

FEARSOME ACCOMPLISHMENT

a review by Randall Wilhelm

Robert M. West and Jesse Graves,
Editors. *Robert Morgan: Essays
on the Life and Work* (McFarland
Press, 2022).

RANDALL WILHELM is editor of *The Ron Rash Reader* (2014; reviewed in *NCLR Online* 2017), *Summoning the Dead: Essays on Ron Rash* (2018; reviewed in *NCLR Online* 2019), which he co-edited with Zackary Vernon (both published by University of South Carolina Press), and *Conversations with Robert Morgan* (University Press of Mississippi, 2019), which he co-edited with Jesse Graves. He holds degrees in both art and literature, including an MA from Clemson University and a PhD from the University of Tennessee. He is recently retired from teaching after thirty years in the classroom. Read his essay "Expressive Interplay through Pictures and Words: The Art and Design in *NCLR* 2017.

ABOVE Old Morgan House, circa 1914 (Robert Morgan's father is the child on the far left; Morgan's great grandfather, J.B. F.Pace, the model for Pa in *The Truest Pleasure* is on the far right.)



COURTESY OF ROBERT MORGAN

After thirty-two books of poetry, short fiction, novels, and nonfiction over the last six decades, it would be easy to crown Robert Morgan the elder statesman of Appalachian literature. Morgan's award-winning work has been recognized for its impeccable craft, concision, and depth, and a chiseled prose and verse as clean and strong as if cut from mountain stone and teeming with inscrutable mystery. "Wonder" is the word many scholars wield when spelunking through the layered strata of Morgan's mountain oeuvre, a mother lode still producing the purest gold, as two recent publications – *The Oratorio of Time: Fourteen Poems and Three Stories* (2022) and *In the Snowbird Mountains* (2023) – powerfully attest. In *Robert Morgan: Essays on the Life and Work*, editors Robert M. West and Jesse Graves offer a collection of superb essays that explore fundamental aspects of Morgan's work throughout his long career, from *Zirconia Poems* (1969) to the break-

through novel *Gap Creek* (1999) to the cosmic poetry of *Dark Energy* (2015).

In the preface, West lays claim to the collection's primary goal, that "the greatest praise" readers and scholars can offer a writer "is their repeated, sustained attention" (2). As the first essay collection devoted solely to Morgan's writing, the book certainly achieves its ambition. In four distinct sections, readers move contrapuntally between Morgan's work and his life, from the opening essays "On the Poetry" to a photo gallery in "People and Places" to studies "On the Prose" and, finally, to Morgan's own thoughts about place and writing in "In His Own Words." This collection assembles some of the best writing on Morgan's work over the years and includes insightful new essays that provide constructive approaches to seeing even deeper into Morgan's imagined world.

Since Morgan began his career as a poet, the collection rightfully begins with a

focus on his verse that includes four foundational essays previously published by fellow poets Fred Chappell (1976), William Harmon (1981), Rita Sims Quillen (1989), and Michael McFee (1990). These essays form the groundwork for the study of Morgan's poetic sensibilities and signature aesthetics. Chappell's "appreciation" anoints Morgan as a poet of the first order and offers a catalogue of thematic material essential to Morgan's vision: "the outlines of this landscape are primitive; they consist of the enormous and imperious operations of nature, of a society of poor, narrow, and proudly embittered people" (7). Harmon's essay on "Pelagian Georgics" shows how Morgan refuses "the easy equations between grief and doom" (15) in poems that "may be the last dwelling place of oldtime agriculture and country life in general" (22). Harmon's essay is essential reading for understanding Morgan's distinct craft and his use of difficult and unusual poetic forms, especially the feverish "three hundred and fifty roughly decasyllabic" line "Mockingbird" (18).

Recent essays from Bhisham Bherwani (2015), Jim Clark (2022), and West (2022) provide longer views into Morgan's poetic work. Bherwani's analysis of the "elegiac strain" examines how Morgan's "intimacy with

COURTESY OF HENDERSON COUNTY HERITAGE MUSEUM



perennial decay and renewal seems to underlie his urge to revive in poems what is in other ways irretrievable (his childhood, its people, the past in general)" (65). Clark's look at the "musica speculativa," the "medieval music theory . . . mathematics, and mysticism, underpinned by Pythagorean notions" (53), considers how "music is the 'master metaphor'" that synthesizes and unifies Morgan's "quadrivium of music, writing, history and nature into a harmonious whole" (61). West's concluding essay on "The Missing as Muse" explores the role of absence, arguing that some of Morgan's "best poems treat disappearances as sources of wonder and even inspiration" (82).

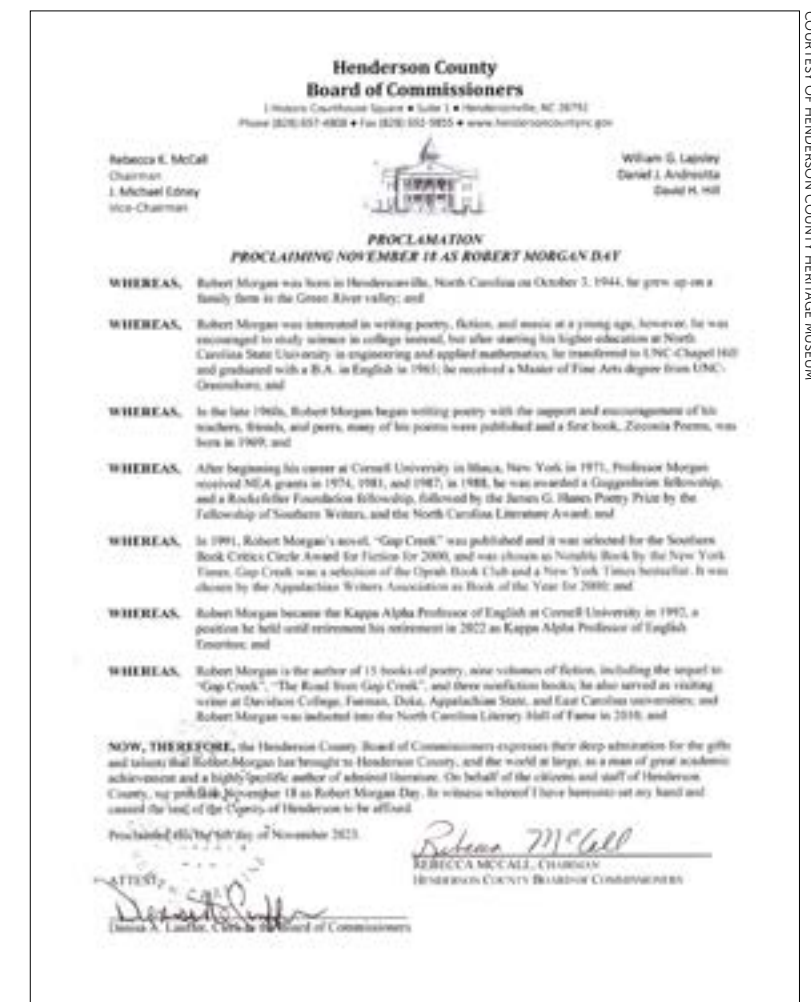
Section Three, "On the Prose," features eight essays, three that address Morgan's work in short fiction, four that focus on the novels, and one that examines

his nonfiction work. In examining the stories in *The Mountains Won't Remember Us* (1992), Paul Lincoln Sawyer points to the "dramatic duality" in Morgan's work, describing the writer as "a poet of nature whose fiction contains an unusually complex view of social history . . . which is also a kind of geology – a record of the endurance and decay of the earth as well as humans and their products" (114). Suzanne Booker-Canfield connects Morgan's poetry to the stories in *The Balm of Gilead Tree* (1999), placing him in the Emersonian tradition of American Romanticism, and showing how his attraction "to patterns of reduplication, linkage, and chiasmus in formal poems" is used "to create some of the same effects" in the fiction (127).

In examining Morgan's novels, George Hovis argues for *The Truest Pleasure* (1994) and

This Rock (2001) as companion pieces, or "two parts of a whole" (174), because the two protagonists' "exploration of faith are in dialogue" with each other regarding "the timeless questions of faith and work and body and spirit" (175). In similar fashion, Martha Greene Eads and Thomas Alan Holmes discuss the connective patterns of "love" and "faith" between Morgan's best-selling novel *Gap Creek* and its companion *The Road from Gap Creek* (2013). Rebecca Godwin's look at "storytellers" in *The Hinterlands* (1994) and Harriette C. Buchanan's examination of the "madrigal of time" in Morgan's Revolutionary War novel *Brave Enemies* (2003) offer productive readings of these less celebrated, but important, works.

Sections Two and Four focus on Morgan's "life," beginning with Graves's essay and a gallery of twenty-three photographs of Morgan's ancestors and family, many of whom appear as avatars in the poetry and fiction. In Morgan's work, Graves argues, regardless of genre, "three elements emerge as constant presences . . . family, landscape, and history" (98). Section Four offers readers Morgan's personal thoughts in "A Sense of Place" and in a recent interview with West and concludes with an extensive bibliography that readers and scholars alike will find



COURTESY OF HENDERSON COUNTY HERITAGE MUSEUM

indispensable. *Robert Morgan: Essays on the Life and Work* is a seminal achievement for the study of this North Carolina writer's award-winning fiction and poetry. Coming in the footsteps of *Conversations with Robert Morgan*, edited by Randall Wil-

helm and Jesse Graves (2019), West's and Graves's collection offers a range of voices that reveal more insightful gems into the wonders of Morgan's mountain world. As Chappell knew so well, Morgan's work is a "fear-some accomplishment" (10). ■

ROBERT M. WEST is the editor of the two-volume *Complete Poems of A.R. Ammons* (W.W. Norton, 2017; reviewed in *NCLR Online* 2019). His poems, essays and book reviews have appeared in *Southern Poetry Review*, *Tar River Poetry*, *Pembroke Magazine*, *Appalachian Journal*, *Asheville Poetry Review*, *Carolina Quarterly Cultures*, *Poetry*, and *NCLR*. He is also the author of two poetry chapbooks, *Out of Hand* (Scienler Press, 2007), and *Convalescent* (Finishing Line Press, 2011). He has an MA and a PhD in English and Comparative Literature from UNC Chapel Hill and a BA in English from Wake Forest University. He is Professor of English at Mississippi State University, where he is an Associate Editor of *Mississippi Quarterly*.

JESSE GRAVES is the author of three poetry collections and co-author of a fourth. He has co-edited several volumes of poetry and scholarship, including three volumes of *The Southern Poetry Anthology* (Texas Review Press), *Jeff Daniel Marion: Poet on the Holston* (University of Tennessee Press, 2016), and *The Complete Poems of James Agee* (University of Tennessee Press, 2018). He received the 2014 Philip H. Freund Prize for Creative Writing from Cornell University, and the 2015 James Still Award for Writing about the Appalachian South from the Fellowship of Southern Writers. In 2015, he was inducted into the East Tennessee Writers Hall of Fame. With a PhD from the University of Tennessee, he has taught at East Tennessee State University since 2009.

OPPOSITE Rebecca McCall, a member of the Henderson County Board of Commissioners, reading the proclamation (ABOVE) declaring November 18 as Robert Morgan Day in Henderson County during a panel discussion featuring, left to right, novelist Terry Roberts, Robert Morgan, and Jesse Graves, co-Editor of *Robert Morgan: Essays on the Life and Work*, Hendersonville, NC, 18 Nov. 2023

"NOW THEREFORE, the Henderson County Board of Commissioners expresses their deep admiration for the gifts and talents that Robert Morgan has brought to Henderson County and the world at large, as a man of great academic achievement and a highly prolific author of admired literature . . . we proclaim November 18 as Robert Morgan Day."