WRITING THE HURT

a review by John Lang

Charles Dodd White. *A Year without Months*. West Virginia University Press, 2022.

JOHN LANG is an English Professor Emeritus at Emory & Henry College, where he taught from 1983 to 2012. He is the author of *Understanding Fred Chappell* (University of South Carolina Press, 2000), *Six Poets from the Mountain South* (Louisiana State University Press, 2010), and *Understanding Ron Rash* (University of South Carolina Press, 2014), as well as the editor of *Appalachia and Beyond: Conversations with Writers from the Mountain South* (University of Tennessee Press, 2006), a collection of interviews from *The Iron Mountain Review*, which he edited for more than twenty years.

CHARLES DODD WHITE spent his early years as a writer in Asheville, NC, before moving to Knoxville, TN, to teach at Pellissippi State Community College. His books include a short story collection, *Sinners of Sanction County* (Bottom Dog Press, 2011; reviewed in *NCLR Online* 2013), which includes a short story first published in *NCLR* 2010. He is also editor of two volumes of short stories by Appalachian authors, both published by Bottom Dog Press: *Degrees of Elevation* (2010) and *Appalachia Now* (2015). He has received an individual artist's grant from the North Carolina Arts Council and a Jean Ritchie Fellowship from Lincoln Memorial University.

A Year without Months is fiction writer Charles Dodd White's first book of nonfiction after his publication of four novels and a collection of stories. White has received the Chaffin Award for Excellence in Appalachian Literature, and his third novel, *In the House of Wilderness* (2018), won the Appalachian Book of the Year Award. Born in Georgia in 1976, White didn't move to the mountains of western North Carolina until he turned eighteen but since then has identified himself and his writing with Appalachia.

This new book is a deeply moving collection of fourteen essays, most of them "written 'as a piece'" (xi), says White, following his eighteen-year-old son Ethan's suicide in late 2015. Only four of the essays seem to have been previously published. Collectively, the volume provides a detailed portrait of White's often dysfunctional extended family that includes, most prominently in addition to Ethan, his maternal grandparents, his mother, his uncle Buddy (his mother's brother, who helped raise White), two of his great-aunts (his grandfather's sisters), his first wife (Ethan's mother), and his stepson Iain.

As the book explains, when White was seven, his largely absent father also committed suicide, as Buddy much later did too. Domestic and familial strife marked the marriages of White's grandparents and his parents, of Buddy's relationship with his father and of White's mother's relationship with Buddy who, readers eventually learn, had sexually molested his sister when she was a child. White's own first marriage also failed, and his relationship with his mother steadily deteriorated as she increasingly relied on her parents and Buddy to care for her son. In her later years she suffered from both physical and mental illnesses, becoming addicted to pills and resentful of White for his second marriage (a happy one), just as she had been about his first. The alcoholism that besets Buddy is equally apparent in Buddy's father, making White's grandfather's behavior erratic and his temperament untrustworthy.

So grim a catalogue of the flaws in these people and the resulting pain they experience might make *A Year without Months* seem overwhelmingly depressing. Not so, however, because White is also attentive to their positive traits and their persistent capacity for acts of kindness and love, like his grandfather's construction of a backyard roller coaster for his seven-year-old grandson in "Coaster King." White's ability to empathize with others redeems what might otherwise become a bleak inventory of disasters, as he writes with keen sensitivity about loss and regret.

Although the essays are not arranged in strict chronological order, they do generally proceed from White's childhood to adulthood and from Ethan's childhood to his death. Many of these essays deal with interactions among the male relatives and the shaping of male identity through such activities as hunting, fishing, hiking, camping, canoeing, and drinking. "Guns formed me," the first essay begins (1), while another, "Bethlehem Bottoms," closes with a hidden White, at age twelve or thirteen, pointing a pistol at the men who had destroyed the hunting shack that Buddy and a friend had built. This concern with male bonding, father-son relationships, and traditional male pursuits is also evident in such essays as "Southern Man," "Those Boys," "Learning a Place by Its Waters," and "Under Weight," and it accounts for the inclusion of the previously published "Why I Don't Hunt Anymore," the book's most overtly political piece, with its sharp critique of what White refers to as a "burlesque of masculinity" and the "vain machismo" of many contemporary Southern males who embrace "reactionary politics" (89). Father-son relationships are also the principal focus of White's first novel, *Lambs of Men* (2010; reviewed in *NCLR* 2011), whose composition he describes in "What We Gain in the Hurt," the essay from which this review draws its title.

At the heart of this collection, running through its central pages, stands "Apart," the book's most extensive depiction of White's relationship with his mother. The title term encapsulates the deep-seated estrangement that characterizes so much of the family dynamics portrayed in the book. Whereas earlier essays were set primarily in Georgia, this one notes the importance for White of his move to Asheville with his mother and his subsequent identification with the mountains, a landscape that intensified his awareness as a child of the solace that immersion in nature can bring. As he states in a later essay, "we live beneath a sky of stark wonders" (135).

Somewhat surprisingly, White's relationship with Ethan receives less attention throughout most of the book than those with his mother and Uncle Buddy and even his grandfather. In part this dearth of detail results from White's near-total absence from Ethan during two years of the boy's childhood: "I had a ten-year-old boy I'd seen fewer than half a dozen times over the past couple of years" (94), he writes. At the time he judged himself "a failed father" (96). No doubt some of White's reticence about his relationship with Ethan arises from the pain such memories bring, along with continuing questions about how Ethan's death might have been prevented. In any case, except for the Preface, there is no mention of Ethan's suicide until the opening page of "Those Boys," the book's eleventh essay, though that essay focuses not on Ethan himself but on a restorative camping trip that White takes two months later in the company of friend and novelist Mark Powell and Powell's seven-year-old son Silas. Readers are left to imagine the unstated emotions evoked by the anguishing absence of Ethan while Silas exuberantly shares his "fanatical enthusiasm for raptors," especially the ospreys the group sights (121).

While two of the last three essays deal with excursions White makes with his stepson Iain, it is the volume's final essay, the one that gives the book its title, that offers the fullest portrait of Ethan. Artfully structured to incorporate flashbacks to various events in Ethan's life, the essay concludes with a poignant incident from the first weeks after his birth and presents a stunning image of White nurturing his son, who initially suffered from "failure to thrive" (161).

That powerful image will linger long with White's readers, as will his affirmation of love amid loss. White is an incisive, deeply humane writer, unafraid to confront his own failings as son and father and husband, yet keenly cognizant of not succumbing, as he believes several of his male relatives did, to the danger of allowing regret to "numb them to what remained of their lives" (8). Judging by these essays, White has successfully resisted that mistake. ■

COURTESY OF CHARLES DODD WHITE

ABOVE **Charles Dodd White with novelist Mark Powell's son Silas (left), and White's stepson Iain, Carver's Gap, NC, 2018**