

TIMELY PORTRAYALS OF A PLACE

a review by Elaine Thomas

David Joy. *Those We Thought We Knew*. G.P. Putnam's Sons, 2023.

C.L. Willis. *Hillbilly Odyssey: Resilience in a Small Mountain Mill Town*. Redhawk Publications, 2024.

ELAINE THOMAS lives in Wilmington, NC. She's been a college communications director, journalist, and hospital chaplain. Her short stories, essays, and book reviews have appeared in numerous publications.

DAVID JOY lives in Jackson County, NC. *Those We Thought We Knew* won the 2023 Willie Morris Award and Thomas Wolfe Memorial Literary Award. He is the author of four previous novels published by Putnam's: *When These Mountains Burn* (2020; reviewed in *NCLR Online* 2021), which won the 2020 Dashiell Hammett Award; *The Line That Held Us* (2018; reviewed in *NCLR Online* 2019), which won the Southern Book Prize; *The Weight of This World* (2017), and *Where All Light Tends to Go* (2015; reviewed in *NCLR Online* 2016). Read Leah Hampton's interview with Joy in *NCLR* 2024.

C.L. WILLIS, a native of Canton, NC, moved back to the mountains after retirement. He is Professor Emeritus of sociology and criminology at UNC Wilmington. *Hillbilly Odyssey* is his first book.

North Carolina is blessed with many fine Appalachian writers. These writers share a regional culture, but their individual experiences and truths vary, as do their literary styles and approaches. For those of us who don't hail from the western part of the state, their range of stories and insights bring us as close to understanding the complexities of the region as we may be likely to come.

Two recent books give us particularly timely examinations not only of a specific Appalachian area, but also of broader American divisions and tensions. David Joy's novel *Those We Thought We Knew* and C.L. Willis's memoir *Hillbilly Odyssey* are set in rural communities located only a half hour or so apart.

Joy's story may be fictional, but both authors draw on lived experience within their communities. The settings are real and the descriptions precise, so that, as with all strong writing, the particular sheds light on the universal. Both demonstrate awareness of the greater human condition in all its complexities, good and bad. Both examine the damage done when people view themselves as set apart from, and somehow more deserving than, others.

In the heat of election season, let's be absolutely clear: neither of these books address party politics. But they do raise timely questions that illuminate underlying differences in how individuals understand power and community. Those questions are useful for reflection as each of us seeks to understand our country's current bitter divisions.

C.L. Willis, as the title *Hillbilly Odyssey* suggests, confronts the portrayal of Appalachia and its people in J.D. Vance's *Hillbilly Elegy*. Like Vance, Willis builds a memoir from anecdotal childhood reminiscences, followed by his unfolding educational and career success. Both happen to call their grandmothers Mamaw. There, any similarity ends. In fact, Willis's first chapter is titled, "What Vance Got Wrong."

Worth noting: the publication date of *Hillbilly Odyssey* was six months before Vance unexpectedly became the Republican Party's 2024 vice-presidential nominee. Also notable: although Vance's book propelled him into national prominence, *Hillbilly Elegy* was published way back in 2016, at a time when Barack Obama was still President. Willis wasn't writing against a political candidate but against the negative stereotypes of Appalachia perpetuated by Vance in his book.

Willis points out that Vance is hardly alone in drawing negative stereotypes of the region. Pop culture has long done so (think *Beverly Hillsbillies*, *Snuffy Smith*, and *Deliverance*). Willis writes, "Appalachia is often viewed as a unique world which is separate and different from larger society. It is seen as a mix of ancient mountains, unique culture, and eccentric residents. . . . Appalachia is characterized as being plagued by violence, substance abuse, and poverty" (19). Willis concedes that Vance might have a compelling personal narrative, but states, "Vance's memoir is a celebration of self, not a portrayal of place" (11). In telling



COURTESY OF C.L. WILLIS

his own personal story, Willis frames it analytically within a much larger, more complicated cultural context. He does give us "a portrayal of a place."

An elegy is a lament for that which has been lost. Vance might have been lamenting, but Willis is not. He wrote an *odyssey*, a tale of journey and adventure, of leaving home, making it in the outside world, and returning to the place where one began and truly belongs. He also allows for progression within the community itself. In another chapter, "The Times They Are A-Changing," he describes the many cultural changes he witnessed during his youth.

Willis grew up on a farm just outside of the small town of Canton. He went on to earn a doctorate in sociology and become a professor. In telling his story, he uses the mind and eye of the trained sociologist to look back at the family and community of his childhood. He writes about those early years with genuine warmth, even

when the experiences might have involved hardships.

Willis argues that what Vance "got wrong" is blaming the victims: "By focusing on his own dysfunctional family and early life experiences, [Vance] concludes that the Appalachian culture and the lack of human agency of its people are the causes of the crisis of poverty, substance abuse, and despair" (16). Without denying the challenges that have occurred in the region, Willis honors the traditions and influence of his community, and of its institutions such as schools, churches, and organized sports. Willis focuses on the strength and character that can be found within Appalachian individuals and communities, whereas Vance "blamed the Appalachians and their culture for their problems while ignoring the larger social context they were facing" (17). Yes, limited opportunities and structural barriers exist and engender poverty. But as the subtitle Willis chose for *Hillbilly*

Odyssey indicates, the trait he notices most in the proud, hard-working people he lives among is *resilience*.

In particular, Willis examines the central role the paper mill in Canton has played as provider of families' financial stability and progress, as a source of social connection and identity, and as an economic engine for the town. At one point in Canton's history, faced with a buyout of the mill, the workers banded together and located an investment firm that would share ownership with them:

This episode involving the purchase of the paper mill by its employees shows the resilience and industriousness of the people in the region. When faced with a challenge that threatened the economic stability of their town, they responded with intelligence, planning, organization, and determination to save the plant. It flies in the face of the tired old stereotypes perpetuated by Vance and others of mountain folk as lazy and unsophisticated. (53–54)

Just as Willis finished writing *Hillbilly Odyssey* in 2023, the town's people again found themselves facing difficult news. Current owners announced plans to close the paper mill. In response, local leaders and business owners were proactively planning ways to respond to the crisis. A job fair had been set up, and the local community college had begun training classes to help ex-mill workers prepare for other careers. "The future for the town and its people is uncertain," Willis writes. "But what is certain is their resilience and determina-

ABOVE C.L. Willis (boy in overalls) and family at their Crossroad Hill home in the North Carolina mountains, circa 1952

tion. . . . Through perseverance and grit, they will survive. Much of the town may change, but its values remain" (180).

Hillbilly Odyssey includes a valuable bibliography for those of us who might wish to learn more about Appalachian lives and voices, particularly in western North Carolina. Among writers on the list, and cited several times within Willis's book, is David Joy. One area Willis identifies as needing more exploration involves the commonalities of stereotyping of white Appalachians and African Americans. He describes growing up during segregation: "The racial world was separate, and it was not equal" (63). He notes the continued effects and tensions from that unfairness, and it is just that topic that Joy brings to life in *Those We Thought We Knew*.

David Joy draws on his intimate understanding of a place and its people to examine what's frequently been called America's original sin, our troubled history with race and white supremacy. He set *Those We Thought We Knew* amidst protests against the prominent display of Confederate monuments. A community is forced to look at wounds that linger, to wrestle with difficult realities the people prefer to pretend have long been resolved.

The novel, Joy's fifth, is a true page-turner. It is a mystery, the plot built around crimes that grow from and reflect community divisions. It contains many layers, primary among them a condemnation of racism and

white supremacy. This layer includes the obvious need for those of us who are white to listen, to learn, and to be honest with ourselves about that history. Among other interesting themes are belonging versus being an outsider, the interdependence of life within a rural community, and the power of art as an instrument of social activism.

Those We Thought We Knew is a character-driven story. It may be a cliché to say location functions like a character, but in this case it's also definitely true. From a "mixed brood of laying hens" (21), to "paintbrush clouds streaked a purple and orange sky" (33), to a Carolina wren that "flittered onto the porch and hopped along the weathered planks" (71), to the outer edges of a garden lined with river rock "carried stone by stone from the stream decades before" (385), you know you're in the hands of a writer who knows this place in detail and who loves its natural world.

As the story opens, a stranger, Willie Dean Cawthorn, shows up in town and gets arrested for public drunkenness and vagrancy. He turns out to be a Klansman from out of state, carrying a notebook with a list of local names, some of them prominent individuals.

Another visitor to town is Toya Gardner, a young African American artist from Atlanta. In a sense an outsider, Toya also has deep generational ties to this mountain community. She is staying with her grandmother, Vess Jones (who she just hap-

pens to call Maw Maw). Toya's late grandfather, Lon, lingers prominently in her and Vess's memories. When Toya visited her grandparents in summers as a child, Lon "always tried to put the land in her because he was scared to death the city would wash the mountains clean out of her blood." Toya's mother, Dayna, a lawyer in Atlanta, "had run off and left at eighteen, shedding the mountains she was from like a set of outgrown clothes" (32).

Toya's staying with her grandmother while completing a graduate thesis. She works in an art studio at the local university. Her thesis project explores family genealogy and what it means to come from a place. As part of this, Toya is casting a set of molds of family faces, capturing similarities in expressions of emotions through the generations. Her work, her devotion to it, and the change it brings both to her and to others contribute to the growing awareness of tensions beneath the community's surface. At one point Toya thinks, "The impact that work makes on the world, that's more important than the work itself" (53). For Toya, art is "an instrument of social change" (54).

In that spirit, she creates two other pieces of art. One involves digging graves at the original location of an AME Zion church and cemetery, which had been moved to make way for other construction. From that relocation, "the pain had been passed down from one generation to the next, and that's what so many people

could never understand unless it was their history, unless this was their story. For certain groups in America, trauma was a sort of inheritance" (6).

The other action involves pouring red paint over the hands of a Confederate statue: "The idea and image were simple, but what she feared might get lost was that it wasn't just the blood on the hands of the Confederacy, nor the blood of bondage that had drawn out for nearly 250 years before the Confederacy even existed. It was the legacy, the open wound that continued to bleed 145 years after the fact" (69). A large percentage of the residents of the town and surrounding area get drawn into the conflict when protests and counterprotests break out around the monument. Two brutal crimes occur in the aftermath.

Sheriff John Coggins knows Toya's family well. He and her grandfather Lon fished and hunted together. Now on the cusp of retirement, Coggins had "never been a man to take a day off and had worn a standard patrol uniform same as the deputies his entire time in office so as not to appear different from the men and women who worked for him" (17). Those who work for him include Deputy Ernie Allison and Deputy Leah Green, who also play key roles in the novel.

Joy has many gifts as a novelist, among them strong interiority, an ability to balance multiple points of view, and vivid descriptive power. He deploys them in service of



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big, big questions. *Those We Thought We Knew* is a traditional mystery in form, and like any good mystery the questions it asks are going to stay with you. An astute reader might figure out who committed the crimes before the reveal. Or not. But even if that happens, it in no way diminishes this story's wallop. What matters here is not as much who-done-it as why it was done.

In searching for a comparable writer of dark mysteries whose gifts bring a specific place to life on the page, the name that sprang to my mind may be surprising: Boston writer Dennis Lehane might seem an unlikely comparison (New England rather than the South, urban not rural), but his specificity of setting and characters similarly captures and conveys the frailty and endurance of being human. Like Joy, he also tackles questions surrounding America's history of racial injustice.

In examining the portrayals of Appalachian communities by Joy and Willis, the word community covers a lot of territory. It implies a shared place but also people who share common concerns, at times in fellowship, at times in conflict.

In *Hillbilly Odyssey* Willis writes, "[A]s Wolfe suggests, you may not go home again and expect it to be the same as when you left it. But it is still home. . . . The values you grew up with remain. The work ethic perseveres in the face of adversity. Folks still help their neighbors and take care of their family, and church bells still ring. Yes, home has changed, but it is still home" (181).

Those We Thought We Knew conveys darkness and the deep pain of characters. Yet, in Joy's beautifully written final section, Vess meditates on the faithfulness of her connection to home: "The woman will never leave this place. She cannot leave this mountain" (384). ■