

LONG ROADS AND TALL PINES

a review by Rebecca Duncan

Marjorie Hudson. *Indigo Field*.
Regal House Publishing, 2023.

Susan O'Dell Underwood. *Genesis Road*.
Madville Publishing, 2022.

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The characters in Susan O'Dell Underwood's *Genesis Road* and Marjorie Hudson's *Indigo Field* need a lot of love. Some have the energy and balance to pursue healthy connections, while others have much to overcome before they can take that kind of risk. They have bungled life, or life has been cruel. And a few, to the reader's amusement or frustration, plod stubbornly on, unaware of life's possibilities or simply unwilling to bend.

With a writer's sense of empathy and a gift for storytelling, Underwood and Hudson create intriguing worlds for these characters to inhabit. And although both novels explore compelling issues – identity, history, race, culture, sexuality – they are most enjoyable and thought-provoking in their use of the land on which their characters live, work, and travel.

For Glenna Daniels, the first-person narrator of **Susan O'Dell Underwood's *Genesis Road***, the land is a family farm, the acreage that formed her identity as a child: "The farm on Genesis Road was me, or who I knew I was at the time. That place was how I understood myself" (9). At ten, she moves with her mother and brother into a trailer in town to escape the charismatic yet violent father for whom she is named. At that point, she recalls, "I was lost. I would never again see the trillium patch I loved in the back of the woods, the cool green ravine" (9). Glenn Daniels follows the family to their new home and the mother takes him in. As Glenna enters adolescence, she becomes the prime target of her father's physical and psychological abuse.

At thirty-six, Glenna seems to function reasonably well as a social worker. But a miscarriage dims any chance of preserving her third marriage, and the death of her father churns up memories of lifelong abuse that has made trust and commitment difficult. She admits that, in bearing the brunt of her father's violent moods and actions, she has become like him, unable to love openly and honestly.

It is with an angry heart that Glenna hears that the family farm has been deeded to her. She alone has dared to say aloud to her enabling family that her father caused the fire that burned the house to the ground and in doing so complicated her relationship with the land. She processes her emotions during a sweeping car trip through the western United States with her high school friend Carey, who is mourning the loss of his partner Stan. Just as Glenna once protected Carey from the taunts of intolerant teens, Carey now shows her a healthier sort of grief. He's an historian seeking out what he calls "landscape kitsch," so he also distracts her with side trips to such oddities as Cadillac Ranch and a brothel tour.

Often the passenger, Glenna contemplates the vastness of Yellowstone and the Grand Tetons, the minute flora of a rare tundra blossoming, and Carey's history lessons on such topics as the Trail of Tears and the spread of Catholicism. Without forcing an artificial symmetry, Underwood creates a credible and optimistic flow between the landscape and Glenna's self-discovery. Old Faithful, for instance,

produces this insight: "Whatever threatens below the surface has nothing on the tensile power of the earth's skin, holding in all that volatility. It exhausted me to think of the turmoil and regret and grief I'd been holding back, the enormous forces at work underneath the surface of my life" (260).

This is a novel of revelation and reflection set against iconic scenes of American grandeur. Carey and Glenna have prepared to camp safely, feed themselves, and navigate highways and lesser roads in baking sun and drifted snow. Carey has even made thematic playlists to fill the dead hours. They are less prepared to acknowledge the trauma and grief set off by a certain song, a conversation, or even an image at a flea market. Although they seem to be helping each other heal, they each withhold significant details, and a few offhand remarks land badly. And so the friendship falters at times.

In less skillful hands, this novel's premise might produce a clichéd "driving and thinking" narrative. Instead, Underwood

PHOTOGRAPH BY DAVID UNDERWOOD



blends lyrical descriptions, lively interactions, incisive metaphors, and a few camping and weather-related crises to keep readers engaged and hopeful and to draw Glenna as believable and complex and ready to decide about the land that has long defined her.

In contrast to the travel/adventure motif, **Marjorie Hudson's** multiple story lines in *Indigo Field* occur on or adjacent to a single piece of land edged by old growth "Gooley Pines" and riddled with history and bones. Jolene, a widowed farmer, ekes

out an existence to support Bobo, a son with Down Syndrome. She offers comfort to Reba, local midwife and a black descendant of a Tuscarora community, when the niece Reba raised is shot and killed by a white boyfriend. Reba nurtures her hatred for Danielle's killer yet agrees to foster the man's teenage son, TJ, who loved Danielle but "hates the country" (70). As additional glimpses of her past reveal, Reba knows how to summon tough love for a difficult white boy. Historical background on the Tuscarora Indians' treatment in North Carolina and their eventual displacement add important context to Reba's character.*

Down the road, at the posh Stonehaven retirement community, Colonel Randolph Jefferson Lee (Ret.), or simply Rand, jogs in defiance of doctor's orders, sneaks biscuits at the Sunrise Grill, and maintains a running interior monologue of disdain for the life that his wife Anne is happily cultivating. She embraces the social galas, the tennis league, and a dinner she's planning with neighbors, while he dreads "the inane chatter, the sloppy drinking, the inevitable social climbing and one-upmanship" (9). A good bit of his loathing turns inward as well, as he regrets what he considers a middling career in the military and envisions a second, this

time fatal, heart attack looming around every bend on his morning run.

The dead also maintain a presence in the community and on the land. Danielle and a beloved sister Sheba live on for Reba as crudely carved angel totems planted in her yard and as "listeners" to stories and revelations. The spirits of Sheba and the maternal figure Old Lucy infuse Reba with vision and prescience. An archeological dig conducted by Rand's underachieving son Jeff (and a stray dog) produces bones and skeletons that need to be explained.

At moments, particularly during a massive intervention of nature, readers face a choice between the competing authorities of reason and spirit. Granting the possibility of the latter, we have to ask, for instance, if Reba is beset by "fits," as her father concluded, or if she can she truly predict an epic storm or an impending death. And do her herbal remedies calm or enhance these experiences? She admits that at one point, "Lucy give me herbs to cure the hate. But it never took, not all the way" (287).

Hudson blends fictional narrative and North Carolina history with just the right touch to make the story plausible. The focal point of both fact and fiction is the the physical land. The massive pine trees, reso-

nant of the Coastal Plain, hover above as heritage or commodity until even they are shaken. Some crops thrive; others fail. The Stonehaven ladies flock to the neighborhood farmers' market. Every character is touched, literally or figuratively, by the soil of Indigo Field and its past. Thus "grounded," each is able to glimpse a vision of life's possibilities.

Tensions over race, love and sexuality, and disability/ableism offer a moral dimension to these characters' struggles that would make the late John Gardner smile. And it doesn't hurt that North Carolina readers might at some point begin to believe they have met at least one of these folks down at the Country Farm and Home store on a recent Saturday morning. ■



PHOTOGRAPH BY EMMA ZUNKER

SUSAN O'DELL UNDERWOOD has retired from teaching in the creative writing program at Carson-Newman University in Jefferson City, TN. She earned an MFA in creative writing at UNC Greensboro and a PhD in English at Florida State University. Her books include a poetry collection, *Splinter* (Madville Publishing, 2023). Although raised in Tennessee, Underwood treasures childhood memories among her mother's family in North Carolina. Read her essay, a finalist in the 2017 Alex Albright Creative Nonfiction Prize contest, on her North Carolina grandfather in *NCLR* 2018.

* Hudson researched this history for "Among the Tuscarora: The Strange and Mysterious Death of John Lawson, Gentleman, Explorer, and Writer," an essay published in *NCLR's* premier issue. In addition, she researched and wrote on coastal tribes, including the Hatteras and Croatoan, in her first book, *Searching for Virginia Dare: a Fool's Errand* (2003); reissued as *Searching for Virginia Dare: On the Trail of the Lost Colony of Roanoke Island* (Press 53 2012).

ABOVE Marjorie Hudson and her book launch attendees at Fearington Barn in Fearington Village, NC, 18 Mar. 2023

MARJORIE HUDSON writes, teaches, leads arts and community engagement projects, and works the earth in Chatham County, NC. She holds a BA in interdisciplinary studies from American University and an MFA in creative writing from Warren Wilson College. She founded the George Moses Horton Project to honor the first African American man to publish a book in the South. Her story collection, *Accidental Birds of the Carolinas* (2011; reviewed in *NCLR Online* 2012), received an honorable mention by PEN/Hemingway. *Indigo Field* is the 2023 winner of the Sir Walter Raleigh Award given by the North Carolina Literary and Historical Association and the Historical Book Club of North Carolina. Read an interview with the author, who wrote for *NCLR's* premiere issue, in the twenty-fifth print issue (2016).