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 resolved 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 mathematic student propidly manages 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 there 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. Whole 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, 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 the greed, social climbing, and as she works with resolve, they are used to being thrown down. (226)

Country people with little cash to lose but with homestead and talents, while Jo and Levi find their 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 speak-easy manager. The music transforms 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, something her father can divert law enforcement from. 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” (437). Reconciling supposed opposites, this harsh-working and fair-minded couple thrives, doing what they love and loving each other in the most fashionable imaginable. Jo’s telling of their evolving relationship creates a joyous 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 join the reading of her father’s will, saying, “You can cut the land and make it productive. Turning corn to liquid transportable in jars enabled farmers to stay on their dirt 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 scared 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 Lipinsky, as the narrator explains that he lives there. 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 loss, 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 Arowood 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.

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 bumbled 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 create. Although in 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 where I was born, and I lived on the farm with my 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, Glenn 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 chums up memories of lifelong abuse that has made trust and commitment difficult. Despite the bearing of her father’s violent moods and actions, she has become like him, unable to love openly and honestly.

It is an anguished heart that Glenn 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 Glenn once protected Carey from the taunts of intolerant teens, Carey now shows her a kinder, gentler 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, Glenn 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 creditable and optimistic flow between the landscape and Glenn’s self-discovery. Old Faithful, for instance,