



PROJECT MUSE®

Mountain Mann: A Biographical Sketch

Cynthia Burack

Appalachian Heritage, Volume 34, Number 3, Summer 2006, pp. 10-12
(Article)

Published by The University of North Carolina Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/aph.2006.0086>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/432833/summary>

FEATURED AUTHOR—JEFF MANN

Mountain Mann: A Biographical Sketch

Cynthia Burack

I was fortunate to have been born just south of the Mason-Dixon line; this lucky accident may be a main reason why Jeff Mann and I have been friends for over twenty-five years. Jeff was born in 1959 in Clifton Forge, Virginia, and spent the significant first eight years of his life in Covington, another small town in the Allegheny Mountains. After that, and until college, Jeff and his family lived in Hinton, West Virginia, the seat of Summers County and to this day the Mann family homeplace.

I met Jeff in 1979 at West Virginia University; I had moved from studying music to history, and he double majored in English and Recreation/Nature Interpretation, a combination I thought odd at the time. I was wrong—Jeff did not just have a clear set of interests, he also had a plan. In him I discovered a kind of person I'd only heard and read of—the determined young aspiring writer. Even at twenty, Jeff had a quick appetite for words and feelings, vivid curiosity, and notebooks full of delicious descriptions of all things sensuous and thought-provoking. He was a poet, a budding cook, and an amateur guitarist. And then, as now, he was the funniest guy I knew.

When I left WVU, Jeff returned as a graduate student and, later, an instructor in the Department of English. We visited back and forth between Washington, D.C., and Morgantown. Throughout much of the 1980s, I shared my big city life with Jeff in small doses, and his English instructor apartment provided a sanctuary of food, books, music, and conversation. In 1989, Jeff left Morgantown to go south again—this time to Blacksburg, Virginia, where he was an English Instructor until 2003 and has since been an Assistant Professor of Creative Writing.

Who is Jeff Mann? Everyone who knows Jeff—indeed, anyone who has attended one of his readings—knows that humor to him is like meat or drink. In private, he can be irreverent, hilarious—at times a perfect fusion of antic wordplay and physical comedy. In public, he delivers his commentary with gentle, often self-deprecating humor. It's a shame everyone can't hear Jeff's poems rather than just read them. I'm lucky—I've been treated to readings frequently over

the years. Some of these early poems have never been published, and I think I treasure them most of all: serious, searing, droll, tender, erotic, sometimes erupting with volcanic rage or desire. Here is this soft-spoken Southern gentleman—taking the smallest packages from me with a firm and ironic, “let me have that, you’re delicate”—giving voice to the bliss and suffering at the heart of love.

Jeff often refers to himself as a contradiction, a jostling set of identities, some of which seem opposed to one another. We joke about being large, containing multitudes, and this is only partially a reference to endless cycles of dieting, fat years and lean years. But I think a better way to say it is that, like the adults we all need (if not want) to be, Jeff is ambivalent. We humans are often described by what we love. We’re expected to love who we are and what we’re given. But there’s no virtue in loving ourselves. It’s harder work to look what we’re given—our place, our people, ourselves—in the face and see it whole, good and bad, lovely and painful. I think this is what Jeff does in his best writing. He looks at what is closest to him, including what is so close that it is in him, and shows it to us in its fearsome complexity. Love and hate, beauty and ugliness, altruism and narcissism, solitude and loneliness, and all the stops in between.

I read and write what Jeff affectionately calls “dry tomes;” Jeff creates poetry and prose, writing of love, loss, home, place, sex, food, yearning, and the meanings of life. Even *I* think Jeff has the better side of that division of labor. For all the years I’ve known him, I’ve had a relationship with literature that I would not have had without him. He introduced me to modern poetry and to the lives of modern poets. He persuaded me that Joni Mitchell is a poet and not just a singer/songwriter. He is famous among his friends for walks in which he fixes flora with a scientific and aesthetic eye. How else would I know that the sassafras tree bears three differently-shaped leaves and that the ginkgo is one of the last few surviving deciduous gymnosperms? It is not Jeff’s fault that I am not (or not yet) a fan of *Dark Shadows* and country music. It’s just more evidence of his range, the incongruous amalgam of his appetites that puzzles and delights.

During our Morgantown years, Jeff and I shared the pleasures of performing music together, and these days we share the latest small successes of academic life. I try to keep the detritus of middle-age to a minimum, but my haul of things too precious to part with includes armloads of photos, letters, manuscript copies of poems and other writings—souvenirs of my long friendship with Jeff. In the years before e-mail, I looked forward to his letters, illustrated as they were

with signature cartoon characters saying and doing things that cannot be printed in a magazine. E-mail is fine as far as it goes, but it is a quick and utilitarian medium. By contrast, there was a time when hand-written letters began—to use only one example—“Moi pansy, moi honeydew, moi Entenmann cheese danish, honied receptacle, moi learned chalice of mead. . . .” Who could resist reading such a letter? And who could resist saving it for twenty years and more? Recently, I found a series of advertisements for reptiles for sale that Jeff picked up and annotated for our amusement. At some point we had agreed that reptiles were a wicked metaphor for lovers gone bad. The ad read: “Ball Python for Sale! Very Docile and Friendly” (Jeff’s marginal comment: “during the courtship!”); “Very Clean Pet” (comment: “leaves no evidence”). I could use this humor as a Rorschach test for my life; anyone who doesn’t get it or doesn’t like it has to go. Jeff had a lover once who didn’t get it and didn’t like it, and it was a foregone conclusion that the lover had to go.

Jeff’s sister, Amy, has called her brother the “hatenest man [she] know[s].” That may well be true—ask Jeff about barking dogs, music that reverberates from passing cars, mountaintop removal, or George W. Bush, and you may see the metamorphosis of a Southern Gentleman into a dark creature fit for Gothic literature. Indeed, such metamorphoses, and monsters that slumber within, are key themes in Jeff’s work. But with all due respect to Amy, you just can’t get a serviceable picture of Jeff unless you factor in his kindness, generosity, and loyalty, not to mention his fierce intelligence and satirical wit.

