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THE KINDRED SPIRITS OF PAMELA DUNCAN

George Brosi

Pamela Duncan remembers that when she was growing up in small North Carolina towns, she thought of authors as being either dead or living in New York City. Nevertheless, she recognized herself in the stories she read about girls who became writers.

I identified so strongly with writers in books and on TV. Jo March in Little Women, Anne in Anne of Green Gables, independent girls who grew up to be writers. I didn't know at the time that it meant I wanted to be a writer. I only knew I recognized them as kindred spirits. My daddy used to go around to the library when they'd be getting rid of books, and he'd bring me home boxes. And then John Boy Walton came along and would sit in his window writing on his tablet. I don't know if I wanted to be John Boy or marry John Boy.

The first of three children born to Carl Jerome Duncan and Patricia Yvonne Price, Pamela Duncan comes from a long line of working-class mountaineers. Her father's people were from South Carolina, but he was raised in Buckeye Cove near Swannanoa, North Carolina. He graduated from Owen High School and worked first in a blanket factory and then, when Pam was a baby, joined the army. After he was discharged, he found work for the corrections department, first at the Craggy Correctional Center near Swannanoa and then moving the family to Shelby, at the edge of the mountains, to work at the Cleveland Correctional Center when Pam was seven.

Pam's mother's people were from Madison County, North Carolina, high up in the mountains near the Tennessee line. Pam's maternal "papaw," Nealie Woodard Price, temporarily lived in Shelby for about a year as a boy when his family left Madison County in search of mill jobs. Nealie served in World War I, and when he returned to Madison County, married a local girl, Eloise Davis, then

only sixteen years old. They had eleven children, the first “set” in Madison County and the second set, including Pamela Duncan’s mother, Pat, after they moved to Swannanoa to find factory work. Eventually both Nealie and Eloise got jobs at the Morgan Furniture plant (later Drexel and now defunct) and lived in “Morgan Village.” Because he had been born in the 1800s, Nealie wanted very much to live to see the new millennium, but he died in 1999. He never had a birth certificate, but the family “reckoned” he was 106 years old when he died.

Pamela Duncan’s mother, Patricia Price Duncan, grew up in Swannanoa and graduated from Owen High School. Her first job was at the Kearfott plant in Black Mountain. After she got married, she worked at the Morgan Furniture plant where both her parents and a couple of her brothers worked. When she and her husband moved to Shelby, Pat got a job at J&C Dyeing, a textile mill supplier.

Pamela Duncan’s life changed dramatically in 1972. She was nine, and her brother, Kelly, was seven when a little sister was born in March. Then in June, their father was killed in a car wreck. Although raised by a single mother from then on, the family enjoyed the support of legions of kinfolks, especially Pamela’s maternal grandmother, Eloise Davis Price, known to her as Nanny. In 1979, Pam graduated from Crest Senior High School, the same high school that graduated Ron Rash a few years earlier. She then enrolled at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, where she majored in journalism because she believed it was the only way to earn a living as a writer. During the summers she worked at Camp Golden Valley, a Girl Scout camp up in the mountains near Bostic, North Carolina, and during the school year, having been raised with a sister almost ten years younger, she was in demand as a baby-sitter. During her last two years at UNC, Pam worked on the *Daily Tar Heel* student newspaper, but journalistic writing never appealed to her, so, when she graduated, she returned home to Shelby and got a job at Roses Department Store. Within a year, her younger brother, Kelly, who was attending UNC, urged her to return to Chapel Hill, and her old friend, Joy Patterson, offered her a place to stay, so she left Shelby

again. She got a job at the Intimate Bookshop, a place she had haunted while in college, and one day a co-worker pointed out a customer saying, “why don’t you read her books; she writes just like you talk?” The customer was Lee Smith. When Duncan read *Oral History* by Lee Smith, it was an experience that changed her life:

Here was a powerful novel about my people, working-class people, mountain people. After years of floundering blindly, looking for a way into the world of writing, Lee Smith’s work opened the door and turned on the light. I thought, “Oh, man, these are my people. This sounds like my grandma talking. This is what I want to do.” Once I found it, there was no looking back. I practically stalked Lee, reading all her books, going to every reading, sitting in the back, absorbing everything. Never had the courage to speak to her, but vowed someday I’d go to North Carolina State University and take a class with her.

Disillusioned, however, with the hours and pay of being a bookstore clerk, she applied for and received a nice secure state job, as a secretary at the UNC School of Public Health. The next five years Duncan went to lots of author events and read southern literature voraciously. But she still had not taken up writing.

Then, in 1990, her maternal grandmother died. Ever since she was a little girl, Duncan had loved to listen to Nanny’s stories:

She was the person who inspired my love of stories. Even near the end, when Nanny didn’t know she was in the world most of the time, she told stories. I can remember lying in the twin bed across from hers, trying so hard to stay awake and listen, eventually falling asleep, only to wake hours later and find her still talking, still telling stories unable to stop. When she died in 1989, I didn’t have anybody to tell me stories anymore. Without her in the world, without her voice, I felt lost. But right after Christmas that year, I heard that voice in my head, clear as day, telling me it was time to start writing or shut up about it (though she said it in a much more colorful way). I got the message. In January of 1990 I signed up for my first

writing workshop, terrified but determined. Writing became a way to keep her voice alive, and I didn't realize until later that it was also my way of mourning her, of processing my grief, of looking for answers to unanswerable questions.

So, Duncan took a creative writing class offered at an extended campus of Durham Technical Community College. After taking the class three times, the instructor suggested that she consider taking classes at UNC. As an employee, Duncan was eligible to take one class a semester free. At first she wrote stories, but she longed to elaborate on the ideas and characters of her stories, so she decided to start a novel. The idea for what novel to do came from the struggles her family was experiencing at the time:

Nanny was sick a long time and suffered from dementia. My mother had Crohn's disease and had lots of health issues. My sister had substance abuse issues. I felt completely helpless, and, when I was trying to think what to write about, I decided I'd write a novel based on these crises only in the book I'd make it turn out the way I wanted it to instead of the way it did. I would have control. Of course, after I got going, the characters took over and told their own stories. Once again control seemed out of my hands, but the process was so much fun, I didn't mind too much. I learned that the smartest thing a writer can do is listen to the characters because most times they know better than the writer what needs to happen.

The third class she took, Spring Semester, 1992, was taught by Doris Betts, an accomplished writer and teacher:

I started Moon Women in her class. I look back at it now (I wrote it by hand in pink ink—what was I thinking?) and cringe and wonder how in the world Doris saw anything worthwhile. But thank goodness she did. Her encouragement and enthusiasm pushed me on to the next stage of my education.

That next stage was enrollment in a Master's Program in Creative Writing at North Carolina State, within commuting distance of Duncan's home near Chapel Hill. She quit her full-time job and took a part-time one. Before long, Lee Smith became Duncan's thesis advisor, and the first draft of *Moon Women* was the thesis. In 1996, Duncan received her MA and went back to work full-time at the School of Public Health. That same year she joined the writers group she still participates in with Lynn York, Darnell Arnoult, and Virginia Boyd.

When I left the mountains at the age of eight, my search for that feeling of surroundedness and community I'd felt as a child led me to several groups of women friends, including this writers group. Like the mountains, these circles provide stability and strength. I learned that I was safe with these women. They had my back and were there to catch me if I fell.

In 1998 she started sending *Moon Women* out to publishers. In July of the next year Joelle Delbourgo became her agent, and in October Duncan signed a two-book deal with Bantam Dell:

I got a large enough advance that I felt I could take some time off work. I was scared witless to leave my job and didn't actually receive the check for half a year, but when it came in, I did quit. I was able to write full time for three years before the money ran out and I had to go back to work. I wouldn't trade those three years for anything, but I do wish I'd understood that I only got half the money. My agent and Uncle Sam got the other fifty percent. I didn't understand that very few writers actually make their living with their writing.

In 2000, Duncan was chosen as an emerging writer for the Millennial Gathering of Writers of the New South at Vanderbilt University. There she met Silas House and formed a lasting friendship. The following year *Moon Women* was published. *Plant Life*, a novel of women who work at a plant much like those where her mother and grandmother worked, was published in 2003.

That same year Duncan went back to work at the UNC School of Public Health, this time as a marketer, not a secretary. Despite this full-time job, Duncan managed to make presentations and teach at writers workshops all over the South. In 2007 *The Big Beautiful* was published, also by Bantam Dell, and she was inducted into the prestigious Fellowship of Southern Writers, receiving from them the James Still Award for Writing about Appalachia. In 2008, Pamela Duncan was hired by Western Carolina University as an assistant professor of creative writing. She is currently teaching there and working on her fourth novel, *The Wilder Place*, set in the North Carolina mountains.

I write morning pages nearly every day. It's an idea I got from a book called The Artist's Way. As soon as I wake up, I sit up in bed and write. It's a great tool for clearing my head, skimming the trash off the top, so I can see what's on my mind, see what's bothering me and why and maybe how to fix it. With that junk out of the way, I can focus on more important stuff like writing a novel. I came to love revision when I realized the first draft was not the best I could do. It took me a long time to see that I really could do better than the initial blurt of a story. Revision is where I look for connections between the pieces and arrange them in a meaningful shape, then tighten and polish until it looks as seamless as possible. There is real joy to be found in laboring over something I care so much about.

As a child dreaming of becoming a writer, Pamela Duncan says she couldn't have possibly imagined being where she is today. She quotes E. L. Doctorow saying of writing that it is "like driving a car at night. You never see further than your headlights, but you can make the whole trip that way."

Life is like that, too. I don't want to dwell on the destination because I don't want to miss what's right in front of me. Being a writer is a dream come true, being a published writer is gravy, and I'm happy to report that I didn't have to die or move to New York City to do either one.