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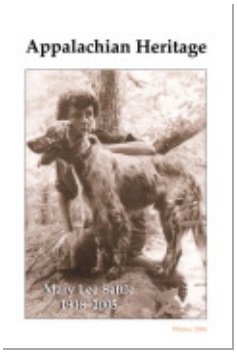
A Powerful Shock of Recognition

Keith Maillard



Appalachian Heritage, Volume 34, Number 1, Winter 2006, pp. 63-69
(Article)

Published by The University of North Carolina Press
DOI: *https://doi.org/10.1353/aph.2006.0018*

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A Powerful Shock of Recognition

Keith Maillard

1.

When I read the email that told me Mary Lee Settle was dead, my first though was not, "Oh, what a terrible loss to literature." My first thought was, "Oh, what a terrible loss to me." I had read her books, but I had never had the chance—and now I would never have the chance—to meet her. I had always imagined that we would have found plenty to talk about. Yes, she was a great writer whether measured by the yardstick of West Virginian, Appalachian, American, or even world literature, but, for me, she was more than that. She was kin.

Settle and I grew up in the same state; her landscape was defined by coal as mine was by steel; if her work is saturated with a West Virginian sensibility, then so is mine. I, too, spent much of my childhood as Settle related in *Addie*, "eavesdropping on the grownups" who talked as though we couldn't hear what they were saying and thus made our future books easier to write. As teenagers, we both heard voices calling to us from a corner of the library and read voraciously—everything but what Mary Lee's mother called "bessellers" because they bored us, and lied to us. We became novelists. We both left the United States to protest the Vietnam War.

But the kinship I feel for Settle goes far beyond any similarities in our biographies. I read her too late in my career to count her as an influence; what I felt when I first encountered her work was a powerful shock of recognition: I experienced the relationship between her writing and mine in a way that was immediate, unmediated, and intensely personal. So now that she's gone, how could my honest response be anything less than personal?

I do not want to write another literary essay. I want to talk to you about the things that I think are important in Mary Lee Settle's work.

2.

In the interview she did with Kate Long for the series *In Their Own Country* broadcast on West Virginia Public Radio, Settle says, emphatically: "Recorded history is wrong. It's wrong because the voiceless have no voice in it. It becomes official history." Of course writing for her matters: "I wasn't concerned with what they call

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historical fiction. I was concerned with the fact that we had had our history censored. And I didn't like that. I wanted to find out what had actually happened." But she wanted to do more than report facts. For Settle, a novel must be as she said in *Addie,* "true beyond facts."

What can it possibly mean to be true beyond facts? The solid trustworthy core of a true novel is hard to define, but in *The Dialogic Imagination* (1981) the Russian theorist, M. M. Bakhtin comes as close to it as anyone. "The decisive and distinctive importance of the novel as a genre," he says, is that "the human being in the novel is always a speaking human being; the novel requires speaking persons bringing with them their own unique ideological discourse, their own language." Like this passage in *O Beulah Land* for instance:

> "The gintleman's tard, Hannah. Git thim youngins outn the way and come set him down a bed." Jeremiah examined him. Squire thought for one second that the man was going to reach out his dirty paw and feel his head.
>
> "Thankee, sar." Squire looked up then and favored him with a smile. Then, remembering the New Light, "God bless ye, sar," he said simply.

Even in this short passage, the authenticity of detail puts us right there. In the small frontier cabin with its loft and ladder, we can sense the children looking down at us from above. The reference to the religious movement called "New Light" springs into the character's mind not to demonstrate the author's knowledge of the period but exactly as it would have at the time for a man like Squire; he is not a believer but wishes to be seen as one so he can "do a leetle business." But this passage is also true beyond facts because Jeremiah and Squire, do not just share a language that is firmly located in the eighteenth century. Each speaks with his own distinct dialect and personal voice bringing with it his own unique ideological discourse.

Settle is just as good in the twentieth century as she is in the eighteenth as shown by this passage from *The Killing Ground*:

> Kitty Puss wouldn't shut up. "We got *Deep Throat* for Charlie Bland's birthday. It was a riot. You should have seen us being tolerant."
>
> "It was very interesting." Maria's mouth went smaller than ever. "After all, we have to keep up with things." She sounded sad.
>
> "It made me want to fuck." Kitty Puss grinned.

"Now, that will be enough." Daisy used the curb. "I'm sure Hannah isn't interested. She probably does that kind of thing all the time. She's artistic. I for one thought it was disgusting..."

Again we see the accuracy of detail—the *Deep Throat* reference that nails the scene firmly into a real time—but we also feel the enormous ideological pressure being brought to bear upon Hannah, feel it in the spoken words. "You should have seen us being tolerant," Kitty Puss says; by inviting Hannah to share a laugh with "us," she is inviting her back into a social world where Hannah's genuine work will be contained and trivialized. Daisy comes at Hannah from another angle but to similar effect: "She's artistic." An entire web of relationships and social pressures is created by the authenticity of these speaking voices. In one of her epigraphs to *Addie*, Settle tells us: "To wait for a story is to wait for a way of telling that can be no other."

Settle did more than read and wait as she researched for The Beulah Quintet. She told Kate Long that she had never seen a mountain lion, so she "communicated" with a puma until she knew it; she felt a bear because she "needed to feel that sort of toilet brush bear skin." She found one of her characters suddenly, fully embodied, when she put her fingers in the holes in the wall of the church where he had been shot by Cromwell. In *Addie*, she says,

"I read everything I could find that was contemporary with the eighteenth century before 1775. The American language changed so radically after 1775 that I read for language that had not changed. I read for mores, for fashions, for what people thought was happening at the time. I read without taking any notes in order to grow an organic memory instead of a file of four-by-six cards."

She tells Kate Long of her excitement in finding five of Mother Jones' speeches. "It had real language in it. It didn't have cleaned-up, genteel, governess, English-class language. It was taken down verbatim and published verbatim." She says that she "had to learn Mother Jones like you learn a language. Then I was free to make a Mother Jones speech."

By the time she has written her way to *The Scapegoat*, Settle's writing has become, to use Bakhtin's terminology, fully "dialogized"—that is, the author has turned the characters loose to fight it out with each other. We can feel Brian Rosenberg's puzzlement as he writes in *Mary Lee Settle's The Beulah Quintet* (1991): "In roughly three hundred pages the novel presents nearly three dozen characters, at least a half-dozen

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of whom can with some justification be assigned the story's central position." These characters not only see the facts differently but have "differences in opinion, judgment, and emotional response.... In the absence of an authoritative central voice, the reader is forced to extract from those conflicting perspectives the actual meaning and tone of the novel's events." Rosenberg tries out and rejects the possibility that Settle might have come to believe that truth is indeterminate; he offers, as a more likely approximation of Settle's position: "If historical truth must finally be an individual determination, then the best historian—the most useful historian—is one who puts the reader in a position to make such a determination."

Rosenberg is right as far as he goes, but Settle is after more than historical truth. She's after the novel that is true beyond facts. When a character in a novel is speaking to us in a way that, as Bakhtin says, "is internally persuasive for us and acknowledged by us," then "entirely different possibilities open up." Bakhtin is talking, of course, not about any old novel but about a novel that matters—like *The Beulah Quintet*. He is talking not about your amusement as a reader of fiction but your "ideological development"—that is, not merely the development of your ideas but the very way you construct the world from moment to moment and continue to live in it. He is talking about a struggle between "internally persuasive discourses"—those voices, voices, voices. "The semantic structure of an internally persuasive discourse is not finite," he says, "it is open; in each of the new contexts that dialogize it, this discourse is able to reveal ever newer ways to mean." Only the very best fiction can engage in that kind of intensely transformative work—fiction like Mary Lee Settle's. We write historical fiction, she tells Kate Long, "trying to find out about the present, mostly," so if you read her, and acknowledge her, you'll have to argue out the truth of things with her right now, in the present, in your time. Of course it matters; how could it not? She's not just a depersonalized voice telling a story; even now that she's gone, her words are living human words, and listen, she's talking to you.

3.

But if there is truth in fiction, there can also be lies. Settle learned that lesson early in life. Her first published poem was about a chiffon pie. She tells the story in *Addie*:

> "Aunt Myrtle she makes CHIFFON pies, us kids we look with hungry eyes..." Only somebody edited it and used the

word "punkin" because it scanned, and sounded cute. I hated pumpkin pies. And "cute."

... It wasn't mine anymore, but it was published under my name, my first publication in the *West Virginia Review* when I was ten years old. Or nine. I don't remember. It had been made into lies. I had said chiffon pie. Then and there, standing on the stairs at Cedar Grove, aware of being the only person in the history of the world to stand just in that place at that moment, I swore on the altar of God... that I would never write another word in my whole life.

Settle tells both Brian Rosenberg and Kate Long that *Prisons* was her most autobiographical novel. "... [T]he earliest seeds of *Prisons*," Rosenberg writes, "were linguistic ones: Settle discovered that Thomas Jefferson had the name Lilburne inscribed on a ring and that the start of the motto of the American Civil Liberties Union... was taken from Lilburne's Star Chamber address, and she began to suspect that 'our language, our language of democracy'..., may have had its beginning an ocean away in the relatively obscure Leveller movement."

Johnny Church, the protagonist of *Prisons*, has been set on the road, fatherless, by a living human voice—Lilburne's voice. Here is Johnny's voice, telling us about it:

> Why, I would even stand alone, in my room, fourteen years old, and not pretend, no, more than that, be at that moment Lilburne himself when he stood before the court of the Star Chamber, whose very presence had silenced the bravest of men. I would say his words, whispering so my tutor would not hear me, that had rung out there when he was only twenty-two and stood so with his hat foursquare upon his head to shout defiance to the greatest power in England. It became my creed, more sweet to me than any I heard chanted in the Oxford churches.
>
> For what is done to anyone may be done to everyone...

Johnny finds his own words. They are what bring him into conflict with Oliver Cromwell. These are some of the words he has written: "All the forms of government being corrupted and abused, the law and administration being perverted, and the people's liberty betrayed..." To save his life, all he has to do is go back on those words, deny them—allow his CHIFFON pie to be turned into a punkin pie.

"We want your words, boy, not your blood!"

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Cromwell throws down the seal and leaves it tumbling across the table... .

We weigh each other, he and I, and both are annoyed by the watching of the others. He reads my inability to turn. I cannot. Does he know I cannot? I see in him a longing to be forgiven that cannot be comforted by all the power he takes upon himself to cover it.

"I could give you freedom," he says now. "I am not so wedded and glued to forms that I cannot overlook your transgressions."

He thinks he offers blessings when he offers bribes. Does he no longer know the difference?

Settle has got right to the heart of it: they always want our words and not our blood, but they'll take our blood if they have to.

"You know why we can sit here and talk now without somebody looking over our shoulder?" Settle asks Kate Long. "I've lived in countries where people are talking to me, and suddenly they want to tell me something, and they glance over their shoulder to see if there's a policeman or a listener around. We don't have that. We have had it."

Who is listening now? Does it matter? This is not a rhetorical device. I'm asking you.

"I don't think we realize in this country how truly rare the history of our democracy truly is." Settle says. It started in the frontier, but it started with ideas that were brought over here. And those ideas, over and over, we have tried to squash. We have fought against them. We have tried to form autocracies... We survived it. We survived the twenties, when there were attempts to blot out opposition. We survived the early fifties when the McCarthy hearings were attempting to blot out opposition..."

"In that case, they called people Communist," Kate says.

"Watch anybody who is calling something they don't agree with by the wrong name," Mary Lee says. "Because you find all the way through American history that those who are autocrats tend to use the wrong name for those who disagree."

Speaking quickly, in a tone of voice that sounds almost like an aside, Mary Lee tells Kate Long: "The choice is completely individual and always has been." She is not invoking the false dichotomy between "collectivism" and "individualism" and opting for the latter. "I have, as a result of all this work, literally fallen in love with democracy," she says. "But democracy is not me against you. Democracy is the

balance between us." We maintain that balance through what Bakhtin calls dialogue. "The word in living conversation is directly, blatantly, oriented toward a future answer-word: it provokes an answer, anticipates it and structures itself in the answer's direction."

Several years ago I met a visiting student from Russia. After exchanging pleasantries—I found out, to my surprise, that Montreal is colder than Moscow—I couldn't help asking her about Bakhtin. It wasn't an unexpected question for her. She laughed. "You people in the West seem so surprised by him," she said. "In Russia we expect our writers to have ideas."

Mary Lee Settle had ideas. Unfortunately, they were the wrong ideas, ones that would never win her a place in the academic cannon. She had ideas about democracy. This is one of the ideas she had. It is Lilburne's living voice, and she made it Johnny Church's living voice, and it is her living voice: *For what is done to anyone may be done to everyone.* Does it matter? Does it matter now?

In what must be the most tragic passage in his notebooks, *Literaturnaia ucheba* (1992), Bakhtin writes: "The lie is today's most ever present form of evil. The word does not know whom is serves. It emerges from the dark and does not know its own roots. Its serious link with terror and violence. The authentically kind, unselfish, and loving person has not yet spoken, he has realized himself in the spheres of everyday life, he has not yet attached himself to the official word, infected with violence and the lie; he is not becoming a writer." That was life under Stalin.

What about our lives, yours and mine? One does not have to be a speech writer for a president to attach oneself to the official word, infected with violence and the lie, not in a time that offers a multitude of bribes disguised as blessings and no longer knows the difference.

When asked if she realizes that she is an inspiration to younger West Virginia writers, Settle tells Kate Long, "Well, that's wonderful. Just tell them to work very hard." Then, laughing, she adds: "And tell them it's mighty hard work for mighty low pay."

Now Mary Lee has entered into what Bakhtin calls Great Time where she will continue to talk with Shakespeare and Roger Williams, and we've been left behind to talk with her and with each other. Yes, it is mighty hard work for mighty low pay, but true pitch is true pitch, and if we want to write novels that are true beyond facts, we've got to find it. And if we don't want our words to be transformed into official words, we've got to keep telling the bastards that, by God, it's