An Interview

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Appalachian Heritage, Volume 34, Number 2, Spring 2006, pp. 13-23 (Article)

Published by The University of North Carolina Press
DOI: *https://doi.org/10.1353/aph.2006.0028*

FEATURED AUTHOR—CRYSTAL WILKINSON

An Interview

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Morris Grubbs: *Let's begin near the beginning, with your formative years back in Casey County, Kentucky. You say in the Introduction to* Blackberries, Blackberries *that when you were growing up in Indian Creek, "being a woman" was what you "longed for." Could you talk more about this yearning?*

Crystal Wilkinson: Well, I think because children were rare in the everyday of my early life, I always thought I was missing out on something that only a full grown woman could get at. Even though I was occasionally around my cousins, I was mostly around adults in my early years before school, and I was fascinated, absolutely fascinated, with the behavior of the women in my family. I thought my grandmother was absolutely up there with God, and I'm serious, and I remember thinking that literally, even when I was in college. This is probably not the appropriate avenue, but I'm fond of not being appropriate: when I was in college and experienced sex for the first time, I was seventeen then—a college freshman—I literally thought that either God, my grandmother, or both were going to come through the ceiling. I was sort of surprised when the walls didn't literally open up and the world come to an end for the sin I had committed. So that's how high I valued the women in my family. I think because I was an observant child that I really kind of fantasized or romanticized or merely invented this kind of mythic relationship with the women in my family. I felt the same way about my Aunt Sookie. I thought she was the perfect woman, the way she dressed, the way she carried herself, her hair, her lipstick, her voice. And she was my model for becoming a woman. It's odd now that I think about it. I didn't really see the men the same way except for my grandfather. He was of mythic proportions to me, too. I really think that this idea that no one could touch him is why I am not married to this day. But that is another story.

MG: *You have also mentioned that you wanted to "capture the secrets" of their "countryness" and their "womanness." Do you remember when you first became aware of the boundaries–clear and sometimes blurred–between*

children and adults, women and men, country and city, black and white? As a child growing up in the heart of south central Kentucky, how clear and how significant were these boundaries?

CW: Well, this is a big one and one that has huge repercussions in my life. One that I should probably be in therapy for (smile). Let's see. I worshipped my grandparents, but I do remember never having a voice when other adults were around. I remember having something that I thought was so important to say and when my aunts were around, my grandmother ignored me. I don't even recall what it was on any of the occasions that I was trying to say, but I remember thinking that if I didn't get to say it I would die or the world would end. I never got to say it (whatever it was) because I was a child and should stay in a child's place and not talk. I think that's why I probably went the other way when I was raising my own children and even with my granddaughter. I always, whether adults are around or not, cup my granddaughter's face in my hands and say "Yes, honey what is it?" so she can see that I am listening to her. I then tell her that it's not appropriate to interrupt a conversation, but I want her to always know that I hear her. I did that with my children, too. As a result they are all a little too self-important but not in an obnoxious way. It all stemmed from my own experience. I wanted to be a part of every aspect of my grandmother's life, and I was, but it was shocking to me that she would dismiss me when another adult was around. I was hurt to the core. Spoiled, I guess (smile). Now there is something behind it that I can't quite put my finger on, but it affected me deeply. And the other things as well. I remember being at a family reunion and being made fun of because of my accent. These experiences were all before I had even reached school-age. I wrote an essay about it that appears in *Confronting Appalachian Stereotypes: Back Talk from an American Region*. When I was growing up, there were these times that I felt like being called "country" was being called a cussword, and I think that affected me wanting to get out so badly. I was hell bent from an early age to escape that label. I embrace it now, but because it seemed so negative I wanted to escape it for a long time. I also remember my grandmother being sort of ashamed the years that the family reunion was held on the creek. We still had an outhouse, and I remember her decorating the outhouse, my grandfather being extra meticulous about the yard, us doing all kinds of things I saw as ridiculous, like shining up the coal stove and putting a dress on it just to try and impress people who were from the creek anyway. It was amazing to me that when my grandmother's brothers and sisters returned home

(and this was home to them) they kind of would snurl their noses up at their own heritage. But this was the beginnings of my kind of straddling shame and pride about my background. One of my aunts, my grandmother's sister, (and I love her, bless her heart) returned to Indian Creek with an accent as did other extended members of our family (ones who hadn't been away all that long). I thought they were foreigners. Kind of how I feel when I hear Tina Turner speak now and she's from what is it? Nubush or Flatbush, Tennessee, and now has a British accent. My people came home citified, some amalgam of their former country selves, and thought this was a good thing. And then there was the other side of this issue. My grandmother warned me of the ways of city boys all the time. I wanted to be a reporter at one time in my early life, and she told me I'd have to go across the waters and I'd be killed. The creek life was an insular one. There were people whose last names alone were enough for my grandmother to warn me to stay away from them. "The so-and-sos (I won't name names because a lot of the people are still around) have always been drunkards," or thieves or no-counts. I had a certain fear of outsiders early on, but I was also intrigued by outsiders because I felt a certain kinship with anyone on the edge because I always felt as though I was always on the edge myself. Race played into this too, because I was black in an all-white town and was aware of that early, early on. I was attracted to the new kids in school and the rebels and the edge-dwellers, people (some of them unsavory) who were on the periphery as I felt I was. Race was a big issue. I was, in some ways, isolated from the pain of race issues when I was little (prior to going to school), but it eased in. My grandmother cleaned up houses for the white folks in town. Many of them would be my teachers when I went to school, but there was always a subservient role that my grandmother played that annoyed me, though early on I didn't know quite what I was witnessing or what bothered me about it. But my grandmother was a queen in our church and in our family, and to see her sort of ordered around by people was a painful thing. My grandfather had the luxury of being on his own land and working his own land, but I also saw him go through some things early on with the other farmers. Sometimes they would sort of make fun of him or say things like "I'm working hard as a nigger" or something to that effect and then look at him for a response. I think I saw these as passive acts on my grandfather's part sometimes, but I quickly learned that it was a strength. He had lived in this community all his life and had survived, even thrived. He was one of the most successful farmers in the area. Not the richest, mind you, by far, but respected and

genuinely one who knew what he was doing. He advised the younger white farmers, and they respected his knowledge of the land, but at the same time there was always one or two who made these little cutting remarks. I think because of all this and because of his personality, my grandfather was most happy in the fields away from human beings. There is a big part of me that feels the same way. If I didn't push myself every day to do what I do, I think I could be much more happy being isolated out in a rural community somewhere, having little contact with people. Once I got in school, the racial divide was even more obvious. I rode the bus, and there were only three black kids (me and my two cousins) on the bus but also in the entire school system. It's funny to look at photographs of my classes from kindergarten through high school and being able to quickly be picked out of the crowd because I was the only black kid in the group. My cousins were there, too, in some of those photographs, but they were lighter-skinned and could "pass" if they had wanted to. At least one of them could, and did. I think she's still sort of passing somewhere. But there was one boy in particular who had something to say every day, some racial epitaph to throw, something that always combined a sexual advance with a racial slur from the time I went to school up until the time I graduated. He was relentless. Some of this I realize now as a part of the economic divide. His family was pretty poor and mine was too but not as poor as his, and that was, I think, a big part of it. I was called names all the time while I was growing up. That was painful. Someone asked "Why didn't you fight?" I would have spent my entire life fighting from the time I was five or six years old up until the time I was an adult. After a while it wasn't worth it. I had things to do. I had to get the rest of my life done, to go to college, I had an agenda. Even as a little girl I had an agenda that I guess was more of an older person's agenda, but I was so busy, determined, really, trying to figure out what I needed to be when I grew up. That was really important to me early on. I guess I'm still trying to decide it now, even at 43. So in some ways issues of gender, of class, of region, of race were moot points. I mean when the creek flooded we all had to take the swinging bridge that my grandfather and other men in the community built to get in and out of our community; if it was a summer of drought, everybody's crops suffered; if there was a stranger on the creek, everybody peeked out their windows to make sure no one was in harm's way; but at the same time it was like being in the midst of eden and hell simultaneously sometimes, a constant hand on my back pushing me out and a loving hand stilling me to stay. Hard to walk straddled so long. I'm still doing it, you know.

MG: *You grew up in a nurturing environment, but one that had just enough vital conflict to serve as your muse later on. Eudora Welty once said she was born into a family of talkers and grew up "listening for stories." She also grew up reading fairy tales and watching silent movies, which gave her a sharp sense of the connection between words and images. How would you describe your own awakening to the world of words and stories?*

CW: Before I remember reading or knowing anything about books at all, I remember stories. My grandparents were storytellers. Even I have a tendency to romanticize rural farm life, but being country is hard. My grandparents' tales of dirt floors, crossing a bluff in a flood, or Dr. Creech coming to visit on horseback, were all fantastic to me even though they were true. We would be sitting around the supper table or in the living room or have company around, and one of them might say, "You remember that time..." And I knew at that moment when those words were spoken that a story was about to begin. My grandfather could weave some tall tales, too. Well, really I don't know, perhaps these things happened. But I remember one about somebody, perhaps Granddaddy's father, Pa Jim, I'm not sure. But anyway there was somebody's story of going across the waters and seeing mermaids and a haint one he told on himself about a long-dead aunt appearing at the foot of his bed one night. The ones I loved the most were the stories they told of when they were younger. It was always hard for me—it still is—to picture my grandparents any other way than the way I knew them. I remember it surprising me somehow to think that they were ever really children. The other thing, of course, was that my grandmother read to me a lot. I remember lying in bed with her and her reading stories to me from our Golden Books collection. I got to the point that I could finish the stories before she reached the end. At first it was just memorization, but I could read before I went to school. They skipped me from first to third grade because I could read so well. Too bad they didn't give me a math test. The next big influence . . . surprising to me . . . this is a new discovery. I never thought about this until just now. But church was an influence on my writing or at least Reverend Mills was. Our minister lived in Somerset and owned a barbershop there, but he travelled and preached at our church one Sunday and Flatwoods, KY, the next. Reverend Mills wore tiny wire rimmed glasses that perched on his nose, a magnificent felt hat, a suit, had a pearl-handled cane (which I don't even think he needed), long hair and a mustache. He was a very light skinned man, and looking back now I see kind of a cross between Mark Twain and Frederick Douglass—long

white hair. But Reverend Mills was amazing. Going to church was like going to a play. He would start off slow but then raised and lowered his voice for emphasis and pounded the pulpit stand. He made the Bible exciting and would actually weave his own stories into it to make sure we got the point. And school too was an influence but in a more marginal way and not so much what was going on in the classroom until I got to high school. Don't get me wrong. I had great grade school teachers, but what influenced me most in grade school was the library. I was amazed then—and it was a small library—at the sheer number of books it held. I remember even at an early age thinking about all the numbers of words that must be behind those book covers and thinking there was a lot to know.

MG: *It sounds as if you were blessed, as if your childhood provided you with rich earth to grow and a stout root system to nourish your imagination. I'm afraid this kind of childhood is becoming more rare every day. It's clear that you revere words, and so do your characters, for their spiritually transformative and healing power. Maybe Reverend Mills especially helped instill in you a respect for the empowering nature of language, words as spiritual balm. I get the sense in listening to you now and in reading your fiction that you believe that storytelling is a large part of what keeps us going, what helps us through trying times. Many of your characters are themselves storytellers. Does this come from your own faith in stories as a means, not only of making sense of experience, but of rising above the limitations and confinements of the human condition, of transcending its tragedies?*

CW: As a writer I think I write to understand either something in my own life or something in someone else's life. I am always seeking the "why" of the human spirit. Why do we act the way we do? So in that sense as a writer I am seeking healing from some pain, some enigma within my own life or within my own psychological history when I'm writing. It's not obvious on the page that I'm doing that, and often it's not even obvious to me when I'm writing that that's what I'm doing, but in the end—sometimes even years later—that's what I feel. Even when I say to myself, "Oh, this one is different. I wrote this one just to be writing it." Kind of like art for the sake of art. There really isn't such a thing. Even when I think I'm being light, my pyscho-history takes over. We all have grooves in our records. Almost all writers have their themes, and I'm no exception. Even when I think I've escaped from my themes, they wind themselves back into my work. As a reader, I definitely think that literature has the power to heal. Reading is balm,

especially reading stories. A good story, for me, is one that touches me somewhere that I haven't been touched before. One that sparks something that was dormant. One that gives chills. And it's not the same for everyone. I'm haunted by stories, even students' stories that did that for me. I have a horrible memory, so I can't even rattle off a long list of stories that do that for me. But the feelings they stir up or the haunting they leave is a staying one. Gayl Jones' work does that for me. That's one that I can call up very quickly. The emotional truth in her stories is chilling. To be able to capture some aspect of the human spirit that causes somebody to think about just how beautiful or ugly or vulnerable or funny—any number of descriptors—the human spirit is, I think, is what writing is all about, and of course that all moves you toward healing within yourself. A good story lofts you to another level of understanding of what it means to be human. Novels do this too, but I think stories have the ability to transcend more purely. Stories are what get many of us through heartache, be it personal, cultural, or universal. All cultures have storytelling traditions and they are much more than just literature, much more than art; they are restorative.

MG: *Good short stories do transcend their time and place and more easily—and more often—tap into a universal vein. It's refreshing to hear that you value short stories as a vital and essential art, rather than as exercises to work up to the larger-scale artistry of the novel. I think in the past twenty years we have seen a renascence of the short story form, at least in terms of how it's appreciated by general readers and valued in academia. I sense, though, that some publishers are still hesitant to give collections the same support as novels. Your two collections have sold well and have been widely praised. Now you're working on two novels. Could you speak to some of the intrinsic differences between the two forms as you've encountered them as a writer and as a teacher?*

CW: I can't wait to get back to short stories. I've started writing stories again when I'm not working on the novels. I miss the form so much. I agree with Mary Gordon's definition of the story. She says that the short story is like a wagon wheel: that all the spokes must be connected; otherwise graceful movement isn't possible. As a writer, if my stories are indeed graceful—as some would argue (smile)—then my novels are definitely not as graceful as far as feeling the need for something so wonderfully whole as a short story. In a novel there is more room to be messy, to wander and to return. I would never consider myself a neat and tidy person or an organized one even, but the short story

attracts me because of its wonder, its wholeness in such a short span. To create a world or a particular window in a world and have that finish up in 20-25 pages and be a whole, complete thing is phenomenal to me—something greater than sex or chocolate (smile). The novel is such a long, long journey—that meanders and climbs and descends and dips and churns. I'm queasy even saying this—car sick (chuckle). I love to read novels, but writing them so far doesn't have the payoff that writing stories has for me. I like it, but I don't absolutely LOVE it. As far as teaching is concerned, I enjoy teaching them both fully. Students seem to think there is so much more to talk about in a novel, but it's also a pretty interesting experience to watch them unleash the intricate power of a short story too. I don't have much to say about the differences in teaching the genres. I love to teach literature and see students suddenly get a work for the first time. I love it when the lights go on in their eyes—that moment of recognition of something familiar and common no matter how difficult they previously thought the work was.

MG: *I love the way you describe the vital moment of illumination. This is certainly a mark of a good short story, to catch the reader off guard and lead her to an epiphany, a communal or self discovery. Let's turn the tables a bit. For you, does this kind of vital moment occur during the writing of a story? Do you think it heralds the story's success, its power both for you and your readers? Is there a story in either of your collections that stands out to you because of this kind of epiphanic writing experience?*

CW: I don't think that this kind of illumination happens for me during the writing process. Certainly not in the conception. It's more of the opposite. Writing a story for me is bliss, but it has to do with discovery. I'm by nature a nosey person, so even when I dip into the lives that I, myself, create I'm seeking to know what's underneath it all. Why are they behaving this way or that? What is the psychological history of the moment for the characters and even for the story itself? And yes, I do think that the element of surprise or illumination is vital in the end once the piece is finished and for readers. If you don't learn something new, a different way of looking at something, a peek inside another culture, another home, yourself even, then I don't think a story is doing its job. No, no one story stands out in that way. I always know there is something that I was scratching at, but I never fully know whether I uncovered it or not. So to say, "yes, such and such story does such and such" would be sort of arrogant or something, at least premature.

Sometimes I don't make the discovery until years after I write something and go back and read it. Because I'm always growing as a human being and because I'm always growing older (and hopefully wiser) there is always another plateau to reach with this process. That's part of why I never tire of it. It's what keeps me writing. Questioning, discovering. Questioning, getting closer to discovering. Questioning and continuing to write till I get as close as I can.

MG: *My students love your stories, and I think it's because many of your characters are questing and yearning and sometimes even finding what they're looking for. And I think your readers intuitively know that you are also questioning and yearning to figure out what is motivating your characters. There seems to be a kind of organic and mystical harmony between you and your characters that helps your stories yield meaning in a way that neither you nor they could have achieved alone. I think my students also identify so readily with your stories, for the circumstances your characters find themselves in are experiences that all of us, no matter our cultural background, can relate to on an emotional or psychological level. I'm thinking, for example, of Aberdeen in "Humming Back Yesterday." Now that story is filled with sexual and emotional violence, but it's balanced, we see in the end, with healing, regeneration, and hope. And we come to realize by the last paragraph how strong and wonderful the marriage is between Aberdeen and Clovis, and how this serves as an antidote to Aberdeen's traumatic past. Could you talk about this story in the light of what you remember of its creation? Is it an example of this cycle of "questioning" and the "getting closer to discovering" that you've mentioned?*

CW: Yes, definitely. At the risk of sounding vulgar again, I am fascinated with the "town whore." She appears again and again in my work in varying formations. On the surface (some people have accused me of writing only about sex) it seems to be about sex, but I think it's always so much deeper than that. It's not so much what she does (I'd be writing something altogether different if I focused only on WHAT she does); we all know what she does, what body parts are involved, that sort of dirty stuff, but what I'm more interested in is how psychological trauma manifests itself in the behaviors of human beings. I often think the town whore (I'm just using her as an example; there are other forms of psychological trauma in people's lives as well) is simply a product of the psychological history of her life. We wouldn't whisper in the same ways at a woman who was the product of some great physical abuse or trauma in life, say if a person grew up being beaten or expe-

rienced some atmospheric trauma like a flood that carried away all of their family's belongings when they were young or something like that—like the people of New Orleans. The children of the people who suffered this tragedy will forever be affected; it will be a permanent groove in their psychological histories for the rest of their lives. And it will manifest itself in a million different ways in the future. That is the kind of thinking and processing of human behavior that I am most drawn to. For instance, a child who saw his parents lose everything in a hurricane might grow up to covet material things, or he might grow up thinking everything is dispensable—material properties, relationships, a sense of "home," etc. It could turn out a million different ways but will have a life-long lasting effect. Fat people, controlling people, every kind of people there is—we're all by-products of our psychological histories—grooves in our records that continue to get stuck in the same place. We replay our pasts over and over and over, sometimes staying still and sometimes inching forward just beyond that one thing that haunts us. "Humming Back Yesterday" is probably the break-out story for me when I began to walk around the impact of memory and the fact that no matter what our circumstances are and what we overcome, the past is always there at the door of our psyches. Memory is not something we can ever control, and it is triggered and flashed and gnashes its teeth continuously like a hound on the scent of blood. Giving birth to Aberdeen Copeland was my first attempt at walking around this sort of thing. She cannot rid herself of her horrid past. It comes back time and time again even in the midst of the happiest times of her life. Most of us don't have to deal with the kind of vile circumstances that Aberdeen finds herself up against, but our psychological histories are present just the same, affecting our every reaction, and then we pass it forward into generation after generation. Even if it lessens, bits and pieces of it remain. I've been studying the effects of ancestral memory, and there is an entire frame of thought, for instance, that speaks of that alive in all of us as a sort of psychic memory and perhaps even genetic memory that is passed down from generation to generation. For instance, someone whose ancestors perished under violent circumstances might still have recurring episodes of the manifestation of that horror. For instance, slavery is not only a psychological circumstance of the slave but the slave holder. We, as Americans, are all products of slavery. We don't often recognize it, but we walk around with those legacies every day. And then if you layer on everything else that there is about us, our familial circumstances, our community circumstances, our region, our socio-economic considerations, etc., you begin to see

"why" a person is like he or she is. That's a long way around the barn toward my explanation, but I believe on some level this is true. And it doesn't have to just concern tragedy; it also concerns other things. I think that my love of land and nature goes back for several generations; it's not just the fact that my grandfather was a lover of the land. I think that in some way it's just a part of me as it relates to psychological history, my familial history, ancestral history, even on a cellular level. So to say "country" is in my blood is of course metaphorical, but I also think it has some literal applications as well. So the beginnings of this sort of thinking and the importance of psychological history to us as human beings and how that relates to the characters I give birth to and how they move around in the world and how they deal with the circumstances of their own lives, and how I walk around their situations in an attempt to discover something, not just for myself but for them too—for all of us really—began with the germ of the story "Humming Back Yesterday." Of course, it probably began even earlier on some level, but this is where I first began to really be aware of it.