

## FROM BIG PINE TO JAZZ: MAKING A LIFE WITH PIZZAZZ

a review by Rebecca Godwin

Terry Roberts. *The Sky Club*.  
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**REBECCA GODWIN** is the author of *Community Across Time: Robert Morgan's Words for Home* (West Virginia University Press, 2023). She retired in 2022 as Elizabeth Jordan Chair of Southern Literature at Barton College. She is past chair of the North Carolina Writers Conference and past president of the North Carolina Literary and Historical Association as well as the Thomas Wolfe Society. She serves on the North Caroliniana Society and North Carolina Humanities boards and is a consulting editor for *The Thomas Wolfe Review*.

**TERRY ROBERTS** is the author of five novels, two of which received the Sir Walter Raleigh Award for Fiction. *A Short Time to Stay Here* (Ingalls Publishing Group, 2012) was also the winner of the Willie Morris Prize for Southern Fiction, and *That Bright Land* (Turner Publishing Company, 2016; reviewed in *NCLR Online* 2017) was also the winner of the Thomas Wolfe Memorial Literary Award and the James Still Award for Writing about the Appalachian South. Director of the National Paideia Center, the author is a native of western North Carolina.

In a page-turner set in 1929–1931, Terry Roberts brings us jazz, bootlegging, and financial collapse, as seen through the eyes of a forward-thinking young mountain woman seizing opportunities to flourish. Following examinations of western North Carolina's World War I German internment camp, post-Civil War violence, and Prohibition Era preacher spreading liquor on his gospel train, as well as Ellis Island's racial and immigration tensions in 1920, Roberts turns, in his fifth book, to the greed, social climbing, despair, and resolve that marked Asheville's – and America's – boom and crash. Rural and urban, old ways and new possibilities meet in the speakeasy and jazz club that gives the novel its name, shaping every aspect of this first-rate narrative of economic and cultural upheaval, risk, loss, and love.

Roberts's feisty female narrator, speaking directly and intimately to readers, keeps us intrigued. This bold, intelligent mathematical prodigy maintains her country-bred spunk after moving into town to fulfill her mother's deathbed request: "Make a life somewhere else . . . a life that I can't even imagine" (4). At twenty-six, Jo Salter leaves her remote Madison County home for Asheville, where her cousin Sissy teaches her how to be a 1929 town girl and Uncle Frank finds her a job at Central Bank and Trust, where he is a vice-president. Jo observes that Frank leads

his family to "taking on the appearance of wealth" (13) and soon discovers, with her skill for checking bank numbers, that the bank itself is operating on pretense, sending out more money than it takes in, "the city and bank propping each other up" (226) while marketing the building of Greater Asheville. She explains to directors, and later to state examiners, the fraudulent reporting that has hidden the bank's overextension of credit. Jo shows us what a bank run and closure look like, and as she works with resolve, she faces down the sexism encountered by women who were smarter and more honest than men earning higher salaries simply because they were men.

While Jo enjoys the bobbed hair and stylish clothes, including pants, that mark her transition to town, she feels no shame about her rural upbringing and no need for wealth or social standing. Missing "the voices of home," she strolls the farmers' market on Lexington Avenue, where "hills and hollows . . . met the asphalt and concrete" (129), perhaps a metaphor for the book's oppositions and theme. Throughout *The Sky Club*, Roberts contrasts the values of money-focused townspeople and community-oriented, resilient rural folks, supporting the epigraph from Emerson, "Money often costs too much." To reshape downtown, city officials use eminent domain to take Black residents' homes. The rich treat servants merely as help,



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ignoring their full humanity. Jo, by contrast, cherishes the company of her relatives' Black servant Pansy and ensures that her cousin Frank Junior knows not to sexually assault Pansy again.

Repeatedly, country people stick together since they know, as hill-born Pink Starnes tells Jo, that "country club people" will "plow us all under to save their mansions" (276). Like the era it describes, this novel points to the dangers of superficial values that lead to lies, such as those that city and bank leaders tell the public as the financial crisis comes to a head. While the bank president serves prison time for violating banking laws, other men facing indictment and disgrace commit suicide, including Jo's uncle Frank, who owes half a million dollars, and Asheville

mayor Gallatin Roberts, the actual mayor who killed himself in 1931 rather than face trial. Jo reflects that

certain things . . . when thrown down shatter. The china cup, the crystal goblet, the expensive vase. All of those things are city things. Then there are certain things that when thrown down, even on pavement, never break. The corn cob, the chunk of firewood, the plow point. All those things are country things, hard things and tough. Truth be told, they are used to being thrown down. (288)

Country people with little cash to lose but with homegrown food and make-do experiences that sustain them through the Great Depression verify that perception.

It is, however, at the merging of rural and urban that Jo

finds her happy place, the Sky Club. She embraces its outdoor spaces, its homegrown food and stalwart bartender, its alcohol, its Black jazz players and their music that makes her dance – the Black Bottom, the Charleston, the Turkey Trot – and falls in love with Levi Arrowood, the hill-born bootlegger and speakeasy manager. The music consumes her, its rhythms based on mathematical intervals connecting to her propensity to "think [and dream] in numbers" (226). She enters the bootlegging business with Levi, who treats her as his equal. They arrange a deal with her Madison County farming brothers to grow corn or apples and to make moonshine or brandy, each according to the attributes of his own land and talents, while Jo and Levi

transport and sell the liquor. Jo insists on learning to drive, another way that she leads the way for women, so that she can divert law enforcement from Levi. They get married, twice: once at her remote homeplace on Big Pine and again in town at the Sky Club, for she and Levi are "country and city. Lonely mountain fiddle and sweat-hot jazz" (417). Reconciling supposed opposites, this hard-working and fair-minded couple thrives, doing what they love and loving each other in the truest fashion imaginable. Jo's telling of their evolving relationship creates a joyful read.

Humor marks some of Jo and Levi's interactions, and at times, keeps scenes from playing into negative stereotypes. At the reading of her father's will, her brothers refuse to let Levi come into the house to discuss business because he and Jo are not yet married. But to hear him explain how he and Jo can sell their corn, they agree to his talking through a window, as long as he does not lean in. Brother Tony quotes scripture to match their moonshining plans to the Bible. Jo willingly plays along with the rather farcical hesitancy to let a woman speak about important affairs, reconciling narrow and more progressive notions to move them all into the future. And through the hilarious banter comes the reason that many Appalachians turned to moonshining: corn

grows in mountain soil but brings too little cash to support families (besides the fact that heavy loads of corn were difficult to get down steep mountain roads to market). Turning corn into liquid transportable in jars enabled farmers to stay on their land and make it productive. Through this part of the story, Roberts turns the moonshiner as criminal stereotype on its head.

Moonshining and the violence accompanying it – a sheriff once assaults driver Jo, and a raid on the Sky Club results in more damage to Levi's scarred body – join myriad details that make *The Sky Club* an admirable historical novel blending actual places and figures with fictional characters. Now condominiums, the Sky Club edifice still stands atop Beaucatcher Mountain, being so named when owners needed to conceal their German-American heritage in the name of their supper club in World War II. Jo shops with her cousin at Bon Marché, a famous store first owned by a Jewish man named Lipsky, as the narrator explains. This landmark also survives in Asheville, now the site of the Haywood Park Hotel along with other businesses. Looking for a room after her uncle's death, when the family must give up their ritzy house, Jo visits the Old Kentucky Home boarding house and meets owner Julia Wolfe, Thomas Wolfe's mother and real estate investor. Roberts

draws on the historical record to describe her personality and also mentions her family, the Westalls. Details of booming construction and the Central Bank and Trust fraud credit historical figures with their roles, for instance E.W. Grove, builder of Grove Park Inn, along with mayor Roberts. Descriptions of Biltmore Forest and Pack Square leave no doubt that Roberts knows the place, and breadlines show the Great Depression's effect.

The independent woman telling this story of Asheville's crash from its real estate frenzy brings a positive note to the losses, with Roberts's convincing portrayal of her inner life and public voice. Jo values the land and family and meaningful traditions such as preparing her father's body for burial. She turns herself into a businesswoman and buys the Sky Club with her husband. She gets Levi to reconcile with his estranged father. She isn't shy about having a Black best friend or about enjoying sex and telling us about it. She follows her attraction to the mysterious Levi Arrowood to find what matters in life and tells us what she's discovered. Speaking of the fraudulent bank records and coverup, Jo says that "the numbers told the truth but the words lied" (108). Words can lie. But her words, and Roberts's, give us a true accounting of this important time of transition in Asheville's and America's history. And just as importantly, they show us how to make a life. ■