

EVER HAUNTED

a review by Amanda M. Capelli

Mimi Herman. *The Kudzu Queen*. Regal House Publishing, 2023.

Culley Holderfield. *Hemlock Hollow*. Regal House Publishing, 2022.

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In 1950, at the banquet dinner for the 1949 Nobel Prize in Literature, William Faulkner reminded young writers that the inner conflicts of the human heart were always and will always be the fodder of great writing. He reminded them of the “old universal truths lacking which any story is ephemeral and doomed – love and honor and pity and pride and compassion and sacrifice.” And he reminded them of the writer’s duty to reflect these values in their work. “It is his privilege,” Faulkner said, “to help man endure by lifting his heart, by reminding him of the courage and honor and hope and pride and compassion and pity and sacrifice which have been the glory of his past.”*

Faulkner’s old truths, pillars of US Southern literature, reverberate throughout the pages of Culley Holderfield’s *Hemlock Hollow* and Mimi Herman’s *The Kudzu Queen*. In fact, one might say they are haunted by them. In both historical novels, we feel the lineage of the writers who came before – like William Faulkner, Alice Walker, and Harper Lee – and in both we sense the universal truths of love and honor and pity and pride and compassion and, ultimately and always, sacrifice. But the hauntings, like the ghosts we meet in each text, aren’t nefarious.

Mimi Herman’s *The Kudzu Queen* is a coming-of-age novel that follows fifteen-year-old Mathilda “Mattie” Lee Watson as

she discovers the kind of person she wants to be and the work needed to become that person. In a scene toward the end of the novel, Mattie answers a question for the Kudzu Queen beauty contest. Her response underscores one of the major themes of the novel: growth. Addressing the audience, Mattie describes herself as a compass, steady in its determined pointing north, but also imperfect and fallible in the right conditions:

Sometimes it gets stuck, and you have to shake it to get it on track again. . . . And if you put a strong magnet next to a compass, the needle is attracted to it, and you have no idea what direction to go. I’ve been like that sometimes, losing my direction because of some attraction, and I’m not always proud to remember how I acted. But when the magnet’s moved away the compass goes back to reading right, and that’s probably me too. (298)

The year is 1941 and kudzu has just come to Cooper County, NC. Some of the townsfolk are skeptical, including Mattie’s father, but Mattie, along with many of the town’s female residents, are quickly taken by the looks and charm of the dynamic salesman, James T. Cullowee, the self-proclaimed “Kudzu King.” Cullowee introduces the miracle plant from the pulpit of his traveling kudzu van: “Kudzu, the perfect plant! You can jam it. You can jelly it. It’ll cure headaches and heart attacks. You can grind it into flour or fry it up as a side dish” (3). However, Mattie soon learns that like the

* “William Faulkner: Banquet Speech,” 1950, Nobel Prize Outreach AB: [web](#).



kudzu, which will swallow up anything in its path, Cullowee isn't as innocuous as he seems. Growth can be painful.

Mattie's relationships with the other women in her community are what really make this novel special. The interactions between Mattie and her mother, her best friend Lynette, her old friend Rose, now separated from Mattie due to segregation, are all richly developed, but it is the quiet, reflective moments with Aunt Mary, or rather Aunt Mary's ghostly presence, that illustrate just how much Mattie has grown, from the child, afraid to even touch the door of Mary's cabin, to a young woman, aware of the sacrifice life often requires:

If Aunt Mary had a ghost and that ghost was angry, now was the time to let me know, before I got too comfortable. I thought my heart could take it. I thought my heart could take anything – it was so loose and fluid from my dance with the Kudzu King. But her ghost was quiet, maybe listening. Maybe no one had ever confided in Aunt Mary while she was alive. When she was a girl, the other girls were probably afraid she'd take their heads off if they said anything to her. I slitted my eyes open, and looked at the picture of the young man in uniform. Maybe him, I thought. Maybe he'd told her his secrets, and she'd confided hers in him. (89)

Herman's text is beautifully written and, like the kudzu vines that spread across the cover

of the novel and envelop Aunt Mary's house, offers readers a complex narrative tapestry that explores the rocky transition from childhood to young adulthood steeped in historical detail and told from the perspective of a narrator willing to sacrifice it all for her community.

Culley Holderfield also takes readers on a trip into North Carolina's past in *Hemlock Hollow*, which splits its time between dual storylines. Caroline McAlister is an archeology professor on sabbatical attempting to renovate her family's old cabin, and Carson Quinn is a young boy who lived on the same patch of land in the 1880s. The impetus of the narrative stems from the death of Caroline's father and her subsequent inheritance of the cabin. Her return to the hollow where she spent many a childhood summer forces Caroline to contend with deeply buried trauma surrounding her mother's death and the fraught relationship she had with her father following it. The scenes around the cabin are dredged in pain, but also a deep sense of place. Holderfield knows this land as well as Caroline does:

Carson Quinn's sanctuary became my play place a century later. Up the hill a bit lay a fissured granite boulder with a nearly perfectly flat top. As a child, it was my special place. I called it Caroline's perch. Sometimes I would go up here and lie on my belly. Peering over the rock's edge, I could look down on the hollow. . . .

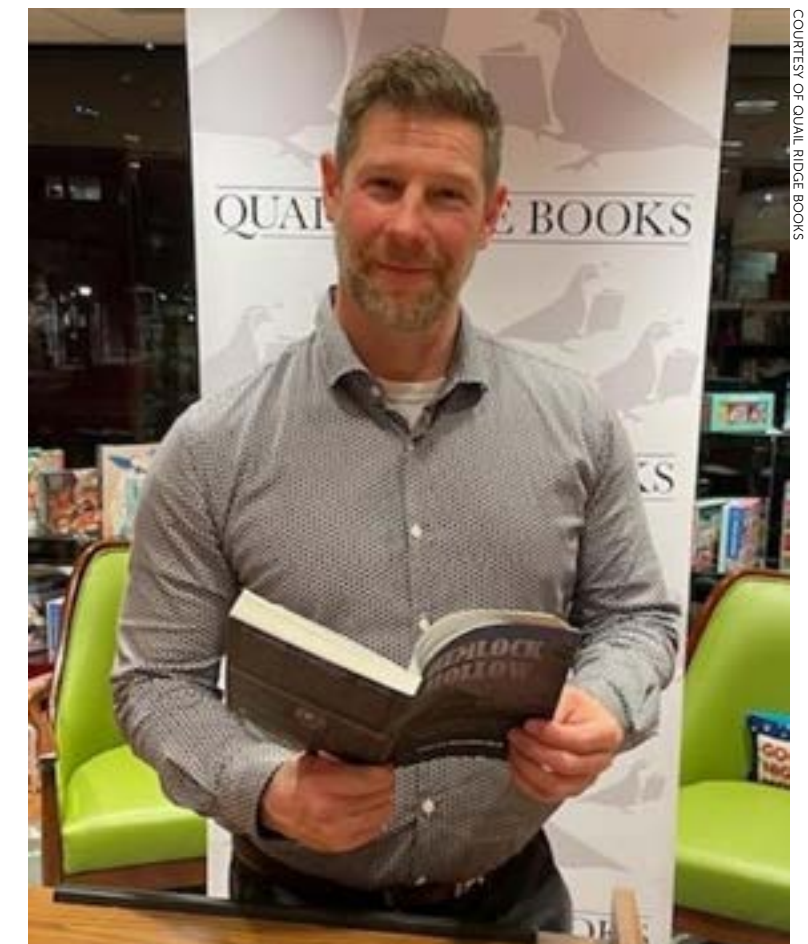
Now, I climbed to my old spot and took in the view of the steep Appalachian forest below. The creek still gurgled, salamanders no doubt still darting around. Ferns clustered in damp places still. (15)

Ultimately, Holderfield's richly textured novel is a study of place and past, and of the hold that the past can have on a particular square of geography. As Caroline learns, it is a place "ever haunted by the spirits of those who loved it and left it and returned" (276). Through Caroline and Carson, we learn about the land and only begin to scratch the surface of some of the mysteries buried there. In her preparation to renovate the now dilapidated building, Caroline finds Carson Quinn's old journal that reawakens old rumors and questions. Though the journal trope as plot device has the potential to stymie the action – the extensive dialogue Carson documents and the sheer length of what would have been handwritten entries feel implausible at times – it's not enough of a distraction to pull us away from the characters and the discoveries they make about each other and the hollow they call home. How could it be that the same Carson who carefully documented the flora and fauna of the forest, quoting Darwin and Emerson, would grow up to murder his own brother? Is the old man she keeps seeing in the liminal spaces – the dark corner of a room, the moments when

one is neither asleep nor entirely awake, the dimly lit memory from her childhood – real or a figment of her imagination? Why did her father leave her this cabin and what will she do with it (and herself) when the renovation is complete?

It comes as no surprise that Herman was an early reader of Holderfield's novel, which includes a blurb from Herman on the cover. Both texts seem

to speak to one another despite taking place in very different geographies and time periods. And both avoid the trap of romanticizing the South and its past. Racial tension, class dynamics, sexuality, and the ways those things are intertwined are embedded in both narratives, leaving readers with a deeper sense of North Carolina's unique history and the way it fits into the larger tapestry of Southern narratives. ■



MIMI HERMAN is a poet, fiction writer, and teaching artist. She holds a BA from UNC Chapel Hill and an MFA in creative writing from Warren Wilson College. She is the author of two collections of poetry, *Logophilia* (Main Street Rag, 2012) and *A Field Guide to Human Emotions* (Finishing Line Press, 2021). Her writing has also appeared in *Michigan Quarterly Review*, *The Carolina Quarterly*, *Shenandoah*, *Crab Orchard Review*, and elsewhere. *The Kudzu Queen* is her first novel.

ABOVE Mimi Herman reading at Flyleaf Books in Chapel Hill, NC, 23 Feb. 2023

ABOVE Culley Holderfield reading at Quail Ridge Books in Raleigh, NC, 18 Jan. 2023

CULLEY HOLDERFIELD studied creative writing at UNC Chapel Hill where he received his BA in comparative literature and history. He is the author of short stories, essays, and poetry, and has been published in *Wildfire Magazine*, *Literally Stories*, *Yellow Mama*, *2Leaf Press*, *Scarlet Leaf*, *Kakalak*, *Dime Show Review*, and *Floyd County Moonshine*, among others. *Hemlock Hollow*, his debut novel, is the winner of the 2023 Eric Hoffer Award in Historical Fiction.