# *Me and My Baby View the Eclipse* (review)

Joanne Brannon Aldridge



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# Book Reviews

Norman, Gurney. *Divine Right's Trip: A Novel of the Counterculture.* Afterword by Ed McClanahan. Frankfort: Gnomon Press, 1990. 311 pages.

It would appear that some historical mischance caused this reviewer to miss the counterculture altogether and cynics might sneer that the reissuing of Gurney Norman's *Divine Right's Trip* is but a ploy to cash in on 1960s nostalgia. Happily, new as well as former readers of this book will marvel at the story's freshness and genuinely human characters. With joy and excitement, Norman relates the epic journey of Divine Right Davenport from cosmically hip California to the apparently plain mountain community of Trace Fork in Eastern Kentucky. Along the way the reader encounters a cast of characters ranging from the almost other worldly Anaheim Flash (that resourceful dispenser of cash and free advice) to a confused Sophist simply known as the Greek, to the long-suffering Estelle, D.R.'s girlfriend. But the progress of the novel is not merely the celebration of the so-called "Alternative Life-Style," despite the numerous icons (dope, geodesic domes, *I Ching)* presented throughout its pages. Instead, as Divine Right cares for his dying Uncle Emmit in the shadow of a mountain savaged by strip-mining, the story takes on redemptive themes—the search for self, the sense of place and oneness, the quest for meaning. Divine Right encounters beauty in the midst of a mangled landscape, resurrection in death. Divine Right is made new before our eyes, and it is a marvelous sight indeed.

Tightly written and hopelessly joyful, *Divine Right's Trip* captures much of what is celebrated in Appalachian life—the strength of family ties, the almost supernatural sense of place, the important role of nature and environment. This book is also timely in view of the opinions in some circles that Appalachia is still somehow out of touch with mainstream America, with little or nothing to offer. Yet we find in Divine Right and his experiences the profound and the transcendent. Luckily for new readers of this book, *Divine Right's Trip* is not only a novel of the counterculture generation, but a work that moves beyond these boundaries to affirm, to teach, and to encourage all of us.

**–Shannon Wilson**

Smith, Lee. *Me and My Baby View the Eclipse.* New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons. 206 pages. Hardback: $18.95.

In *Me and My Baby View the Eclipse,* Lee Smith continues to dazzle with her depiction of ordinary lives illuminated by extraordinary flashes of yearning and command of style that ranges from the wry to the comic to the tragic. She demonstrates once more that she is a master of voice: one not only reads her words, one hears them. Smith has one of the keenest ears in American letters not only for the sound of the human voice but the secret longings of the human heart.

In her first collection of short stories since *Cakewalk,* Smith's heroines grow up to be cheerleaders and "Miss What-Ever-High-School," marry their high school sweethearts, and expect to spend their lives taking care of husbands and children. The women and occasional men in these nine stories have been trained to be gallant and to carry on; to take care of elderly parents; and to be polite at all costs. But life has changed the rules and run away with them, disputing their words by the everyday "eclipses" of divorce, illness, death, loss of faith, children, and dreams. Smith catches them as they cope.

In "Mom" Gloria sips Andre Champagne from a Dixie Cup for her "nerves" while she waits for a telephone call from her son Buddy, a runaway from a group home. As she sips the champagne purchased at Safeway, dusk falls into dark, the room lit only by the neon lights from the Nu-Tread Tire Company.

Early in "Tongues of Fire," the longest story in the collection, the narrator announces the events of summer, her story, and her mother's rules for life: "The year I was thirteen my father had a nervous breakdown, my brother had a wreck, and I started speaking in tongues." Her mother supplied her a model of conduct and rules for life. "Mama's two specialities were Rising to the Occasion and Rising Above It All, whatever 'It' happened to be. Mama believed if you can't say something nice, say nothing at all. If you don't discuss something, it doesn't exist. This is the way our family handled all of its problems . . . . still Mama had very rigid ideas about things. Her ideas about nervous breakdowns were: 1. The husband should not have a nervous breakdown. 2. Nobody can mention the nervous breakdown. It is shameful. 3. The children should behave at all times during the nervous breakdown. 4. The family must keep up appearances at all costs. Nobody should know."

On the other hand, not discussing a problem so that it does not exist does not exclude talking. "This was another of Mama's rules: 'A lady never lets a silence fall . . . .' [Rising to the Occasion, Mama] talked incessantly about anything that entered her head to fill the void." Mama's other rules and pronouncements include, "We always finish what we start, Karen," and "Horses sweat, men perspire, and women glow."

In the title story "Me and My Baby View the Eclipse," Sharon Shaw, settled into a marriage of little moment, falls in love—or in sweet lust—with Raymond Stewart in broad daylight at the Xerox machine in Stewart's Pharmacy. Raymond, who calls himself Ramon, and "drives all the way to Roanoke to get his hair cut in what he calls a modified punk look," makes life's little moments big productions.

Sharon remembers him best from high school as drum major "wearing a top hat, white gloves, and an electric blue sequined suit which, it was rumored, he had designed himself, strutting and dancing across the field like a professional. Nobody ever saw anything like it!"

Raymond or Ramon yearns for drama and brings it to Sharon's life. He gave events a title: "'Me and my baby sip scuppernong wine,' he'd say—to nobody—rolling his eyes. Or 'Me and my baby take in a show.'" Or "'Me and my baby make out!' . . . Oh, it was crazy!" Finally, to Raymond's excitement, " Me and my baby view the eclipse." And while they fell in love in broad daylight in front of the Xerox machine, their affair ends in the shadow of the eclipse. But their particular love had, for the moment, lent sweet meaning—and given a bit of drama—to each of their lives, as love brings meaning to the craziest of lives in Smith's stories.

In "Life on the Moon," the narrator says, "I think you ought to stay in a place where people know you and know who are." In a nation of strangers, readers know who Smith's characters are—small town Southern women and occasionally men, usually from Appalachia or somewhere in North Carolina (any-

body not born in the South is a foreigner.) Smith's characters and her stories are regional in the best sense of the word, but they are rendered universal in the hands of a first-rate artist.

**–Joanne Brannon Aldridge**

Caskey, Jefferson D. *Appalachian Authors: A Selected Bibliography*. West Corwall, Connecticut: Locust Hill Press, 1990. 191 pages, $25.00.

This book is mistitled. The only Appalachian writers included are Eastern Kentucky ones. Beyond that at least eight of the seventeen writers are neither from mountains nor have they written primarily about Appalachian subjects. Among them are Joseph Alexander Altsheler (Civil War novelist), Irvin S. Cobb (from Paducah!), Alice Caldwell Hegan Rice *(Mrs. Wiggs of the Cabbage Patch)* and her poet husband Cale Young Rice. Others who are marginal to Appalachia are James Lane Allen, Ruby Dell Baugher, and Hollis Summers. Two frequently listed as Appalachian writers, although most of their works are set elsewhere, are Wendell Berry, whose *The Unforseen Wilderness* is about East Kentucky's Red River Gorge and who has written several essays touching on mountain strip mining and other environmental and human problems in the mountains, and Elizabeth Madox Roberts, whose early novels and poetry depict life on the frontier in the Appalachians and Kentucky.

The bibliographer doesn't give a clear reason for his selection of these authors. He writes in his introduction:

> In limiting this bibliography to the seventeen authors included, a great deal of selectivity was necessary. Each was finally chosen for the reason that he or she is distinctive and has a unique place in Appalachian literature.

While one might claim that each is "distinctive and has a unique place" in *Kentucky* literature, the claim would not hold for all of the writers in *Appalachian* literature.

Having presented these negative views, let me hasten to say that Mr. Caskey has done a great service in presenting the works by or about the writers who are native to or have primarily written about the region: Harriette Simpson Arnow, Harry M. Caudill, Rebecca Caudill, John Fox, Jr. (curiously listed as John William Fox), Lucy Furman, Janice Holt Giles, Jim Wayne Miller, and James Still.

Depending on the writer, the bibliography lists books of fiction, books of nonfiction, books of poetry, books of short stories and poems and articles published in journals or anthologies. It also lists biographical and critical literature about the authors in journals, theses and dissertations and includes a useful index. The length of the material ranges from four pages on Harriette Simpson Arnow to twenty-three pages on Jim Wayne Miller (the most prolific of the lot).

This bibliography should have been entitled *Kentucky Authors: A Selected Bibliography*.

**–Loyal Jones**

Lyon, George Ella. *Come a Tide*. Pictures by Stephen Gammell. New York: Orchard Books, 1990. 30 pages, $14.95.

George Ella Lyon is a name familiar to those who read, teach, and love Appalachian literature. My students and I know her as a poet, a literary advocate, and a fiction writer, but what I didn't know until recently was that she has written several exquisite "picture books" for children, the latest of which is *Come a Tide*. In this story for young readers, Lyon tells of a flood in Harlan, Kentucky, a true experience, that "washed