Cataloochee: A Novel (review)

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Appalachian Heritage, Volume 37, Number 2, Spring 2009, pp. 68-70 (Review)

Published by The University of North Carolina Press
DOI: *https://doi.org/10.1353/aph.0.0126*

BOOK REVIEWS

Wayne Caldwell. *Cataloochee: A Novel.* New York: Random House, 2009. 368 pages. Trade paperback, $24.95.

Reviewed by Thomas Rain Crowe.

In an expanding spotlight of regional and national acclaim, three of western North Carolina's own have distinguished themselves by penning novels that have shed new literary light on our region.

In what must be an unprecedented literary flourish of recent novels all set in the environs of a single western county, Charles Frazier (*Cold Mountain*), Ron Rash (*Serena*) and Wayne Caldwell (*Cataloochee*) have, as the saying goes, "done Southern Appalachia proud." In their nationally-acclaimed novels, these three writers have brought not only accolades and high praise, but world-class fiction to our doorsteps and into our homes here in the far-western counties of North Carolina. And what is maybe most remarkable is that in writing about this place, all three are "from here." Not outsiders who have moved to these mountains from somewhere else, all three of these writers have family roots deep in western North Carolina soil. In that sense we can all be proud and can truly say that these are "local boys who have made good."

All three of these books have to do with the theme of outsiders coming into the mountains and bringing with them the destruction of both place and culture. In this sense they are epic tellings of the "Beauty and the Beast" story. All three are tragedies in their own way. And all three draw on long-standing classic literary traditions and authors to tell their respective tales. In the case of Caldwell's widesweeping and to-be-extended epic *Cataloochee*, we are early in the book introduced to the "iron beast" of the railroad, which is symbolic for what is to come and what that "beast" will bring into western North Carolina from the outside: the federal government and the National Park system, which will, ultimately, uproot and displace hundreds of local families and communities.

As to literary lineage and classics we can connect and compare him and his book to, Caldwell's tale harkens back to Tolstoy's novels with their wide sweep of history and characters, the train, and the over-riding theme of social inequities and defense of the local peasantry. In this sense, Caldwell sees the local through the same lens as did Tolstoy.

Cataloochee was first released in 2007, but is still very much on the radar screens of folks here in western North Carolina. And Wayne Caldwell is still being asked to give readings and talks about his marvelous book on life in Southern Appalachia.

Cataloochee, Wayne Caldwell told me recently over dinner in Asheville, is a long historical work, many years in the making and covering a time span of four generations from 1864–1928. "It's the historic prelude that led up to the government's confiscation of land in Madison and Haywood counties—by hook, crook and eminent domain—displacing hundreds of mountain families, including some of my own people," he said. "This story runs in my blood, I guess you could say. And it's a part of regional and national history, like the removal of the Native peoples, that has been largely ignored, forgotten, and I felt was begging (me) to be told. The sequel to *Cataloochee*, which I'm working on now, will get more into the politics and the actual displacement of mountain people."

While Caldwell's *Cataloochee* is dominated primarily by a sense of social history, it is really driven by the language, by dialogue, dialect. A language Caldwell knows well, being western North Carolina born and bred. Caldwell's is a prose that lingers. Lingers through a clearer picture of everyday domestic family life. In this sense, it is more about detail than high drama. A much kinder, gentler Haywood County than is portrayed by his two contemporary literary cohorts, Frazier and Rash. And the Carter/Banks family, which we follow through four generations, speaks to us through a story of human-scale realities and experiences that is almost timeless in its sense of rootedness and place. If Caldwell hasn't lived much of what he writes in Cataloochee, then he surely was paying attention to the stories and the speech he grew up around.

Such prodigious passages as this one permeate the three-hundred-and-sixty-eight-page book:

> Jake Carter was far from dark-minded, but had inherited a streak of what his mother called "worriment," along with her conviction that while a body ought not hunt for trouble, nonetheless he should be watchful, for woe walks up and down in the world. It was 1928, the first day of October, the time of year yellow jackets turn ill. Nearly ready for winter—apples and beef cattle sold, firewood stacked in the dry—yet weather too warm to kill hogs. The in-between, a time when man thinks he deserves some rest, but woman knows none awaits.

In many ways, the Biblical "Garden of Eden" theme runs through each of these three great books. Each one comes at it from a different angle and perspective. In the end, it's about what has been lost, what has been taken from these mountains. "Blood crying from the ground," as Caldwell puts it in *Cataloochee*. Reading *Cataloochee* gives one pause, gives one reason to contemplate ("to study" as one of his characters might say) what has been the price of so-called "progress" during the various invasions that have taken place in these hills in the last two centuries. It began with the invasion of the Europeans and the displacement of the Indian peoples, followed by the Civil War (and the invasion of the Union armies) and the invasion of the "Yankee" logging companies coupled with the incorporation of the National Park System in the Smokies in the first half of the twentieth century, and continuing on to today with the recent invasion of large developers and their gated communities for second homes. All the while, as Caldwell's character Preacher Noland says at the end of *Cataloochee*, "It's brother against brother and father against son." And those of us who remain here, with great writers such as Wayne Caldwell in our midst, work hard to hold on to what little bit of "Eden" still remains.