

REFLECTIONS ON SELF AND FAMILY

a review by Jon Kesler

Julia Nunnally Duncan. *All We Have Loved*. Finishing Line Press, 2023.

JON KESLER is an organization development consultant, retired Air Force Officer, and aspiring author working on his first novel, based loosely on the letters his father wrote to his mother during World War II.

JULIA NUNNALLY DUNCAN is an award-winning author of twelve books of prose and poetry, including a new poetry collection *When Time Was Suspended* (Redhawk Publications, 2024). An alumnus of Warren Wilson College, she taught English and Humanities at McDowell Technical Community College for nearly forty years. Retired now from teaching, she lives in Marion, NC, with her husband, Steve.

ABOVE Julia Nunnally with her brother Steve, father Otto, mother Madeline, and sister-in-law, Mary at the author's childhood home, Christmas 1964

Captivating. Engaging. Memory inducing. In her recent memoir, *All We Have Loved*, Julia Nunnally Duncan brings her family, past and present, to life in a conversational style that authentically draws the reader to her inner circle. One can easily envision sitting around a campfire with her exchanging stories about childhood memories and accounts of family history passed down through the generations.

In *All We Have Loved*, Duncan captures the essence of familial storytelling. In so doing, she provides a service to her family and to her broader audience of readers. For her family, she documents the words of her ancestors, words that would otherwise be lost with the passage of time. Who among us does not have at least one flash of a memory we wish we could recall in greater detail, something we heard one of our parents or grandparents say about one of their elders? In addition to the pure enjoyment of reading her stories, perhaps Duncan's book may serve as the impetus for others to put pen to paper and document some stories of their own. Therein lies an ancillary service Duncan provides to her broader audience, over and above the enjoyment of her storytelling.

Duncan's writing presents the reader with a vivid portrayal of rural and smalltown life in western North Carolina during her own childhood years in the 1960s, as well as the childhoods of her ancestors. In passages like the following, she shares the innocence and joys of that life and demonstrates how she has carried those early influences into adulthood:

On those snowy days, the kids in my McDowell County neighborhood congregated to slide down our icy street on makeshift sleds and splatter each other in snowball free-for-alls. Sometimes our parents joined in the fun. But besides playing in the snow, I looked forward to a treat that came with the wintry weather: my mother's snow cream. . . .

"I wouldn't eat too much," my mother cautioned. "It might give you a sore throat." She always issued this warning when she made snow cream for us. . . . And I don't recall getting a sore throat from eating snow – either in my mother's snow cream or in the handfuls I'd scoop from the yard to sample.

The last snow cream I remember my mother making was in mid-March 1993, after a blizzard that dumped eighteen inches of snow on Marion and kept us trapped inside our houses for a week. My husband . . . oil lamps for light. . . .

When the highway was passable, Steve drove me in his Dodge Dakota to my parents' house, where I grew up. The power in their area, closer to town than ours, had been restored, and I looked forward to getting to their house and the comfort it promised.

My mother's dining room . . . While I sat at her table, she brought me a tall glass filled with snow cream and an iced tea spoon to eat it with.

"I hoped you'd make some snow cream," I said. I believe she made it especially for me.

It was the tastiest snow cream I'd ever eaten on one of the most memorable days of my life. I had missed seeing my parents, now in their seventies, and had worried about their safety during the blizzard. And frankly I felt like I'd been released from captivity after a week of isolation.

"This is so good," I said as I spooned the icy treat into my mouth and savored the sweet vanilla flavor.

"I hope it don't give you a sore throat," my mother said. (17–18)



COURTESY OF JULIA NUNNALLY DUNCAN

This excerpt exemplifies many of the things I found enjoyable about Duncan's writing. She gives a realistic sense of the enjoyment she felt as a child relishing a snow day with friends, as well as sharing a special time with her mother in the making and eating of snow cream. In between her words the reader can get a glowing picture of a rosy cheeked little girl fetching a dishpan full of snow, helping her mother with the mixing, and then sitting down to taste the fruit of her labor. Fast forwarding to adulthood, one can again envision Duncan sitting in the same chair, eating the last batch of snow cream her mother made, enjoying every bite, and most likely chuckling inside at her mother's caution about getting a sore throat. Without ever saying so, Duncan demonstrates the timeless love shared between mother and daughter.

Duncan's use of plain language helps the reader develop vivid mental images of her experiences and gives a sense of who her family members

really were. Throughout the book, she uses the words of others as they were spoken, including instances of incorrect grammar, which may reflect levels of education or possibly the colloquialisms of western North Carolina in that era,

bringing her characters to life.

In another recollection, Duncan reveals family history that might now be considered cringe-worthy behavior. Her uncle and aunt formed a duet, *The Cherokee Sweethearts*, and played at the Cherokee Indian Reservation on a small, illuminated stage, near a teepee, with a back display of hanging ornamental quilts.

When Louis spotted us in the audience, his face lit up. Dressed like an Indian chief in tan buckskin trousers, vest, and moccasins and a white shirt and white-feathered headdress, he stood and took the microphone from its stand.

"I'd like to welcome our family who've come here from Marion," he announced and pointed in our direction, his husky voice booming in the balmy air. Helen, wearing a white fringed buckskin skirt and sleeveless top and matching beaded headband and moccasins, grinned shyly as her husband made the announcement. . . .

In reality, Helen and Louis were no more Native American than the rest of our family, whose roots were more Scotch-Irish than anything. (36)

This reviewer appreciates that Duncan stayed true to her authentic style, not sanding and varnishing any rough edges off her family stories.

Through her writing – and perhaps being similar in age to Julia and her husband, Steve – I feel a kinship with them. Reading "The Wampus Kitty," I could see myself replacing Steve's trail bike with the snowmobile of my northern Wisconsin youth, regaling innocent children and unsuspecting tourists with tales of our local demon, the snow snake, a pink-eyed snake of indelible proportions, bearing a naturally fluffy coat of white ermine-like fur. Seeing oneself in another's writing is a pleasurable experience; providing that experience for the reader reflects masterful storytelling.

Duncan caps off *All We Have Loved* with "Her Clinchfield Childhood," a story in which she again relies on her conversational tone and use of authentic language to engage the reader in a conversation with her mother. This reviewer truly got the sense of being in the room with Madeline Davis Nunnally, taking in her firsthand account of growing up in the Clinchfield cotton mill village. And again, this gave me a sense of kinship with the author, too, as our mothers grew up in a similar era, under similar conditions, albeit in very different parts of the country.

For her documentation of these family stories, Duncan's children and all their children after them, as well as those of us in the broader reading audience, should be eternally grateful. ■