

## AND WE ARE HERE, RIGHT HERE

a review by Jimmy Dean Smith

Ron Rash. *The Caretaker*.  
A Novel. Doubleday, 2023.

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**RON RASH** is the Parris Distinguished Professor of Appalachian Cultural Studies at Western Carolina University. He has been featured often in *NCLR*, including interviews in the 2004 and 2014 issues and essays about his work in 2004, 2011, and forthcoming in the 2024 print issue. His numerous honors include the 2020 Thomas Robinson Prize for Southern Literature, given to him by Mercer University's Spencer B. King, Jr. Center for Southern Studies, the North Carolina Award for Literature, and, in 2024, induction into the North Carolina Literary Hall of Fame in 2024.



COURTESY OF THOMAS CALDER, MOUNTAIN XPRESS

The title character of Ron Rash's eighth novel, *The Caretaker*, watches over both a country graveyard and the wife of his best friend, a soldier fighting in Korea. Polio has left Blackburn with a "drooping eye . . . the right side of his mouth pulled upward as if snagged by a fish-hook" (89), and the desire to "be around fewer people" (14). With only a slight limp signifying physical impairment, Blackburn digs graves in frozen ground and paints the church steeple. One of Blackburn's significant character traits is his "steadfastness" (90), perhaps partly developed from his experiences with polio and the ostracization he has suffered in his community due to his facial disfigurement.

When Jacob Hampton, the scion of smalltown gentry, is drafted, he first asks his parents to watch over his pregnant wife until he returns. Convinced that

Naomi, a chambermaid when she and Jacob met, is out for their money, the Hamptons (who own a store and a sawmill) refuse. A poor farm girl from Tennessee, Naomi falls beneath their social standards. Jacob next turns to his best friend, Blackburn, who accepts the charge. While Jacob is away, the caretaker and Naomi, both outsiders, grow close. The relationship lasts after she returns temporarily to her Tennessee home. But the Hamptons' hatred of Naomi grows; her very existence threatens the life they had planned for their son. When Jacob nearly dies in hand-to-hand combat, the Hamptons get the opportunity to end their son's marriage by convincing both Jacob and Naomi that the other has died.

The earlier Rash novel that most resembles *The Caretaker*, *The Cove* (2012),\* also

uses the tools of melodrama to examine loneliness, love, and the meanness of a small town. But *The Cove* does not consistently resist the tropes of that genre. *The Caretaker*, however, employs and contests them, as if Rash is examining his own often remarked upon tendency to grimness. Early in the novel, as if the author speaks to himself, one character tells another, "[Y]ou ought to dwell on happy notions" (30). In fact, auguring tragedy perhaps to come, *The Caretaker* does deal in multiple troublings. That now almost-forgotten scourge of the 1950s, polio, "the word even the grownups feared to speak" (145), renders parents helpless, murders children, traps them in iron lungs, or, as with Blackburn, makes them easy targets for smalltown bullies and self-doubt. Before Jacob Hampton was born, his sisters died in the Spanish flu pandemic. (The Hamptons' mania for protecting their last remaining child is understandable.) The presence of disabled young veterans – in 1951, even Great War soldiers are middle-aged – is a reminder that, in a war-racked half-century, personal and family disaster are a draft notice away.

The fragility of existence extends to place. *The Caretaker* is set in the landscape Rash often calls his spiritual home, a sentiment with which many of the novel's characters would concur. Laid up in a Korean hospital and haunted by thoughts of the North Korean soldier he killed, for example, Jacob Hampton takes comfort in thinking of Watauga County as "the true world" (110). But it is 1951, and even rural North Car-

olina changes. Flowers placed on the graves might have been handpicked on old farmsteads – the flowers had "long survived the hands that planted them" (140) – but could as well have been store-bought in Blowing Rock. Customers have their choice of traditional wares in the Hamptons' store, but Sunbeam also makes regular deliveries. Nehis and Cheerwines "swayed like fishing bobbers" in the "gray slush" of an icy drink box (105). So, too, does the dialogue establish a "true world" of language – "You a godly man?" (153); "I can't misdoubt she had to say good-bye" (239) – to expertly sketch out an agrarian reality giving way to a smalltown world that, seventy years later, is also fading from memory.

In *The Caretaker*, a man gathers quilts and makes his bed next to a grave. Men clasp slashed palms and declare blood brotherhood; voices overheard in darkness signify another world; a trout (Rash signature alert) signifies purity of a place well known and loved. But the gestures that eventually count most in *The Caretaker* are not so mythical. Rash, long concerned with the metaphorical snakes in his Watauga County Eden, finds room for simple goodness. Countering the tropes of smalltown bullies are the book's quiet heroes: a disabled World War II veteran who helps a war-shattered Jacob along; two smalltown buddies who have grown old together while reading Shakespeare and Keats; a "godly man" who does not doubt the sincerity of Blackburn's wishes. One remarkable instance of mundane decency appears in a three-page chapter

that hardly moves the narrative along. In it, Dr. Egan and Catherine, elderly widowed people, meet every other Sunday for lunch and gin rummy. Those afternoons they also "leave her parlor for her bedroom [and] drape their clothes neatly on the divan." The adjectives Rash employs for their lovemaking – "[p]redictable, even staid, but pleasing" (121–22) – are funny and precise and gentle. Catherine's wedding picture remains on the mantle; the doctor recollects forty years of marriage and telling his adult children at their mother's funeral that "he had been blessed" (122). It is the most romantic, sexiest thing Rash has ever written.

A little more than halfway through the novel, believing that his wife is dead and needlessly suspicious of Blackburn's friendship with Naomi, Jacob flashes back to the night he nearly died next to a frozen river in Korea. To overcome this traumatic episode, he practices an exercise his elementary school teacher used, surveying the objects in the Hamptons' store until the familiar world reemerges: "Jujubes, Mary Janes, Bit-O-Honey" (164). While the catalog of candies might trigger a sugar rush of nostalgia in some readers, here they are items that situate Jacob in a world he loved and wants to love again. The teacher, writes Rash, "would point out continents and countries [on the classroom globe] but always let her finger return to the anvil shape of North Carolina. *And here we are*, she'd said, *right here*" (164). With this novel of grand emotions and quiet blessings set *here*, Rash has written his finest novel. ■

ABOVE Ron Rash at the Chapel Hill Baptist Church Cemetery on the Western Carolina University campus

\* Read Zackary Vernon's interview with Rash about *The Cove* in *NCLR* 2014.