A Hopeful Coming of Age

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Appalachian Heritage, Volume 32, Number 2, Spring 2004, pp. 28-31
(Article)

Published by The University of North Carolina Press
DOI: *https://doi.org/10.1353/aph.2004.0099*

FEATURED AUTHOR—SILAS HOUSE

A Hopeful Coming of Age

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ON A HOT JULY AFTERNOON at the Appalachian Writers Workshop, in Hindman, Kentucky, Silas House handed me a manuscript. This was the second year at the workshop for both of us. We had forged a quick friendship in 1997 when we realized that we were practically the only writers under thirty taking part in the conference. Letters sent during the intervening year discussed in detail the literature we read, our own writing, and the perils of trying to publish. What we had not done until this moment was exchange our manuscripts.

I was thus fortunate enough to read Silas's first novel, *Clay's Quilt,* long before Algonquin Books published it in 2001. I could not have been more delighted. In many ways, this novel symbolized to me what I had come to Kentucky the year before to find: Appalachian writing that was about the world that I knew. The generation that Silas and I are part of is a world formed around movies like *Star Wars.* We had all watched in horror as the space shuttle *Challenger* had exploded. Our world wasn't breaking apart because it was given to us already broken.

Only someone our age could have written *Clay's Quilt.* This is evident from the opening lines where small Clay Sizemore is riding up a snowy mountain, listening to his mother talk and feeling the heavy price she pays for the domestic chaos she has brought into the lives of her family members. Loving and heedless, Anneth may be a traditional 1960's free spirit, but it is her orphaned son who must spend his life untangling the knots she has created in his own life by her individualism. The whole scene is written to make the reader, along with Clay, experience a collective, even symbolic moment. As Clay's life changes, so too, does an era. An innocence ends. "Clay looked out at the snow and wondered if the world had stopped. Maybe it had frozen, grown silver like the creek water around the edges of rocks." As part of this generation, Clay will come to realize that his is not an easy time to be a child. Even the land itself seems to offer him only cold comfort:

> The pines lining the road were bent low and pitiful, full of clotted ice and winking snow. Some of the trees had broken in two. ... There

was not so much sunshine as daylight, but the snow and ice twinkled anyway. The cliffs had frozen into huge boulders of ice where water had trickled down to make icicles.

Not since Jayne Anne Philip's *Machine Dreams,* I told Silas that afternoon, had I read a novel that captured an Appalachian coming of age story so beautifully. I loved the freshness, the contemporary feel of *Clay's Quilt,* something I had almost wistfully longed for in the many excellent Appalachian novels set in the 1960s. While these worlds wonderfully portrayed my parents' time, there had been nothing yet about mine.

This novel may be the first in Appalachian fiction to describe the world of those born after an almost unbroken streak of destructive and divisive wars—two World Wars, the Vietnam War, the Cold War, the War on Poverty. *Clay's Quilt* is far more than a poignant story of one man. As Clay has lost the once steady, once bright light of his traditional world, he must now learn to find his own life and identity amidst uncertainty and chaos. The family is fractured. The land is scarred. Even religion, the emotional relief of Appalachians for centuries, seems fixed in a time and place where Clay has no part.

Down to the very details, this story bridges the gap between the old and new. Music references predominate—old hymns and ballads blending with Credence Clearwater Revival and Lucinda Williams. Post-modern pop-culture references abound, as when Clay's cousin Dreama has her first baby and the family talks about what to name him:

> "I'm going to call him Tristan, after that movie," Dreama announced.
>
> "What movie?" Easter asked, considering the name.
>
> "*Legends of the Fall,* her favorite movie of all time," Clay answered.
>
> "Besides *Gone with the Wind,*" Dreama chimed in. "You know, Easter. I showed you that picture of Brad Pitt. That was his name in the movie."
>
> "Dreama, you know I wanted to call my first boy that," Clay said.
>
> "Tough titty. I beat you to it."

Yet it would be a mistake to simply believe that by changing the names and titles and dates, this book is a retelling of previous coming

of age themes. There is another old tradition in Appalachian literature that *Clay's Quilt* must make new—the role that violence plays in the lives of people. In a late twentieth century world where graphic violence is as common as turning on the television, Silas and I wondered how best to portray what we saw as a sea-change in the role violence played in our generation. The past was no guide; in a letter, Silas wrote once that it seemed the stories of the past thirty years were filled with "an alarming number of animal murders, deaths, rottings, maulings, decapitations...you get the point."

Yet there is no denying that violence continues to shape the Appalachian region, and thus, its literature. *Clay's Quilt* is filled with violence from the opening murder. Heavy drug use and spousal abuse lead to the shooting death of Alma's first husband Denzel: "Clay screamed. He let go of all the screams that had been latched away inside of him ever since we has a child, ever since he was a little boy lying facedown in the snow with his dead mother's scarf wrapped around his hands."

Instead of portraying a traditional cathartic moment, however, House turns this violence and this novel on its head. Perhaps because the world we knew was permeated by violence—by the "malaise" that President Carter chided the American people with in the 1970s—such motifs are no longer sufficient unto themselves. In the end, what is new about *Clay's Quilt* is not the themes of the breakdown of society, of the family, of tradition, but how to scratch out a personal happiness in spite of such trials. In the end, Clay Sizemore finds hope. Compare this passage, when Clay is carrying his infant daughter Maggie up on the mountain, to the one at the beginning where his mother dies. This time, the mountain itself symbolizes the peace Clay has made with his own life:

> He moved along the steep mountain path effortlessly, feeling as if he were going to the top of the world. ... At the summit, the sun washed out over the earth, so bright and yellow that he could see through the leaves fluttering on the trees. He walked across the top of the old mountain and looked out at the land below. There were no strip mines to be seen from here, no scars on the face of the earth, only mountains, pushing against the horizon in each direction, rising and falling as easily as a baby's chest.

In less than two years, *Clay's Quilt* had gone from being a manuscript from an unknown man in rural Kentucky to a novel read all across the world. "I got an e-mail from someone in Australia," reads one of his letters. "She told me that she really related to Clay and Alma and their world." And why not? While there are aspects of *Clay's Quilt* that mark it as a regional novel, it is surely more than that. It speaks for a generation as much as it does a place.

Silas House has now come full circle. In the first letter that he ever wrote to me, back in 1997, he said, "I feel like we are part of a new breed of Appalachian writing." At the time, there was more bravado in that statement than fact, but we did our best to make it so. Not that this is an end in itself—already, close on our literary heels, is another generation coming of age, showing us what they can do. Whereas we were once the students, we are now the teachers, working with students who don't remember Ronald Reagan, the hostage crisis or the bombing of Lebanon and will be forever defined by September 11, 2001. In this milieu, Silas is hopeful about the future. In his letter about Hindman in 2003, he talked about how many young writers there were. "They are really, really good, too," he wrote. "Better than we were at their age."

Silas has every reason to be hopeful about his own future. Still, perhaps because we, like Clay Sizemore, are skeptical of relying upon a world we do not (and will not ever) control; we still share our moments of doubt. But as we share Clay's distrust, we also somehow manage to cling to a hope to feed our feeble faith. We both take pride in the place we have found in a long tradition of writers from the region we call home. And as we teach the writers coming after us, I often think of *Clay's Quilt* when I give out the words we have come to live by as artists, "Don't forget your past, and make the story your own."