

APPALACHIAN JOURNEYS

a review by George Hovis

Rebecca Godwin. *Community Across Time: Robert Morgan's Words for Home*. West Virginia University Press, 2023.

Robert Morgan. *In the Snowbird Mountains and Other Stories*. Press 53, 2023.

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REBECCA GODWIN is retired from Barton College in Wilson, NC, where she was Professor of English and Elizabeth H. Jordan Chair of Southern Literature. She received her PhD in English from UNC Chapel Hill. She is author of *Gender Dynamics in the Fiction of Lee Smith: Examining Language and Narrative Strategies* (International Scholars Publications, 1997), as well as numerous essays and book reviews in critical anthologies and scholarly journals, all focused on Southern or Appalachian writers, including an essay on David Joy in *Twenty-First-Century Southern Writers: New Voices, New Perspectives* (University Press of Mississippi, 2021). 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 currently serves on the North Caroliniana Society Board of Directors.

Readers of Robert Morgan have ample reason to celebrate 2023 – with a new collection of his stories and an important new work of scholarship by Rebecca Godwin – as well as Morgan's much anticipated biography of Edgar Allan Poe released in November. Author of thirty-two books of fiction, poetry, and nonfiction – the majority of them explorations of his family and regional history in southern Appalachia – Robert Morgan's writing has attracted a growing body of critical literature, including a collection of interviews in 2019, a collection of critical essays in 2022, and special issues of four major journals devoted to his work.¹ Despite this abundant interest, remarkably, Rebecca Godwin's *Community Across Time* is the first monograph upon his work, and, as such, it is poised to satisfy a demand that is keenly felt.

Rebecca Godwin's *Community Across Time: Robert Morgan's Words for Home*, offers a comprehensive and seminal treatment of Morgan's extensive body of fiction writing, one that uses as its primary touchstone the author's biography, traced back across multiple generations of maternal and paternal ancestors. Very early in the study, the wisdom of Godwin's approach becomes clear. Even Morgan scholars aware of how

biographical materials have found their way into his fiction will likely be surprised at how pervasive Godwin reveals these connections between life and fiction to be. In her introduction to a study of Morgan's family novels, Godwin quotes Morgan as saying, "One of the motivations to write fiction is to make the past come alive – to try to understand it, to get into it, to see it in the kind of intimate detail and complexity with which we see contemporary life" (70). *Community Across Time* reads Morgan's fiction and poetry as a palimpsest that builds upon family lore and regional history, breathing life into a past that has passed into oblivion under waves of industrialization and late capitalism.

We learn of Morgan's great-grandfather John Benjamin Franklin Pace and of how he encountered Holiness worship as a survival strategy while in New York's Elmira prison camp during the Civil War. We follow the ensuing religious strife that engulfs Ben Pace's descendants, how his daughter Sarah fought with her hardshell-Baptist husband over her desire to attend Holiness services, how their son (Robert Morgan's father) was affected by this familial conflict. Making use of extensive interviews and an unpublished memoir, Godwin traces the ways Morgan has developed

¹ Jesse Graves and Randall Wilhem, eds., *Conversations with Robert Morgan* (UP of Mississippi, 2019); Jesse Graves and Robert M. West, eds., *Robert Morgan: Essays on the Life and Work* (McFarland, 2022; reviewed in this issue). The following journals have published special issues on the writing of Robert Morgan: *Iron Mountain Review* (1990), *Pembroke Magazine* (2003), *Appalachian Heritage* (2004), and *Southern Quarterly* (2010).

this and other family history in *The Truest Pleasure* (1995), *Gap Creek* (1999), *This Rock* (2001), and other writing. Inclusion of a series of family photographs further enhances these connections. Of course, Morgan's fiction stands on its own without the necessity of being tied to biographical sources; however, Godwin demonstrates how biography provides an invaluable tool for organizing the body of an author's work into a coherent whole, one that in Morgan's case relates a history spanning several centuries.

Godwin practices a similar method when reading Morgan's historical novels that are less directly tied to family stories. She provides historical context for *Brave Enemies* (2003) by relating events in the novel to the Battle of Cowpens, a turning point in the Revolutionary War. In her discussion of Morgan's neo-slave narrative *Chasing the North Star* (2016; reviewed in *NCLR Online* 2017), Godwin makes connections to Frederick Douglass's 1845 *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* and Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), as well as the illuminating research of Stephanie M.H. Camp into sexuality among enslaved people.

Although the primary focus of this book is on Morgan's fiction, Godwin incorporates frequent discussions of Morgan's poetry



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and historical biographies, especially when they connect with themes explored in the novels and short stories. One indication that Godwin has selected a fruitful – arguably the essential – approach to a reading of Morgan's fiction is the way that her line of inquiry converges with and extrapolates the author's own comments about his work and its connections to family history. Godwin's text is dense with nuanced interpretation while also offering a pleasurable read, one that will be indispensable to the committed Morgan scholar and thoroughly accessible to anyone interested in reading single works by Morgan more deeply or making connections among his varied work.

In contrast to the sprawling family saga and Appalachian history that occupy his novels, the stories in **Robert Morgan's**

recent collection, *In the Snowbird Mountains*, feature mostly contemporary protagonists who travel west to rediscover the mountains of their youth and in so doing stumble into potentially deadly adventures, ones that often connect with the region's past. In *Community Across Time*, Godwin relates an account Morgan has often shared publicly of the first story he ever wrote. He was in the sixth grade, and the rest of his class had departed on a field trip to the Biltmore House in Asheville. Because he "did not have the three dollars required for the outing," he remained behind in the classroom. While the other students were away for the day, Morgan responded to a writing prompt provided by his teacher: "a man is lost in the Canadian Rockies, with no gun or knife; get him back to civilization. By day's end, Morgan had created his first story, drawing

on his own experiences in the woods as well as his reading of London and Curwood" (23). With this latest collection, Morgan has gone back to this original story idea, creating a series of adventure tales in which ordinary men, several of them distinguished academics, having long established themselves in the North Carolina Piedmont, return to the mountains only to be thrust into life-threatening situations, some combination of mountain creatures, human criminals, law enforcement, and the natural elements themselves.

In "The Body on Mt. Mitchell," "the editor of a small-time paper . . . fighting for its life in the age of television and social media" travels west to the tallest peak east of the Mississippi, in order to mix work with "recreation" (1–2). The editor intends to chronicle his exploration of Mount Mitchell in search of the waterfall where in 1857 the body of the mountain's namesake, Professor Elisha Mitchell, was discovered after he'd accidentally fallen to his death. The editor finds that he is fighting for more than his professional life when he encounters a large alligator, which has apparently emerged from a "fetid sinkhole" at the base of the mountain (7). Our protagonist is reminded of the legends of gators inhabiting sewers of New York City, an allusion that amplifies the elements of tall tale marking this playful story. A second antagonism, and one that recurs throughout the collection, appears between the narrator and the park ranger who threatens to arrest him for violating park rules. Here, as in other stories of the collection, law enforcement occupies an ambiguous position, but ulti-

mately one intended to protect the "civilized" tourist from the mountain wilderness and vice versa. This editor/narrator seeks communion with the wilderness of his youth and, by extension, an earlier age of humanity, an age of tooth and claw when people were not insulated from nature by technology. As he confronts the gator, the editor identifies the "prehistoric animal" as a "demon from the age of the dinosaurs, from the era of volcanoes and flying reptiles, before there was warm blood" (10).

In "Judaculla Rock," we find a similar quest into the mountains figured as a quest to know the past. Dr. Jim Evans, a botanist recently retired from teaching at a "small Lutheran college near the middle of North Carolina" (86), sees a news article about vandalism of Judaculla Rock, a petroglyph located near the site of his childhood home. The story begins with Jim providing a catalogue of guesses at the origins of the petroglyph. According to one theory, it is a Cherokee memorial to an important military victory over the Creeks. Other scholars claim that the stone originated

from the era of Woodland tribes who predated the Cherokee. According to Cherokee legend, the stone bears the imprint of a giant named Judaculla, who leapt from the mountain whenever he sought out his human lover. Another theory, one put forth by the young man convicted of vandalism, pushes the petroglyph's origin even further back. According to this young man, the figures on the stone are an oracle of human suffering inscribed by "beings from outer space, from beyond the known stars, who had invaded the planet long before people existed" (87). When Jim Evans arrives at the site to make his own inspection, he is confronted not with a solution to the petroglyph's puzzle but, rather, with a deepening of mystery:

The markings were like the deep language of nature itself, dark energy, black holes, and dark matter, like the strange attractor, the first cause: elusive, essentially unknowable. The more we know about nature the less we understand. That's why science is so thrilling. We always look for the key that unlocks the code, the semiotics of our world, that recedes the closer we study. These ancient scribes had understood and inscribed that very sense of mystery. (92)



PHOTOGRAPH BY LARRY W. MULL, COURTESY OF NC COLLECTION PHOTOGRAPHIC ARCHIVES, WILSON LIBRARY, UNC CHAPEL HILL

ABOVE Mount Mitchell, circa 1930s

RIGHT Judaculla Rock in Jackson County, circa 1930s

Born in Hendersonville, NC, **ROBERT MORGAN** grew up in the Blue Ridge Mountains. He has published seven novels, five collections of stories, and sixteen collections of poetry, and, in addition to reviews, his work has been discussed in *NCLR* in several essays and interviews with the author. He has won awards and fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation, the American Academy of Arts and Letters, the National Endowment for the Arts, and the Rockefeller Foundation. His awards also include the Thomas Wolfe Prize, the James G. Hanes Poetry Prize, and the North Carolina Award for Literature, and he was inducted into the North Carolina Literary Hall of Fame. He is Kappa Alpha Professor of English Emeritus at Cornell University, where he taught for five decades.

The ensuing action serves as a personal corollary to this cosmic message. Immediately following the revelatory passage quoted above, Jim Evans turns away from the stone to be accosted by an unkempt woman who lures him down a path farther and farther into the bush, presumably to help rescue her father stricken by heart attack. Once far from parking lot and path, Jim is struck in the head and later returns to consciousness with a splitting headache to find himself not only robbed of phone and wallet but also totally naked, even shoeless, an old man utterly exposed to the elements and without help in sight – King Lear on the heath.

In the collection's titular story, "In the Snowbird Mountains," an aging protagonist named Troy finds himself in a similar situation. Recently recovered from surgery to remove a meningioma, Troy takes to the trail with backpack and cane, only to be trapped in the wilderness by flooding streams and to have his good leg broken in a landslide. Crawling on all fours, without shelter from the elements, confronted by a bear and then poachers, he likens himself to the biblical King Nebuchadnezzar, stripped of his power and on his "belly, eating grass with the kine" (121). In "Hurricane," we again find protagonists battling the elements. Two young men from southern Appalachia escape a sadistic deputy sheriff intent on whipping them with a chain, only to be whipped about by winds of the powerful storm. Reduced to little more than a

will to survive, they find delivery after jeopardizing their own safety in order to rescue another helpless victim of the storm.

The collection's two stories with child protagonists are set in the early and mid-twentieth century. Even these two stories of childhood center upon confrontations with mortality. "The Wonderful City" resonates powerfully with our post-COVID moment by relating the story of the typhoid epidemic of 1924. Having seen his grandmother succumb to the Spanish flu only five years before, a teenaged boy named Billy imagines typhoid as "a giant stepping over hills, breathing venom and swinging a long razor" (15). As with COVID-19, one of the features of typhoid that makes it so threatening is its unpredictability. According to Billy's father, "Two people who lived together, ate the same meals, drank the same water, slept in the same bed, might have opposite responses. One could sicken and die, while the other was untouched, or at worst suffered what was called 'walking typhoid'" (16). Billy becomes infected after he breaks his family's quarantine and travels to a nearby farm to play with a friend and afterward drinks from a pool of infected water. For many days thereafter he suffers recurrent fever dreams in which he imagines himself traveling beyond the mountains toward a wonderful city, where, in contrast to his biblically-inclined expectations of "streets paved with gold," he finds a paradise of sidewalks that "moved like conveyor belts

in both directions, and people soared above the streets on little platforms, holding to handlebars," where "pavements were transparent as glass or ice" (28). Here as in the other stories discussed, a confrontation with mortality corresponds with a revelation of deepening mystery.

The same is true in "The Secret Face," a tale inspired by Morgan's boyhood love of fishing.² A boy named Tony, while waiting for an elusive trout to find his bait, discovers a dead body immersed beneath the water and a head bobbing with the current. Instead of running for help or reporting the terrible find, as one might expect, Tony hordes his secret, and over the course of the following days the corpse becomes a source of complex emotions: feelings of misplaced culpability, along with the thrill of danger and pleasure at withholding the secret from other eyes. In contrast to Morgan's novels, which explore networks of kinship and community, *In the Snowbird Mountains* is distinguished by a focus on the isolated self confronting mortality.

The one story from the collection to explore relationships within an Appalachian community does so only after its narrator has passed out of this life to be with his dearly departed. "Beyond the Outer Banks" is a dialogue-driven drama (which Morgan reports in his Press 53 reading, he originally wrote as a play) featuring a businessman named Charles who is rushing from the office to spend a vacation with his family on Ocracoke

Island. When he takes a detour by his Raleigh home to pack a few remaining items, Charles is shocked to be greeted by a series of unexpected guests from his Appalachian childhood and youth. As the evolving dialogues reveal, each guest in some way saved Charles's life or furthered his success. There is his ninth-grade English teacher who gave him the A he did not deserve, thereby encouraging his confidence and paving the way for future, legitimate success. Next, he is greeted by the uncle who pulled Charles as a toddler away from a rooster's slashing spurs. He meets the cousin who in adolescence prevented him from eating rat poison. As he listens to each guest casually relate another story of life-saving rescue, Charles impatiently ponders how he might gracefully excuse himself so that he might catch the last ferry to the Outer Banks. The story opens with this driven businessman's observation, "When you're in a hurry all things conspire to frustrate you" (59), and the irony and deeper message of that statement become apparent to the reader well before they do to Charles.

The motif of boys and older men confronting their own mortality may have a biographical source. But they may also be related to Morgan's most recent biographical project: *Fallen Angel: The Life of Edgar Allan Poe* (2023). Poe's stories, of course, frequently feature the isolated ego confronting its own annihilation. The story from this collection that most



clearly echoes Poe – and especially Poe's preoccupation with premature burial – is "Devil's Courthouse," which involves an archaeology professor from a "small college in central North Carolina" (35), who returns to the mountains after reading news that a sizable gold nugget has been found in the vicinity of Devil's Courthouse, a rock formation near the Blue Ridge Parkway where he explored as a youth. Of greater interest to this professor of archaeology and "student of the Cherokees," the nugget was found near Native remains. Steeped in the lore of gold rushes, including the one in the Piedmont region of North Carolina that preceded those out west in California and the Yukon, the professor is prepared to be greeted by "hordes of frantic prospectors" ready to "claim, dig, fight, kill, and spoil the land" (36). Instead, he finds several couples distracted by cell phones and iPads. "If there had been smart phones in 1849," the narrator muses,

"there might not have been a Gold Rush." Before leaving the parking area, the professor encounters a park ranger who warns him of an escapee from the "mental wing of the VA hospital near Asheville," a man the ranger calls a "deranged Vietnam vet" (39). Later, exploring below the Devil's Courthouse, the professor encounters the veteran, who has apparently fled the mental hospital in search of freedom. Perhaps concerned that the professor is encroaching upon his sanctuary, the vet warns of a panther that has been "using up here," as well as "more skeletons in these woods than the one they found" (40). Later in the story, the veteran complains of being haunted by ghosts. Reference to hidden skeletons, ghosts, and to the panther (hunted to extinction in southern Appalachia), as well as to the veteran's participation in the tragic and disastrous US occupation of South Vietnam, all set up themes of oppression, exploitation, and violence, as well as retribution,

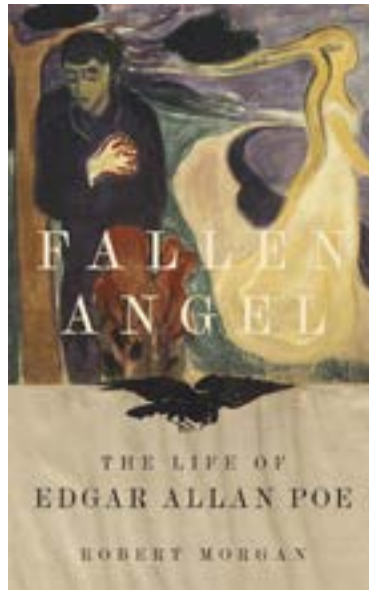
² According to Kevin Morgan Watson, Press 53 editor, during the online launch of *In the Snowbird Mountains and Other Stories*, Zoom 1 May 2023: web.

resurgence, and resistance to oppression, preparing us for the professor's discovery of long-buried evidence of violent contact between Cherokees and marauding conquistadors searching for gold.

Undeterred by the "mad-man's" warnings, the archaeology professor persists in his exploration until he unearths a cave entrance that leads down two hundred feet into the heart of the mountain, what he quickly assumes to have been a gold mine from the age of de Soto. The professor proceeds through the tunnel by way of stone steps he presumes to have been carved by Cherokees enslaved by Spanish prospectors in the sixteenth century. As he descends those steps into sulfurous, suffocating vapors, toward a terrifying revelation of retribution reminiscent of Poe's "The Cask of Amontillado," the professor is overcome by childhood lessons of "fire and brimstone, of hell deep under the earth. It was easy to see why our ancestors believed the Devil dwelt far down in the ground, tormented by sulfurous fumes and black flames. Where else could hell be but deep in the earth? And here I was beneath Devil's Courthouse" (50). Like Poe's stories of madmen and killers, of mariners and prisoners facing death, Morgan's story plumbs the darker spaces of the human psyche – both the professor's terror and mankind's propensity toward greed and pursuit of power over others.

Like Poe's Montessor at the end of "The Cask of Amontillado," Morgan's professor leaves the earth's crypt with a terrible secret of premature burial. But the protagonist of "Devil's

Courthouse" is no Montessor, and his decision to keep the secret to himself is not driven by dark self-interest. On the contrary, he *resists* self-interest and the glory of publishing this major archaeological find, in order to avoid perpetuating further suffering. His cultural sensitivity and respect for Cherokee oral history makes him aware that they may already know of the centuries-old secret he has just stumbled upon. A scene he surreptitiously witnesses aboveground at the story's end helps him to arrive



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at this choice of self-restraint. From a thicket of briars at the base of Devil's Courthouse, he watches the park ranger and a state trooper brutally subdue the armed veteran he'd met earlier in the story. The professor laments, "The modern world had its own atrocities, more than enough" (56).

In the hands of Poe, "The Devil's Courthouse" might have been written from the perspective of the "deranged" Vietnam

vet. Poe likely would have been drawn to the man's neurological difference and the alienation that helped to produce it. By contrast, the protagonists of Morgan's latest collection give the impression that they belong to a supportive community, even when they find themselves alone and deep in the wilderness enduring the most abject suffering. Although these communities tend to remain in backstory, or otherwise on the stories' peripheries, they are felt in the consciousness of the protagonists. In "Devil's Courthouse," for example, we share the professor's memories of teenage years hunting deer with his father in the Pisgah National Forest near Devil's Courthouse, and also of the "hardscrabble," "one-horse" farm where he'd grown up, a farm he'd been "happy to escape to attend college" but that now seems to draw him home, producing the feeling that he is "driving back in time" (37). Unlike Poe, whose mother died when he was still a toddler, who was abandoned by father and foster father, who lived an itinerate and impoverished existence, Robert Morgan's deep ties to family and community across time, and to their collective roots in Appalachia, yield protagonists who may suffer terrible pain and fear but who are never divested of their humanity. *In the Snowbird Mountains* celebrates both Appalachian community and the spirit of frontier exploration alive in this contemporary generation, imagining adventures in which even aging academics might defy death and glimpse fresh revelations of the mystery at the heart of creation. ■