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Provocative Excursions

Red Holler: Contemporary Appalachian Literature. Editors John Branscum and Wayne Thomas. Louisville: Sarabande Books (2013).

The folk who live in Appalachia now understand two things better than most anything else: stereotype and conflict. Our region's generational stories are replete with them: the southern slave/northern carpetbagger; the striking miner/union boss; the illiterate redneck, the hillbilly and the mountaineer; the butter churning and quilt-making female. We recognize each and every one of them. Mostly in the same way we know our own families. Their stories are our stories; their blood is our blood. The people who live outside of Appalachia generally view it as the cultural wasteland of America inhabited by even more hyperbolic stereotypes: snake-handling zealots and the toothless denizens of hollers, who subsist on moonshine, firearms, and government handouts. Unfortunately, the global handshake of the internet has done little to change this perception. If anything, it has, sadly, only served to reinforce it.

Thus, one might suspect a newly-published book entitled *Red Holler: Contemporary Appalachian Literature*, might be a gross attempt to capitalize upon the essence of that "stereotype and conflict" culture, perhaps to seek justification for generations' worth of societal shaming and blaming, or to glorify and wallow in the tragic self-loathing engendered by that society which only ridicules, derides, and scorns. Fortunately, *Red Holler* does absolutely none of these things. Rather, it explores modern incarnations of a traditional Appalachia worldview few today would even recognize; an Appalachia that is racially diverse, upwardly mobile, and most importantly, literate. Editors John Branscum and Wayne Thomas clear-cut a swathe straight through the existing forest of dense Appalachian stereotype to reveal a surviving, thriving culture, varied and vibrant as a crazy quilt, and, surprisingly, just as comfortable.

In *Red Holler*, you will find a strange and wondrous hybrid of Appalachia's stereotype and conflict: a representative literary and eclectic mix of the modern Appalachian existence. One of the volume's opening poems, Nin Andrews' "A Brief History of Melvin, My Own Personal Bull," explores poetically, and perversely, the story of a young girl and her not-so-stereotypical pet, now the substance of the

family's evening meals. In his memoir "715 Willey Street," Jeff Mann recounts the difficulties of coming-of-age as a gay college student in Morgantown, West Virginia, from his current vantage point as a newly-established poet, conflicted now by new definitions of loss and lust, and the unexpected wisdom borne of reflection. "Controlled Burn," a short story by Charles Dodd White, reveals, by degrees, the futile attempt of a man and his wannabe hippie son to save the family's hunting cabin from a savage wildfire staged by governmental agents who intend to destroy the enormous weapons stockpile of an apocalyptic crusader.

As is usually the case with most anthologies, the reader will inevitably discover several noteworthy gems. First, Pinckney Benedict, known primarily for his dark-edged fiction, imagines a futuristic Appalachian realm through a stark and gritty graphic novella, "Orgo vs. The Flatlanders," a thinly veiled cityscape of metropolitan excesses under attack by a "hillbilly king" crowned with kudzu, who looks more like a musculo-skeletal escapee from the cover of *Gray's Anatomy* than a mountaintop ruler. Second, Desirae Matherly's *tour de force* of creative nonfiction, "Vagina Dentata" is a contemplative exploration and internal philosophical discourse the author has before, during, and after recurring visits to her dentist and her gynecologist, from whence she draws interesting and jaw-dropping parallels. And, third, Jake Adam York's simply magnificent poem, "Walt Whitman in Alabama," is an absolute must-read for any fan of Whitman's transcendent "I Hear America Singing," accompanied by the strings of a fiddle.

Of course, try as you might, there's no escaping Appalachia's time-honored, and sometimes self-serving, stereotypes—common distrust of state and federal authority; impoverished, yet tight-knit and insular communities; shared generations of tragic loss and alcohol-fueled commiseration—important here, not because they are Appalachia's stock literary conventions, but because they are symbolic of obstacles overcome, of battles hard fought and won, of bloodied knuckles. Of course, there's no escaping conflict, either. In this anthology, though, conflict is the battlefield standard hoisted, the pennant signifying Appalachia's willingness, once again, to raise its hoary head and re-enlist. *Red Holler* will stand among the best of literary anthologies, not because of its daring and provocative excursions into uncharted Appalachian territories, but because of its stubborn, travel-worn re-examination of the destination it knows only too well.

Welcome to *Red Holler*, where all roads lead to home.

