



PROJECT MUSE®

Appalachia in Her Hands

Silas House

Appalachian Heritage, Volume 37, Number 2, Spring 2009, pp. 12-13
(Article)

Published by The University of North Carolina Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/aph.0.0125>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/263406>

APPALACHIA IN HER HANDS

Silas House

I loved Pam Duncan's laugh before I loved her.

Both of us had been invited to a symposium at Vanderbilt University as part of their Millennial Gathering of Writers in 2000. We, along with eight others, had been selected as "emerging writers" in Southern literature. Once at the symposium, our first official function was to attend a fancy reception that was in the opulent courtyard at an estate in Belle Meade, the famously upscale neighborhood of Nashville. There was a marble fountain, servants with trays of *hors d'oeuvres*. Everyone seemed to know how to operate in this world. I did not. As a long-time restaurant-worker, I had sometimes *worked* at events like these, but I had certainly never been on the guest list.

But then I heard the laughter, coming from the other side of the fountain. While many of the people at the party seemed to be giggling politely or guffawing like gloating businessmen, this laugh was different: unrestrained, delighted, free. Country. This was the laugh of country women I knew, women who threw their heads back, opened their mouths wide, slapped their knees. The laughter of Appalachian women on porches at twilight, or just before the church meeting started, or at family dinners.

I worked my way around the fountain to find out to whom this laugh belonged. As soon as I caught sight of the laughing woman, her eyes touched mine. "Hey," she said, like Scout in *To Kill a Mockingbird*. "You must be Silas House. Lee Smith told me to be on the lookout for you."

Lee Smith had taken both of us under her wing and knew that we'd be fast friends. She was right. For the rest of that weekend, we got to know each other, and by the time Sunday rolled around I was calling her "sister-woman," and she was calling me "brother-man." I don't know how those nicknames came about, but they stuck. We still sign our letters and emails to one another that way.

In the eight years since, Pam has published three celebrated novels that I believe are among the best representations of Appalachian women

in contemporary literature. There are the strong, fiery *Moon Women*, the hard-working and hard-loving factory-workers of *Plant Life*, and beloved, hilarious, and endearing Cassandra Moon of *The Big Beautiful*. All of them know who they are and know where they're from. And so does Pam Duncan.

The reason that Pam's writing sings is because it rings with the voices of the people. Pam is especially adept at conjuring the voice of her grandmother, Nanny, whom she thinks of every single day. And not just Nanny, but just about everyone Pam ever found interesting helps to build the worlds of her books. I believe that the best writers listen and then preserve. This is her great legacy already, that she has listened so well, and preserved so beautifully. To read Pam Duncan's novels is to travel the width of North Carolina, from its high western peaks all the way to the coast, but all of her characters carry Appalachia in their mouths and hearts. Because like the best Appalachian writers, the mountains live in Pam's hands. The land is a part of her, and it lives and breathes in her books, an undeniable force as strong as the men and women who populate her pages.

Pam loves the Scottish actor Gerard Butler, her mother, chocolate, *Anne of Green Gables*, and her friends. She loves musicals, and the beach, and country music, and the mountains. She loves to have a good cry and to laugh and laugh and laugh.

What *I* love most about Pam is that she's just who she is. She is *true*. True and good. To the bone. She is generous to a fault. Two quick examples: my daughters love to rip into the Christmas parcels their "aunt Pam Duncan" sends (she always gets them way too much), and, after making a couple quick visits to the university where I teach, she has kept in constant touch with my most active writing students, helping to guide and encourage them as they find their way on the road to becoming writers. She gives so much of herself to her friends, family, and students that it has kept her from producing as much writing as she would have been able to otherwise.

Pam has known troubles and sadness, but she faces each day with an open heart, approaching each morning as a new opportunity to put good into the world by her generosity, her writing, her laughter. All of us who know her—friends, family, readers—are the better for it. I'm so happy she exists.