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### James Still: The Dean of Appalachian Literature

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## James Still: The Dean of Appalachian Literature

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# poetry & poets

## James Still THE DEAN OF APPALACHIAN LITERATURE

James Still (1906-2001) wrote "Heritage," his signature poem, in 1935, and he continued to read it before audiences large and small into the 21st Century. Intriguingly associated with eastern Kentucky, Still was reared in Chambers County, Alabama. He attended Lincoln Memorial University, then Vanderbilt University, and finally the University of Illinois, before moving to eastern Kentucky during the early years of the Great Depression.

Still would call the Cumberland Plateau home until his death, living primarily in Knott County – either in Hindman at the Hindman Settlement School, or in a log house 11 miles from town.

"Heritage" was among the 123 poems included in Still's *From the Mountain, From the Valley: New and Collected Poems* (University Press of Kentucky, 2001), a book for which I served as editor. While rarely incorporated into national anthologies and thus are not as widely known as they ought to be, Still's poems make for deeply satisfying reading both thematically (they evoke Appalachian life in memorable ways) as well as stylistically (they are as musical and enchanting as the finest mountain ballads). Published shortly after Still's death and serving as a vivid tribute to this master author, *From the Mountain, From the Valley* in 2002 was named the Appalachian Book of the Year by the Appalachian Writers Association.

James Still stayed on people's minds,

### Heritage

I shall not leave these prisoning hills  
Though they topple their barren heads to level earth  
And the forests slide uprooted out of the sky.  
Though the waters of Troublesome, of Trace Fork,  
Of Sand Lick rise in a single body to glean the valleys,  
To drown lush pennyroyal, to unravel rail fences;  
Though the sun-ball breaks the ridges into dust  
And burns its strength into the blistered rock  
I cannot leave. I cannot go away.

Being of these hills, being one with the fox  
Stealing into the shadows, one with the new-born foal,  
The lumbering ox drawing green beech logs to mill,  
One with the destined feet of man climbing and descending,  
And one with death rising to bloom again, I cannot go.  
Being of these hills I cannot pass beyond.

BY JAMES STILL

and his works remained in people's hearts, during the decade after his death. Two book-length collections I edited, *James Still: Critical Writings on the Dean of Appalachian Literature* (2007) and *James Still in Interviews, Oral Histories, and Memoirs* (2009), offered personal and scholarly reflections upon Still's life and work from a range of writers. Two other scholars, Claude Lafie Crum and Mars Hill College professor Carol Boggess, wrote and published studies exploring Still's literary achievement. In 2011, Still's final novel *Chinaberry* (edited by author Silas House) was published. Meanwhile, Still's classic first novel *River of Earth* (1940) found many new readers across Appalachia and to some extent around the nation.

While in recent decades Still was tagged with the nickname "the Dean of Appalachian Literature," his early works were read nationally. From the 1930s to the 1950s his poems and short stories were published in such leading periodicals as *The Atlantic* and *The Saturday Evening Post*, and his books were issued by Viking Press. Still always intended his work to reach a national audience.

Although Still happened to live in and to write about eastern Kentucky, his literary evocations of one section of the Cumberland Plateau and of the folklife he witnessed therein constitute some of the finest writing about any region in the United States. As a scholar of Still's work and the editor of a portion of his literary legacy, my hope is

that his masterful writings will once again attract a broad-based national, even international, readership.

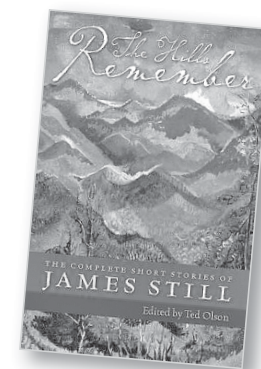
Still was a master of three literary genres – the poem, the novel, and the short story – and while his achievement in the first two genres has received attention in recent years, his work in the short story form has been comparatively overlooked.

This is unfortunate because certain of Still's short stories are among his strongest literary efforts, and a few of his short stories are as fully realized and as memorable as any in the history of American literature.

In conversations I had with Still in 1999 regarding ways to disseminate his life's work to the widest possible public, Still gave me his blessing to oversee the editing of two book collections: *From the Mountain, From the Valley* and a compilation of his short stories. Still read the galleys for the poetry collection, but the short stories project was conducted entirely without his input. It is my sincere hope that the latter project, published in April 2012 as *The Hills Remember: The Complete Short Stories of James Still* (University Press of Kentucky), would make its author proud.

This new book contains all of the short stories that Still ever wrote. Of the 53 stories featured in *The Hills Remember*, seven were long out-of-print and 10 had never been published anywhere. The other stories in the book, while available in previously published collections, had never been compiled together. And what does the chronological arrangement of Still's body of work in this particular genre reveal about his trajectory as a crafter of short fiction?

Still's earliest stories (1930s-1941) reflect his discovery of his primary subject matter – the people and folk culture he encountered in and around his adopted eastern Kentucky



BY TED OLSON

home; also during this period Still experimented with utilizing Appalachian dialectal language, and his Depression Era short stories (and accordingly *River of Earth*, which was constructed out of 12 short stories that are also included

in this new book) are infused with Still's brilliant literary approximation of Appalachian speech. Still's wartime and post-war short stories employ a sparer approach to language and less use of dialect and are noteworthy for their acuity of psychological vision.

Still's short stories constitute the connecting link between his poetry and his novels. His short stories expanded upon the strengths of his poems and ultimately encouraged his imagination to explore the extended narrative novel form. In his haunting and resonant short stories, Still distilled his visions and his values into minimalist landscapes. To many readers his short stories seem closer to being outpourings from the oral tradition – like evocative and timeless yet remarkably simple tales and legends from the soul of Appalachia – than to being conventional, self-consciously composed "literary works."

On Tuesday, May 22, I'll be in Asheville at Malaprop's to discuss James Still, *The Hills Remember*, and Still's role in the American and Appalachian literary worlds. I'll also perform a few of the ballads and songs that inspired Still, and if encouraged I may read a poem or two from my own recent poetry collection.



Ted Olson reads from *The Hills Remember: The Complete Short Stories of James Still*. Tuesday,

May 22 at 7 p.m. Malaprop's Bookstore/Café, 55 Haywood Street, downtown Asheville. For details call (828) 254-6734 or visit [www.malaprops.com](http://www.malaprops.com).

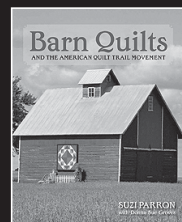


Ted Olson is the author of such books as *Breathing in Darkness: Poems* (Wind Publications, 2006) and *Blue Ridge Folklife* (University Press of Mississippi, 1998) and he is the editor of numerous books, including *The Hills Remember: The Complete*

*Short Stories of James Still* (University Press of Kentucky, 2012). His experiences as a poet and musician are discussed on [www.windpub.com/books/breathingindarkness.htm](http://www.windpub.com/books/breathingindarkness.htm)

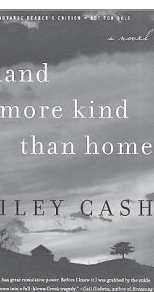
Poets who would like for their poetry to be considered for a future column may send their books and manuscripts to Ted Olson, ETSU, Box 70400, Johnson City, TN 37614. Please include contact information and a SASE with submissions.

## Barn Quilts and the American Quilt Trail Movement



The story of the American Quilt Trail, featuring large colorful quilt square patterns painted on barns throughout North America, is one of the fastest-growing grassroots public arts movements in the United States and Canada. In this beautifully photographed book, Suzi Parron takes us to visit the people and places that have put this movement on America's tourist and folk art map. Written by Suzi Parron with Donna Sue Groves.

## READING AND BOOKSIGNING WITH WILEY CASH



In *A Land More Kind Than Home*, debut novelist Wiley Cash gives us a mesmerizing literary thriller about the bond between two brothers and the evil they face in a small Western North Carolina town. Fred Chappell has called this "one of the most powerful

novels I have ever read." This event is part of the Thomas Wolfe Conference.



Saturday, May 19 at 4 p.m. Malaprop's Bookstore/Café, 55 Haywood Street, downtown Asheville. For details call (828) 254-6734 or visit [www.malaprops.com](http://www.malaprops.com).