

From Ragsales to Mumblety-peg:

The Search for Self in Appalachian Young Adult Literature

"I've heered tell a little 'sang is quickening to the blood."

"Woods full of 'sang there used to be, but I hain't seen a prong in ten year."

"So scarce it might' nigh swaps for gold."

"Don't reckon there's a sprig left on Carr Creek."

"Well, now, it ain't all gone. I seed a three-prong coming up from Blackjack, blooming yellow. I see that 'sang standing so feisty, and I says to myself: 'Ain't that a sight? Nobody's grubbed him yet,' and I broke a bresh to hide it." (James Still, *River of Earth*, 1978, p. 54-55)

You've just read a sampling of the rich language from Still's *River of Earth* in which two mountain characters are discussing the scarcity of 'sang or ginseng. Appalachia is not just about languages; it is a place and a culture. As a place, Appalachia is a chain of mountain ranges that begins in Canada and stretches all the way south to Alabama. The ranges include the Blue Ridge Mountains, the Great Smoky Mountains, and the Allegheny Mountains in the states of Georgia, Tennessee, Kentucky, Virginia, West Virginia, North Carolina, and Maryland. As a culture, Appalachians are a people who value their freedom, independence, and solitude. They live in the high misty mountains along the east coast of the United States where they are surrounded by natural beauty, wild game, roots and herbs for food and medicine. For mountain people, the strongest most unifying value is the sense of place (Jones, 1994). Mountain people love the land. Although the natural resources of this land have been exploited and squandered for profit, the Appalachian culture remains strong and functional.

In the search for self, young adults from this region need to read novels about the culture, people, language, and setting of Appalachia. They need to be able to identify with the subject matter and recognize themselves in the fictional characters. The characters should face situations that students know, or at least have heard of, and react in ways the students can understand. Novels with Appalachian settings and stories not only represent and validate adolescents who are from this region, but they also provide young adults from other cultures a new understanding and appreciation of life outside their societal norm. Since Appalachian adolescents often have difficulty finding themselves in literature whether due to scarce availability, the "hillbilly" stereotype, or traditional curriculum requirements, a survey of current young adult novels that are both well-written and sensitive to the cultural and social realities of Appalachian children should prove valuable.

Culturally conscious literature should reflect Appalachian life experiences. As Simms (1982) defines other regional literature, this means that the major characters are Appalachian, the story is told from their perspective, the setting is in an Appalachian community or home, and the text includes some means of identifying the characters as Appalachian – physical descriptions, language, cultural traditions and so forth. If we use the same criteria to judge the value of Appalachian literature as for other regional genres, it should (1) deal with the land as it impinges on humans, (2) deal in-depth with individuals involved in universal conflicts or learning some universal truth, (3) reject stereotyping, and (4) provide a heightened

sense of place. These criteria will inform our examination of young adult literature.

The Land As It Impinges on Humans

Cherokee Removal

The first Appalachians were the Cherokee, who lived in the mountains hundreds of years before Columbus arrived in North America. A woodland tribe, they farmed, hunted, and gathered wild berries. Their society was based on a system of clans, with women heading households. Then, in the 1700s the first people of European descent made their way to the region. For a while, Native Americans and the new settlers coexisted peacefully. But as competition for land intensified, a series of fierce battles took place, culminating in the forcible removal of the Cherokee to an Oklahoma reservation in 1838.

Cornelissen's *Soft Rain: A Story of the Cherokee Trail of Tears* (1998) tells a fictional story based on the Cherokee march westward, an incredible 700 miles without adequate food, clothing, and shelter. Soft Rain is nine years old when the soldiers arrive without warning and command her mother to go with them, taking only the possessions they can pack and carry. They are forced to leave behind Soft Rain's blind grandmother, her father and brother, and even her puppy. The long and dangerous journey that takes them across rivers and over mountains, through rain and snow, is a dreadful adventure for Soft Rain and her people. Historical records affirm that fully 16,000 Cherokee died of starvation, disease, exposure to the weather, or mistreatment by soldiers. Soft Rain's inspiring story of strength and hope is a testament to all those who lived through the Trail of Tears.

Cherokee Sister (2000), by Debbie Dadey, is another story about two girls from different backgrounds that form a lasting friendship in spite of the Cherokee removal. Allie McAllister is white and comes from a farming family, struggling to make it during hard times. Leaf Sweetwater is a Cherokee Indian who lives with her grandmother, owner of the Cherokee trading post. Despite their economic and scholastic differences, Allie and Leaf become best friends. One Sunday, Allie slips out of church to visit Leaf at the trading post. While at Leaf's house Allie tries on a beautiful white animal-skin dress Leaf has in her closet, and Leaf braids her hair. They are so happy to

look like sisters, but here is where the adventure begins. While Allie is wearing the dress, an army captain comes to the door to take the Cherokee Indians away to the new Indian Territory. Allie is mistaken for a "half-breed" and is taken along with Leaf's family down the Trail of Tears. As conditions on the trail grow more desperate every day, hope of rescue fades, while prejudice and terror mount. Allie and Leaf's friendship strengthens as they make this journey and endure many hardships together.

Industrialization forces change

Settlers in Appalachia from the 1700s all the way to the late 1800s were almost all subsistence farmers. Well into the twentieth century many people in Appalachia continued to get by on small homesteads, eking out a living with horses or mules – and some still do. However, in the late 1800s, the railroad began to penetrate the mountains, and with travel facilitated, industry followed. This abrupt change dramatically altered both landscape and people. First came the lumber industry, which provided jobs, but also ravaged the mountainsides and polluted the streams. In time, entire hillsides were eroded by runoffs. Then, with the industrialization of America, coal became a necessity. Since the mountains of Appalachia were rich in anthracite, a superior grade of coal, the industry grew rapidly. Not only were Appalachian farmers lured into the mines, but African-Americans were imported as cheap labor, and European immigrants migrated to the "company towns" built by the coal industry in hope of fulfilling their American dream. According to Bial (1997), forty percent of the country's production came from Appalachian coalfields during World War II. However, after the war, the demand fell, mining became mechanized, and fewer workers were needed. In the 1950s, workers were let go and forced into government assistance if they wanted to remain in the mountains. While the natural resources of this land had been exploited and squandered for profit, the Appalachian culture remained. Young adult literature, then, should reflect the struggle to preserve the land and the culture in spite of those who would destroy it.

Bartoletti's *Growing Up in Coal Country* (1996) captures the legacy of life in coal country. Bartoletti uses oral history, archival documents, and an abundance of black-and-white photographs to capture

mining life at the turn of the twentieth century. As she reports her careful research, she tells the story of what life was like for the children of the coal country in northeastern Pennsylvania. She writes of the desperate working conditions, the deplorable squalor found in the “patch villages,” and the ever-present dangers of the occupation. All the stories point out the enormous hardships suffered before there were effective unions and child-labor laws. The words and work of children are weighted equally with the efforts of the Molly McGuires, Mother Jones, and other adult players. Captioned, black-and-white photographs appear on almost every page, allowing the images to play a powerful role in retelling the children’s stories.

In another nonfiction work, *In Coal Country* (1987) by Judith Hendershot and illustrated by Thomas Allen, the life of a miner’s family is vividly seen through the eyes of his young daughter in the nostalgic glimpse of growing up in an Ohio coal-mining town during the 1930’s. This family lived in a place called Company Row built by the owners of the Black Diamond Mine. The young narrator describes playing on the gob piles which remained after the good coal was sorted out and dumped into railroad cars, collecting coal that rolled off the cars and cooling off by standing under Bernice Falls. Kids played hopscotch and mumblety-peg in the dirt and built campfires in the summer, but Christmas was her favorite holiday when they cut down the tree and roasted goose for dinner. While the reminiscence of childhood is innocent, the power of the book lies in the dark counterpoint that underlies text. The illustrations portray the darkness of the environment from black creek water, to black engine smoke, to grit on the table.

In Baldacci’s *Wish You Well* (2000), eighty-year-old Louisa Mae has to fight hard to keep her land from the Southern Valley Coal and Gas Company. They want to buy her land, not just the mineral rights to it, but there is no way Louisa will sell it to them. “You ain’t scalping this land like you done everywhere else” (260). She said, “I got me a deed to this land says I own it, but nobody really owns the mountains. I just watching over ’em while I’m here. And they give me all I need” (260). No argument coal company officials make for a good living and a better life convince her. Louisa stands her ground. She means for her land to stay in the family, and intends to pass it on to her

great-grand children, Lou and Oz, just as she had inherited it from those who went before her. Louisa’s lawyer puts it this way in the courtroom:

“You know she’d never sell her land, because that ground is as much a part of her family as her great-grandchildren waiting to see what’s going to happen to them. You can’t let Southern Valley steal the woman’s family. All folks have up on that mountain is each other and their land. That’s all. It may not seem like much to those who don’t live there, or for people who seek nothing but to destroy the rock and trees. But rest assured, it means everything to the people who call the mountains home” (359).

Moving as his speech was the verdict goes in favor of Southern Valley. There was no justice for Louisa Mae Cardinal, but in the end the children are able to remain in the mountains they had come to love.

Another book that reflects the struggle to preserve the land and the culture in spite of strip-mining destruction is Hamilton’s Newbery Medal Book, *M.C. Higgins, The Great* (1974). Mayo Cornelius Higgins is an African-American hero who must come to terms with his own cultural heritage in order to survive. As he sits on his gleaming, forty-foot steel pole on a bicycle seat towering over his home, he surveys his world and wonders how to save Sarah’s Mountain from the strip mining spoil heap that threatens to come crashing down on his ancestral home and family. Sarah’s Mountain was named after M.C.’s slave ancestor who, like Hamilton’s Grandfather Perry, escaped to Ohio. All Sarah’s descendants are living on or buried in the mountain. In his desperation, M.C. hopes that a man collecting folk songs will hear his mother, Banina Higgins, sing, and will take them all away and make her a star. His world, which includes a friendship with a family his father thinks is “witchy,” is also entered by a wandering teenage girl who stays just long enough to help M.C. learn something about his own responsibility for making choices and decisions. In the end, M.C. realizes that he himself must take some action to save himself and his family.

Universal Conflicts and Lessons: Growing Up and Finding Oneself

Culturally conscious fiction deals with in-depth individuals involved in universal conflicts or learning some universal truth. This aspect focuses on youngsters making some step(s) toward maturity as individual. While the protagonists often are also involved

in relationships with family and peers, according to Simms, “the stories involve (1) achieving some personal goal, (2) acquiring some insight into themselves as individuals, and (3) recognizing their growth over a given period of time, or, in the case of the books for older readers, (4) some combination of all the above” (1982, 61).

Phyllis Reynolds Naylor’s Newbery Medal book, *Shiloh* (2000), is the story of a young boy whose personal goal is to save an abused, runaway dog from its angry owner. As the story begins Marty Preston discovers a young beagle in the hills of Tyler County behind his home. Marty, sensitive to the dog’s cowering from some kind of abuse, befriends him and names him Shiloh. In his pursuit of justice for the dog, Marty exposes his family to the dog’s abusive owner, Judd Travers. Judd is the town’s tobacco spitting iconoclast. He is cruel and mean to his hunting dogs – beating them and starving them so they’ll find the prey. Marty is caught in the ethical dilemma of returning the beagle to its legal owner versus hiding the dog to save him from further abuse. His decision to hide him only complicates the matter since the dog has been attacked and severely injured. After Doc Murphy sews up the wounds, Marty is still faced with not only finding a way to repay the doctor, but also still having to return the animal to Judd. In the end, Marty agrees to do back-breaking work for this mean man in the hopes of accomplishing his goal of obtaining Shiloh for his own.

In Katherine Paterson’s *Come Sing, Jimmy Jo* (1985), all James Johnson wants to do is sing the songs he loves with his Grandmother. James has been raised in West Virginia by his Grandma, while his Mother, Father, Grandpa, and Uncle Earl have been out on the road singing country music at tent meetings, picnics, and family reunions. After returning from their most recent trip, the family argues over whether or not to hire a manager. When a potential manager, Eddie Switten visits the house and hears James singing, he recognizes that James has “the gift.” It doesn’t take Switten long to see that James should play a part in the family’s band. They get a six-month contract with a TV show, “Country Time,” in Virginia and move there, leaving Grandma at home. Although James becomes the star of the band and has many adoring fans, he hates his stage name, “Jimmy Jo.” He is also behind in his new school, doesn’t have any

friends, and doesn’t want anyone to know about his singing. It’s hard to keep that a secret, since some of the students have seen him on TV and there is a story in the newspaper about him. James needs insight into his gift of music to find his place in the family.

When Zinny Taylor, in Creech’s *Chasing Redbird* (1997), discovers a mysterious, overgrown trail that begins on her family’s farm in Bybanks, Kentucky, she is determined to clear it from start to finish. For her, it represents a place of her own, a place she could go to get away from her family, to grow up and find herself. “The trail was curving in the direction of the woods, and part of me was eager to enter them to see where the trail would lead, and part of me was pigeon-hearted, uneasy about what might await me there” (31). She may have felt uneasy, but she was not afraid to discover the truth. Along this journey of uncovering an old Indian trail, she also uncovered her own feelings about her beloved late aunt and cousin, the parents she had never been close to, and a boy who pursued her in spite of her obsession on the trail. This passion to uncover the trail that was eventually opened to the public as Redbird Trail, led Zinny home with a strong identity and knowledge of her unique contribution and place on the earth.

Woodrow, in White’s Newbery Honor Book, *Belle Prater’s Boy* (1996), must deal with his mother’s disappearance in order to grow up and find himself. After Belle Prater vanishes early one morning, Woodrow is sent to live with his grandparents in Coal Station, Virginia. His cousin, Gypsy, lives next door and is just as curious as the rest of the town about his secret concerning his mother’s disappearance. Woodrow is cross-eyed and wears hand-me-downs, but Gypsy is impressed by his charm and witty stories. As they spend time together, the cousins find they have a lot more in common. Gypsy wonders how Woodrow can accept his mother’s disappearance when she’s never gotten over her father’s suicide seven years earlier. As time passes and the two come to trust each other with their loss and sorrow, they find a way to share their pain and face the reality that a parent had left them, not because they didn’t love them, but because “their pain was bigger than their love. You had to forgive them for that” (195). Eventually, Woodrow finds he can release his secret concerning the whereabouts of his mother and share his pain with his cousin.

Overcoming the loss of a loved one is also a theme in Cynthia Rylant's Newbery Medal Book, *Missing May* (1992). After her parents die and when none of her relatives in Ohio want her, Summer is sent to live with her Aunt May and Uncle Ob in West Virginia. Her Uncle Ob, a disabled World War II veteran, enjoys creating art sculptures in the form of whirligigs and her Aunt May enjoys gardening. They live in a broken-down trailer with peeling aluminum, missing windows, and sinking front steps located in Deep Water in Fayette County. Summer has never seen two people more in love than her elderly aunt and uncle. She found all the love and family she had been missing all her life right there with Ob and May. Life was good for six years, and then May dies from her untreated diabetes. Not only does Summer have her own grief to deal with, but she fears losing Ob, as well. Summer's identity crisis depends on moving through the grieving process herself and at the same time helping Uncle Ob cope with his great loss.

Another universal experience for young people is the search for religion. In Cynthia Rylant's Newbery Honor book, *A Fine White Dust* (1986), Pete, a thirteen-year-old North Carolina boy, has been attending the Baptist church and is searching for something that would save him from going to hell. When the Preacher Man, James W. Carson, comes to town to lead a revival, Pete is sure he has found what he was looking for. He has a religious experience that changes his life, and then he strikes up a friendship with the Preacher Man, making every attempt to follow in his footsteps. Of course, this obsession causes conflicts with his loving, but non-religious parents and his best friend, Rufus, an avowed atheist. They fail to share the joy of his salvation or warm up to the Preacher. Then in the final days of the revival, the Preacher Man invites Pete to leave town with him. Pete agrees to go, but, when betrayed, learns some painful lessons about trust and friendship.

Characters Free of Stereotyping in Strong Family Relationships

When characters are free of stereotyping, they reflect the culture in producing memorable, family relationships with characters true to the culture of the region. As Cynthia Rylant reflects on her childhood memories of living with her grandparents in Cool

Ridge, West Virginia, she says, "We children had to make do with each other and what we found in the mountains, and do you know, I was never bored!" In her books, especially in, *When I Was Young in the Mountains* (1982), Rylant depicts the culture of her grandparents through the simple home-cooked meals, visits to the outhouse in the middle of the night, swimming in a mud hole, baptism in the mountain river, visits to the country store, water pump by hand, and church in the one-room school house. Her stories take us back in time to a culture that was isolated from mainstream America but which thrives on strong relationships among the people.

Gloria Houston also takes us to the Blue Ridge Mountains and a most unforgettable character in *My Great-Aunt Arizona* (1992). Arizona was born in a log cabin her papa built in the meadow on Henson Creek. Arizona is a typical mountain girl who likes to grow flowers, sing, and square dance to the music of the fiddler on Saturday night. But what she likes most of all is to read—and dream—about all the faraway places she would like to visit one day. Well, Arizona only goes to those faraway places in her imagination. Instead she stays in the Blue Ridge Mountains where she was born and teaches generations of children in her one-room schoolhouse "about the words and numbers and the faraway places they would visit someday" during her fifty-seven-year teaching career.

Another memorable character is found in George Ella Lyon's *With a Hammer for My Heart* (1997), Ada Smith. Protagonist Lawanda Ingle comes to know her spiritual values and the power of prayer through the influence of her eccentric Grandmother, Mamaw Smith, who is struck by a bright light in the spirit Sunday at Splinter Creek Church and has a vision. In the vision she sees Mother Jesus who gives her a gift of healing in her hands with a command, "Don't let nobody go to bed before their time" (16). But when she testifies in front of the congregation, they drag her out and excommunicate her. Even though they consider Mother Jesus to be sacrilegious, in hard times and desperate situations, many are healed by her laying on of hands and waving of a feather to chase the sickness away. When Lawanda is critically ill, the family carries her over the mountains in pouring rain so that Mamaw can pray for her and she can be healed. Because she has experienced this healing herself, Lawanda is quite incensed when a new

classmate, Jimmy says in Civics class, “You should see her. Big crazy woman, goes around singing and healing people with a feather” (21). Lawanda does her best to defend Mamaw at the time, but then begins to doubt. Lawanda seeks out Mamaw to verify the story for herself and find out the truth of her healing power.

In *The Star Fisher* (1991), Laurence Yep draws on his own family history to depict a Chinese family’s experiences when they arrive from Ohio to open a laundry in 1927. When they get off the train in Clarksburg, West Virginia, they are the first Asians any of the town’s people have seen. As a result, the language barrier, as well as outward appearances, make them the brunt of cruel taunts. Fortunately, their landlady, a retired schoolmistress, warmly welcomes and befriends them. The protagonist, Joan Lee is fifteen, and unlike her parents, she and her siblings were born in the United States and speak English fluently. She serves as translator for her parents and shelters them from cruel comments. At school, Joan has a difficult adjustment, until she meets another outcast friend who helps her realize that she is not the only one struggling to find a niche. Still, “The Star Fisher,” a Chinese folk tale Joan shares with her little sister, symbolizes Joan’s position even after she gains acceptance: like the child of the magical kingfisher who is held captive in human form by her mortal husband, Joan feels caught between two cultures: the Chinese and the Appalachian.

Another story rejecting stereotypes is *Borrowed Children* (1999) by George Ella Lyon. It is set in Kentucky during the Great Depression. When Mama is forced to stay in bed for six weeks after the birth of William, it is twelve-year-old Amanda Perritt (Mandy) who reluctantly drops out of school to care of her younger siblings and keep house for her older brothers and father. She is responsible for taking care of the new baby until her Mama is able to take over. Then, Mandy is sent to visit her well-to-do grandparents in Memphis during the Christmas holiday to give her a break from all her responsibilities. Here, Mandy learns about her family history. She hears stories of her mother’s childhood and learns about the dark secrets of her Aunt Laura. Mandy bonds with her grandparents and, with a new understanding of her family, returns home with a sense of her own individuality as well as what it means to be part of a family.

A Heightened Sense of Place

Novels that provide a heightened sense of place are ones that take the reader to a situation so unique to the culture that the experience would have little likelihood of occurring elsewhere. For instance, in Bates’ picture book, *Ragsale* (1995), illustrated by Chapman-Crane, *ragsalin’* makes Saturday a special family day in Appalachia. In the book, Jessann, her mom, sister Eunice, Mamaw, Aunt Mary Jane and cousin Billie Jo set off for ragsales. Driving to various sales they look for the things they need, but also hope to find some unique treasures. The Stuart Robinson ragsale is at Mommy’s old high school, so she always sees people she knows. While her mom looks for clothes for the family, Jessann tries to find some mittens for riding the sled and Billie Jo combs through the piles of used paperbacks. Bates says that “Ragsales are a special kind of used clothing store, and when I was a little girl we went to the ragsale about every weekend. Wearing used clothes is a way of not wasting things that are still good.” She says that even though ragsales aren’t as prevalent now, “going to them is as much fun as ever.”

While rural poverty is a universal experience, *Just Juice* (1998) by Karen Hesse tells the inspiring story of the eight members of the Faulstich family who learned to endure impoverished conditions ever since Pa got laid off from the mine. The opening image of Ma “spreading grape jelly so thin on the sliced white bread you can hardly find the purple” suggests the level of poverty of the Faulstich family. The story is narrated by nine-year-old Justus (“Juice”) Faulstich who has to repeat third, grade because no matter how hard she tries, she simply can’t learn to read. She often plays truant and stays home, where she is happiest working with Pa in his machine shop in the yard. Illiteracy is an underlying issue: Pa keeps it secret that he can’t read, and because he can’t deal with the official papers, the family could lose their house. Juice sympathizes with her Pa’s secret and his depression: “We all look out for him. But I look out for him best, even Ma says so.” At the same time she realizes that as she learns to read, she may have to leave him behind: “Pa and me, we’ve been careful tiptoeing around this particular secret. But I can’t let Pa’s half of the secret keep me from doing something about mine.” In a climactic scene when Ma gives

birth, Juice is the only one at home, and she makes herself read the sugar monitor and saves Ma's life. Even through the darkest moments of truant officers, court summons, and the fear of losing their home, the Faulstich family remains hopeful and creative in finding inner resources to cope with their bleak situation.

The Search for Self in Appalachian Young Adult Literature

What matters in Appalachian literature is that young adults examine their beliefs and validate their culture and family heritage. While Appalachian values may be marginalized in mainstream American culture, the literature discussed here gives adolescents a means to search for their identities within a safe context where their values are validated. Whether they go to Ragsales on Saturdays or play Mumbletypeg with their friends, adolescents should find role models in the literature they read. When readers discover their own feelings in the character of a book, they experience the events of the story as though they were happening to themselves, thus validating their life experiences. They can also learn about the history and politics of Appalachia. For readers not living in Appalachia, this literature not only acquaints them with the values of mountain people, but readers can also identify with the characters who struggle with universal themes such as poverty, family relationships, cultural heritage, and spiritual matters. In Appalachian Young Adult Literature, readers searching for their identity and looking for a yardstick against which to measure themselves can find help in defining the person they want to become. Whether they come to the mountains to learn to understand them like Louisa in *Wish You Well*, or want to come to terms with the family history like Zinny in *Chasing Redbird*, or want to leave their mountain home for a college education like Lawanda in *With A Hammer for My Heart*, readers can identify with the subject matter and recognize themselves in the fictional characters.

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