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## A Black Appalachian Treasure

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FEATURED AUTHOR—CRYSTAL WILKINSON  
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George Brosi

From the time Crystal Wilkinson was six weeks old, she was raised by her grandparents, the Silas and Christine to whom her first book, *Blackberries, Blackberries* (2000), is dedicated. They lived in the Indian Creek community in northeast Casey County, Kentucky. Once a bustling enclave where most of the county's Black families lived, it had dwindled to only four Black households by the time "Crissy" was born in 1962, and, today, not a single Black family lives there. The community was rich in story-tellers, but Crissy remembers no stories about slavery days. It was, however, common knowledge that the Indian Creek Wilkinsons bore the same name as the descendents of the White families that had held their people as slaves, including former Kentucky Governor, Wallace Wilkinson. They also shared the same ancestor many generations before.

Silas was a well-respected tobacco, corn and sorghum farmer, and Christine worked in the homes of school teachers in the Casey County seat, Liberty. When she retired in the 1990s, Christine was still receiving just \$20.00 for cleaning houses three days a week. When Crystal Wilkinson has recently returned to Liberty to give readings at the Public Library, she has experienced strong mixed feelings about the compliments showered upon her grandmother, for example, for her willingness to stay extra hours and be helpful in times of need. It was those times when Crissy was most missing her primary care-giver and worried about why her grandmother wasn't home yet.

Wilkinson cherishes powerful and positive memories of growing up out in the country, an "only child" about a mile from the closest playmate her age, in a home that didn't get indoor plumbing until she was in college. She loved the woods and the animals and the attention of her loving grandparents. Wilkinson recalls being so sympathetic to the farm animals that she refused to eat eggs one whole year. In the not-too-distant past, Indian Creek had been served by a one-room segregated school, and Silas and Christine, who themselves had only gone to the 3rd and 8th grades respectively, had hosted the community school teacher. There were still lots of books in the schoolhouse which had been built on their property. Silas and Christine raised seven chil-

dren before taking in their granddaughter and sent them to the only high school available to them, a “colored school,” located in Stanford, the county seat of adjoining Lincoln County. As adults, several of them settled in Stanford, and Crissy usually spent most of the summers living with her aunts and uncles and cousins in Stanford. Water Street, which provided the title for Wilkinson’s second book of stories, was a gathering place for the Black community there.

Her grandmother taught Crissy to read before she entered nearby Middleburg Elementary, and Crissy skipped second grade which put her in the same class with her second cousins, Tracy Sweeney and Loretta Patton, the only other Black students in the entire county school system. She told interviewer Joyce Dixon of *Southern Scribe*, “reading and writing became my playmates. I would take a pen or pencil and go down by the creek or at the edge of the yard for hours making up stories.” Crystal Wilkinson asserts that she actually started writing books when she had finished reading all the books available to her. As a third-grader, she began collecting her tales and sewed them into little books on her grandmother’s sewing machine.

Throughout her youth, her world centered on Indian Creek and extended only as far as Liberty where her family went to the Laundromat and shopped for groceries and Stanford where they occasionally watched her cousin play basketball for Lincoln County High. She never traveled to the parts of Casey County where Amish families lived but remembers, Hannah, the one Amish student at Casey County High, and she recalls Ms. Sapp the one “hip” teacher at CCHS who encouraged her and others to write. When she turned 16, Crissy got a job on the Casey County Library’s Bookmobile, and her grandparents bought her a car so she could go to work and school, but she wasn’t allowed to drive anywhere else. The three Black cousins graduated together from Casey County High School in the Class of 1979.

A counselor at the high school suggested that Wilkinson attend Eastern Kentucky University and major in Journalism since she liked to write, so at the tender age of seventeen, she drove to ECU, her grandparents following behind her, the furthest she had ever been away from home except for a one-week visit to kinfolks in Hamilton, Ohio. Excited but overwhelmed to be away from home and at a huge university, she wanted earnestly to fit in with the other Black students, but they mostly made fun of her for her country talk and rural ways. Although she had been warned over and over again about big city boys, she fell in love with a student from Lexington who had been raised by grandparents and whose grandmother was from

Lincoln County. Crystal Wilkinson gave birth to a little boy, Gerald, on October 17, 1980, in the middle of midterms her second semester at Eastern. Her roommate, Sue Welch, from Stanford, and Gerald's father watched the baby while she was in class, and they moved to the University's family housing. Having a baby brought Wilkinson closer to her mother who lived in Lexington and held a succession of dishwashing and cleaning jobs. As a student, Crystal was painfully shy. She threw up before she had to give a speech and made up required interviews—something she now sees as an indication that she should have majored in creative writing rather than journalism! Nevertheless, she was raised to finish what she started, and so she persevered, graduating in the class of 1985 with a journalism degree.

After college, Crystal Wilkinson and her son, Gerald, moved to Lexington. Her first job out of college was as an accounts receivable clerk for Seasons Sash, a window marketing company. Other jobs followed for the college graduate, at Walgreens, Arbys, as a custodian, a hospital clerk then finally for the *Lexington Herald Leader*. In 1989, when Gerald was eight, she gave birth to twins, Delainia and Elainia. A job with the City of Lexington in public relations was remunerative enough that she did not have to work two jobs to support herself, and she began to take a more active part in Lexington's literary life. During this time she attended readings at the Kentucky Women Writers Conference and the "Working Class Kitchen," held at Alfalfa's, a health-food restaurant. She also began to attend writing workshops at the Carnegie Center. In 1994 Wilkinson received her first grant—from the Kentucky Foundation for Women—and the following year she garnered a grant from the Mary Anderson Center for the Arts in Indiana. Her writing began to appear in magazines, the first being *Southern Exposure*, and her work for the city helped her land an even better public relations job at Midway College. In 1996, she was accepted for participation in the prestigious writing workshop at Virginia Commonwealth University named for Zora Neale Hurston and Richard Wright. The President of Midway lent her his Cadillac to drive there. Marie Brown, a literary agent who attended the conference, agreed to represent her. In 1997, Wilkinson began teaching creative writing to high school students during the summer at the Kentucky Governor's School for the Arts, and she received a grant from the Kentucky Arts Council. Wilkinson's piece in *Eclipsing a Nappy New Millenium* in 1998 started a roll that has resulted in an essay or story included in at least one book published in every subsequent year, including *Confronting Appalachian Stereotypes* in 1999 and *Home and Beyond*, an anthology

of Kentucky stories, in 2001. Ironically, it was Wilkinson herself, not her agent, who ended up finding a publisher for the first entire book with her by-line. She found a web-site for Toby Press Review and sent them one story, thinking they were a magazine. They requested a complete book manuscript which Toby Press, located in London, England, accepted, offering a rare two-book contract to the previously unpublished author. *Blackberries, Blackberries*, a collection of short stories set in a rural Black community reminiscent of Indian Creek, was published in 2000, and *Today's Librarian* magazine gave it the award for "Best Debut Fiction." Having a book out increased the demand for Wilkinson as a public speaker not only in Kentucky but also at such events as the International Conference on the Short Story in English at the University of Iowa, the African-American Women Writers' Conference in Washington, D.C. and the Kellogg Writers Series in Indiana.

The Carnegie Center for Literacy and Learning, where she had first taken and then taught writing workshops, hired her to be their Assistant Director, and Gurney Norman, the UK creative writing teacher and author dubbed her "The Godmother of Creative Writing in Lexington" because of her active role in promoting writing and motivating prospective authors. Wilkinson found so much meaning as a teacher that in 2001 she enrolled in the brand new low-residency MFA Program at Spalding University in Louisville to gain the credential necessary to teach at the college level. In 2003, by this time working as a Writer-in-Residence at her old Alma Mater, Eastern Kentucky University, she was part of Spalding's first MFA graduating class of four including Frank X. Walker. Walker had coined the term "Affrilachian" to describe writers, primarily students at the University of Kentucky, whose roots extended not only in the Black community, but also in rural Kentucky, and the Affrilachians poets became an important support group in and around Lexington. That same year, *Water Street*, a collection of stories based on Wilkinson's summer experiences in Stanford, was published by Toby Press.

After receiving her MFA degree, Wilkinson was hired as a professor at Indiana University where she currently teaches. For the 2006-2007 school year, she is returning to Kentucky to teach at Morehead State University. At this time, Wilkinson is working on two novels, tentatively entitled, "Opulence," and "A Good Rain" as well as another collection of stories. She is committed to teaching and wants to do some teaching for the rest of her life, but she would love to be able to support herself primarily as an author.

Crystal Wilkinson has already made an inestimable contribution

to Appalachian Literature. She has given a voice not only to Black Appalachians but to rural Blacks throughout America, while at the same time resonating with readers of various racial and geographical backgrounds. As a teacher she has been a mentor to a wide variety of students as amply demonstrated by the story “Green Shirts” in this issue of *Appalachian Heritage*, written by her student Jeff Wallace. As a speaker, she not only demonstrates how a desire to write can help overcome obstacles but also that excellence can be achieved despite adversity.

