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Listen Here: Women Writing in Appalachia (review)

Silas House

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Appalachian Heritage



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battle deserve the focus: What was the battle's ultimate significance? What is its lasting legacy?

On the other side are those who feel that Civil War history should describe in loving detail the battle strategies, troop placement, and the broad and bloody machinations of war, since these factors determine the outcome of the particular battle.

Ultimately, Hafendorfer's book represents the second philosophy. Readers who believe that the intricacies of battle should be the focus will find his book both interesting and informative, for it is a book about a battle that has too long lingered and waited patiently for its scribe.

—Marshall Myers

Sandra Ballard and Patricia L. Hudson, eds. *Listen Here: Women Writing in Appalachia*. Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2003. 673 pages. Cloth. \$45.00.

The introduction to *Listen Here: Women Writing in Appalachia*, begins with a quote by West Virginia poet Irene McKinney:

"I'm a hillbilly, a woman, and a poet, and I understood early on that nobody was going to listen to anything I had to say anyway, so I might as well say what I want to" (1).

The editors of *Listen Here*, Sandra Ballard, editor of *Appalachian Journal*, and Patricia Hudson, a freelance writer for *Southern Living* and other magazines, wanted to make sure that writers like McKinney did get listened to, so more than ten years ago they began preparations for this collection of 105 Appalachian women writers. At 673 pages, this book gives us plenty to listen to, and it is every bit worth hearing.

Listen Here is a monumental work, a comprehensive gathering that goes all the way back to 1826 for an excerpt from an Anne Newport Royall travel book and is immediate enough to include the very modern musings of contemporary writers like Karen Salyers McElmurray, who offers a piece of her 2003 memoir, *Mother of the Disappeared*. In effect, the book covers practically the entire timeline of Appalachian writing.

The editors wisely allow the book to speak for itself in many instances. There are very few entries from the 1800s, not because the editors were lazy in their research but simply because not very many women in Appalachia—or anywhere else, for that matter—were being

published. *Listen Here* not only covers the span of writing in Appalachia but also the versatile nature of its female authors. Included in the book are poems, essays, short stories, novel excerpts, autobiography, and whole texts of children's picture books.

All the usual suspects are here—Emma Bell Miles, Harriette Arnow, Wilma Dykeman, Cynthia Rylant, Denise Giardina—but the book is also populated by Appalachia's lesser known female talents, which the introduction clearly states as one of the major goals of the editors. They know that many of these lesser known voices should be more widely heard, and most likely would be if not for their gender and their region. Ballard and Hudson include the very commercial (Catherine Marshall's *Christy* has sold more than four million copies; Barbara Kingsolver's *The Poisonwood Bible* was an Oprah book club selection) and those writers like Sheila Kay Adams, Angelyn De Bord, and Leatha Kendrick, who have made a name for themselves and developed a devoted following despite small publishers or limited press runs.

In such a wide-ranging anthology, the key is to choose the right authors to be included, as well as the right excerpts. Ballard and Hudson succeed on both counts. Every single writer included deserves to be part of the collection. The editors have remarkable taste, unfailingly choosing perfect representation of each author, whether it be Dana Wildsmith's and Kathryn Stripling Byer's best poems or the opening chapter of Lee Smith's *Saving Grace*, which stands as some of her strongest writing. Ballard and Hudson succeed in not only choosing a great representation of a particular author's work but also in selecting excerpts that stand easily on their own. In doing so, the editors provide the reader with that rare thing: an anthology that is big enough to serve as a doorstop, yet also serves as a true page-turner, full of beautiful and entertaining writing.

Among the best aspects of the book are the well-written biographies of the authors that precede each selection. The biographies read like short feature stories and are concise, up-to-date, and often provide the reader with some lesser known facts about the authors as a result of the editors' meticulous research. For example, the short biographies are full of rich information like details about Belinda Mason's fight with AIDS or the fact that Dorothy Allison's mother "was a hard-working waitress all her life, was married three times before Allison was five years old" (10). Also included are insights into the writers' lives, such as Rita Quillen's self-description: "I can flatfoot, shoot well, burp extremely loud for a girl, have really, really good teeth..." (502) or Catherine Landis's commentary on the writing life. All these biographies include short bibliographies where the reader can find further writing about the authors' lives and work.

Some may argue that the pieces are all too short as most entries are only 2-4 pages in length, but the editors' goal here was to include as many women writers as they could, thereby introducing readers to as many new voices as possible. Another criticism might be that some of the best women writers in the region were excluded (Isabel Zuber and Cathy Smith Bowers being the most obvious exclusions) but this is not the fault of the editors. In fact, most of the best female writers in Appalachia *are* included in the collection and those who are not don't show up due to length restrictions, copyrights, or other unavoidable obstacles. Ballard and Hudson also cleverly include a section called "More Women Writing in Appalachia, Other Voices to Study," which lists female writers who were not included in the collection but whose work is definitely worthy of being heard. An added treat to this list is that Ballard and Hudson include writers who have not had a book published yet, but show great promise.

Listen Here is a must-have for scholars, writers, students, and those who simply love good writing. The best part of the collection is that it seems obvious that the editors truly love Appalachia and its writing and didn't put together this book for the glory of publication but because they really do want these writers to be heard. From its wonderful, haunting cover to its well-chosen design, this collection succeeds in every way except one. The book could have been better if it had been split up into two volumes, which is more the fault of the publisher than the editors. University presses often have to charge a higher price for large books, but this seems to defeat the purpose of a book entitled *Listen Here*, a collection that should be available for many people to own. If the University Press of Kentucky had committed to two volumes, the staggering price (\$45 in hardback) could have been cut in half as well. This is a book that should be a part of required reading in all Appalachian studies and literature classes, but the expensive list price will keep many professors from choosing this text and might keep many readers from purchasing the book. A lower price would have allowed many more readers to hear the voices of the women included in this fine, important collection.

—Silas House

Leatha Kendrick. *Science in Your Own Back Yard*. Monterey, KY: Larkspur Press, 2003. 35 pages. Handsewn paperback. \$18.00.

On the flyleaf of her new collection of poems, *Science in Your Own Back Yard* Leatha Kendrick quotes theologian, Paul Tillich: "The first duty of