form of masculinity in contrast to the patriarchal power irresponsibly wielded by other characters.

In his second novel, *Where Dark Things Rise*, Clark continues to refine his exploration of these themes, including toxic masculinity, religious fundamentalism, and the nature of evil. In the mid-1980s, five decades after the events of *Where Dark Things Grow*, Papa Leo and LilyMa (Lilyfax's adorable grandmother moniker) raise their grandson, Gabe, in the aftermath of his parents' death in a car crash. Ezra, a relatively minor character in Clark's first novel, has succumbed to the desire for dark power and terrorizes Gabe. Mina, who grew up in a trailer park with an alcoholic father and harbors a crush on Gabe, has found herself in possession of a grim and seductive power; she can summon the Shadow Faces. The teen romances in *Where Dark Things Rise* are more mature than in *Where Dark Things Grow*, a natural evolution due to the new time period during which the second novel is set. Whereas Clark depicts an innocent crush in his first novel, *Where Dark Things Rise* features more nuanced teenaged relationships including frank discussions

about sex and sexuality that allow Clark to bring the romance subplot to the fore.

Mina's romance with Gabe is juxtaposed with scenes of increasing dread as Ezra, in the form of a vicious Red Wolf, becomes more influential and dangerous. At the midpoint of the book, Clark inserts an extended series of chapters from the point of view of Erin, one of Mina's friends. Erin, who has been dubbed sexually immoral by her parents, is sent to the Purity Sojourn, where she and other teens endure a mixture of abusive conversion and wilderness "therapy" practices. Eventually, Erin and other young girls are kidnapped; imprisoned by Ezra, Mina, and Gabe; and equipped with Mina's sinister powers and Gabe's inherited trauma. They climb the mountain to save the girls and stop history from repeating itself.

While it is not necessary to read Clark's first novel to enjoy his second, *Where Dark Things Rise* serves as a perfect spiritual successor to *Where Dark Things Grow*, expanding its lore and refining its themes. As the novel progresses, Clark introduces new horror elements, which complicate the supernatural environment of Southern Appalachia. The author also continues to focus on themes of patriarchy and religion as



forms of coercion. *Where Dark Things Rise* asks the reader to consider what happens when those without any power gain it, and how does power change someone's motivations? What justifications do people make when they abuse the power they have gained?

Where Dark Things Rise, like *Where Dark Things Grow*, ends on a cliffhanger during which a character for whom we've been cheering gives in to the seduction of power. With two novels already under his belt, I'm curious to see how Clark will expand his Appalachian universe populated with monsters and wicked men. His work so far has managed to capture much about his home region: the creepiness of the dark woods when alone at night, the suffocating grip of religious fanaticism, the beauty and brutality of nature, and the resilience of the people who live there. ■