River Bends and Meanders (review)

Janet L. Appel

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could in his poem "A Closer Look." Three females in his life type their names on the paper in his typewriter, below which he adds, "they did not know/that I would react by making them look/like a poem." That's the thing, you see, looking like a poem and sounding like and being a poem are quite different things.

Thomas's true strength comes from those things he loves: words and mountains. His love for the land on which he lives and thrives is as evident as his love for poetry. As I mentioned above, Thomas is highly influenced by the poetry of Jim Wayne Miller, and he dedicates one of the poems in this volume to Miller. The poem houses one of the best images in the volume:

> When I was too close
> to my heritage
> to recognize it
>
> & use the material of generations
> that I carried around with me
> like circles within a tree,
>
> you cut the tree
> & raked my fingers across the stump.

Now that's an image! There are other such morsels in Thomas's book which are well worth sampling. Thomas is at his best when he writes about the complexities of the simple. Miller once wrote about the "knowledge you fondle like loose skin on a dog's neck." The simile and its meaning are inextricably and inexpressibly linked by something greater than the words which are used. When Thomas, too, gets hold of these connections, he gets hold of the reader, and as he says in "Intimate," "There is a quickening,/a thrill that runs through the insides/like water down a mountain slope."

—B. Ann Qualls

William E. Ellis. *River Bends and Meanders.* Burnsville, North Carolina: Celo Valley Books, 1992. 150 pages. $11.95.

With the intention of writing a history of the Kentucky River basin, Ellis's research involved interviewing over 150 people who lived and/or worked on the river. The history book will have to wait. What has developed from his

research, so far, is a collection of good social history combined with solid research. *River Bends and Meanders* is a collection of fictional stories about life on the peaceful, resourceful, and sometimes seemingly demonic river.

William E. Ellis is surprisingly more than a historian, for his tales of individual lives pulled me in as a reader. I felt I was right there on that poleboat in 1886 trying to maneuver among the sand bars and deep waters and having supper at a river boarding house. One of my favorite pastimes as a child was fishing for catfish. I still enjoy a good fighting trout, so reading "Big Boy" really reeled me in. "That cat must weigh fifty pounds if he weights a ounce. I ain't got no gaff or net. He's bigger'n the big one they said was caught at Beattyville ten years ago." Rufus had caught the biggest cat that ever came out of the Kentucky River. Ellis pays an honorable tribute to the dialect of the mountain people by trying to capture the voice and pronunciations as so few speak today. It certainly adds a flair of the times and of the people. It wasn't just what they said that was captivating but how they thought and where they had been.

Like any relationship built on sharing hard work and sweat, the friendships among the river men were a special bond all their own. One Ellis expounded on was between Sam and Rannal; Sam being the only black man on the Pool 8 snagboat crew. Sam was known as the best cook on the river and there were men that were willing to quit their jobs if it meant working on the snagboat without Sam's cooking. "He was a firm believer that a working man needed his greens each day." The Army paid for the cleaning of Pool 8 of obstructions at a dollar a day wages plus expenses; they paid, too, for two sticks of dynamite never accounted for 'cause Sam and Rannal did a little night fishing in the river. That fishing dinner was enjoyed by all of them with comments like "Sam, you the best nigger cook I ever seed." "My momma used to cook fish like that." "Lord you make good corn pone." Those two nearly lost their jobs over that fishing expedition, but when the rest of the crew dared to quit if Sam wasn't staying on as the cook and Rannal running the steam, the boss backed down and just told them, ". . . lemme keep the dynamite locked up . . . get to work."

You couldn't bring up the Kentucky River area without bringing up coal mines. Tick was a buyer of coal in the 1940s and ran up against the likes of Curbitt Post. Post was an old coal miner whose lungs were so full of black dust, he barely got around any more and sounded like a wheezing, plugged-up steam engine. Curbitt Post promised to buy Tick "a loney samich" the next time he came through for having bought him one just before loading Tick's truck. Tick knew he'd never see the man again and wondered how much time he had left.

There are stories of folks being murdered along the river towns and the

automobile being dumped into the river to make it look like a drowning car accident. There was the meeting in 1990 of Hibernia Dove Owens King, a ninety-nine year old Negro lady full of spunk and wisdom to share with both a white college professor in his fifties and a brown-skinned young student Negro woman in a doctor's office full of canceled appointments. Finally looking at the river from the view of a $150,000 houseboat with three superficial, drinking couples with plenty of money, there seemed to be little regard for the scenery, the sanctity of marriage, the appreciation of family and the life that used to thrive along the shores of the meandering Kentucky River.

If you want to look at the Kentucky River—stand on the shore. If you want to know its dimensions, check out a map. If you want to experience it, take a boat trip. But if you want to *feel* it from the late 1800s to the early 1990s, read William E. Ellis's *River Bends and Meanders.*

—Janet L. Appel

Frank C. Strunk. *Jordon's Showdown.* New York: Walker & Company. 241 pages. $19.95.

Erstwhile deputy sheriff, gambler, grandfather, and stubborn individualist Berkley Jordon is back.

Introduced to readers in *Jordon's Wager,* Berkley Jordon returns in *Jordon's Showdown,* Frank Strunk's new 1930s saga of union struggles in Eastern Kentucky.

Jordon's opponent in the dramatic final showdown is introduced on the first page. A professional killer, a preacher's son turned bitter by his father's rigid rantings, Moody McClain has been hired by someone to come into fictional Stanton County and ply his trade. Moody brings along Pearl, his "fresh meat" blonde companion, to keep him entertained between ambushes.

Berkley Jordon, soundly whipped in his campaign for county sheriff (in *Jordon's Wager),* now runs a roadhouse card game, finds time to bed his boss, Della, and mourn for his estranged girlfriend, Cassie, and finds himself being drawn into the smoldering struggle between the mine and owners and the miners. Both sides want Jordon's help. Coal baron H. R. Buxton wants Jordon to squelch the potential battle; the miners want his help in the struggle to bring in the union.

Jordon, always his own man, stays clear of it all until his best friend, Willis Dobbs, falls to one of Moody's rifle shots.