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James Still: The Dean of Appalachian Literature

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**James Still**

**THE DEAN OF APPALACHIAN LITERATURE**

James Still (1906-2001) wrote “Heritage,” his signature poem, in 1935, and continued to read it before audiences large and small into the 21st Century. Integrated 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 not as widely known as they ought to be, Still’s poems make for deeply satisfying 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 (2001) 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 Laffie Crum and Mars Hill College professor Carol Boggs, 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 works were included in 12 short story collections: From the Mountain, From the Valley and a compilation of his short stories. Still read the galleries 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 his author proud.

This new book contains all of the short stories that Still ever wrote. Of the 53 stories featured in The Hills Remember, 25 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 home; also during this period Still experimented with utilizing Appalachian dialectical 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 sparser 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 – 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.

Ted Olson is the author of such books as Breathing in Darkness: poems (Wind Publications, 2006) and Blue Ridge Folklore (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

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.