5-1-2012

James Still: The Dean of Appalachian Literature

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Citation Information
https://issuu.com/rapidrivermagazine/docs/rriver_may2012

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**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. 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 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, 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 Lafie 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 work was featured in leading periodicals as The Atlantic and The Saturday Evening Post, and his work was featured in numerous books, including The Hills Remember: The Complete Short Stories of James Still (University Press of Kentucky), which would make his author proud.

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.

**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.

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.