

**FATALISM AND FLAMBOYANCE:
REPRESENTING RURAL APPALACHIAN LGBTQ+ YOUTH IN YOUNG
ADULT LITERATURE**

**A Dissertation Presented for the
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Degree
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ABSTRACT

Fatalism and Flamboyance: Representing Rural Appalachian LGBTQ+ Youth in Young Adult Literature examines the past lack of young adult literature depicting the lives of rural Appalachian LGBTQ+ teens and analyzes how this absence caused the author to become a writer of young adult novels. The dissertation opens with a critical introduction which explains that the study will use autoethnography and the lens of queer theory or its Appalachian cousin, “quare theory,” and also provides a brief literature review of LGBTQ+ young adult novels. The introduction is followed by the main body of the dissertation, which consists of a collection of creative autoethnographic essays exploring growing up as a queer reader and writer in rural Appalachia. The final section is a critical afterword which provides a close reading of three contemporary LGBTQ+ Appalachian young adult novels and analyzes how rural-set LGBTQ+ young adult literature has grown and how it can continue to do so.

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PART I: CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

The woefully out-of-date fourth grade reading textbook we used in my small Appalachian elementary school contained an account by Volunteers in Service to America (VISTA) workers of the help they provided to impoverished children in Eastern Kentucky in the 1960's. I don't remember the name of the essay or the textbook in which it appeared, but I do remember that the piece described the VISTA workers installing new playground equipment and the way the kids' skinny, dirty legs stretched toward the sky as they pulled themselves aloft on the swings. The writing was accompanied by photos of emaciated, unwashed white children in hand-me-down clothes, whose wide, dark-circled eyes spoke of want and deprivation, and the ramshackle, garbage-strewn tarpaper shacks these children called home.

First, a caveat: I could look around my fourth-grade classroom and see several children whom I knew to be poor. A few of them were even unwashed. However, the essay still rubbed my ten-year-old mind the wrong way because it suggested that the children it described were representative of all Appalachian children: dirty, ignorant "white trash" who deserved pity and, if they got lucky, could be "uplifted" by outsiders who knew better.

Another quick look around the classroom was all it took to prove the authors wrong: There was the daughter of the town's pharmacist, who was always dressed in the latest styles purchased from the most expensive department stores on family trips to Knoxville. There were the twin boys who were my best friends, both wearing *Star Wars* T-shirts, whose parents were a social worker and an office manager. Another friend, a Black girl whose mom worked in the local uniform factory, gave lie to the authors' implication that all Appalachians were of Scotch-Irish descent. My family and I didn't fit the essay's regional profiling either: I was the daughter of

first-generation college graduates, both English teachers and artists, and was a voracious reader. I don't recall my teacher leading us in a discussion of the VISTA essay, but I went home that day incensed and vented to my parents about it, and they taught me the meaning of the word "stereotype."

I would think about the VISTA essay many years later, the first time I heard Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's TED Talk, "The Danger of a Single Story" (2009). Reflecting on the preconceptions her white college roommate had of her as an African, Adichie says,

What struck me was this: She had felt sorry for me even before she saw me. Her default position toward me, as an African, was a kind of patronizing, well-meaning pity. My roommate had a single story of Africa: a single story of catastrophe. In this single story, there was no possibility of Africans being similar to her in any way, no possibility of feelings more complex than pity, no possibility of a connection as human equals. (4:37)

The attitude Adichie describes is exactly what bothered me about the view of Appalachians in the VISTA essay, even though at the time I was not articulate enough to express these feelings. It was the smug confidence that the authors knew what it meant to be Appalachian and that it only meant one thing.

Another formative experience, a more humorous one, came several years later when I was attending a tiny Catholic high school in Southeastern Kentucky. Surprisingly, the school had quite a few international students who boarded there, and when a short holiday break came up like Thanksgiving or Easter, the sisters encouraged local families to invite the boarding students into their homes. Thus, my family ended up inviting Silvia, a classmate from Mexico, to stay

with us over the four-day Easter break. On the car ride home, we talked about stereotypes. Silvia said that when Americans heard the word “Mexican,” they imagined a man in a sombrero and serape, snoozing away leaned against a cactus. She said, “In Mexico, I have never seen such a person.” My mom and I talked about the comparable Appalachian stereotype being the barefoot bearded bumpkin dressed in bibbed overalls toting a jug of moonshine. We turned down the road where we lived, and the first person we saw was a neighbor, bearded, barefoot, and wearing bibbed overalls. All that was missing was the jug of moonshine. It took us a long time to stop laughing.

Both of these experiences from my years growing up in rural Southeastern Kentucky illustrate Adichie’s “danger of a single story” (2009). These kinds of experiences, along with the lack of representation I saw of rural characters (and especially rural LGBTQ+ characters) in the books I read as a child and teen inform both the creative and critical aspects of this dissertation.

Seldom, in literature and media, do portrayals of rural Appalachia get it right. This criticism is true in part because there is no one Appalachian identity. Not all Appalachians are poor or white or cis het or rural, nor are they defined by one single demographic fact (A poor person isn’t *only* poor any more than a gay person is *only* gay). Most mainstream depictions of rural Appalachians get it wrong for two reasons: (1) reliance on stereotype, and (2) disregard of the intersections of identity that make people people.

When I was a child, the main representations I saw of rural people were in two sit-com reruns that I watched with my papaw, *The Beverly Hillbillies* and *The Andy Griffith Show*. Papaw, a retired coalminer who started work at the age of twelve, loved both shows. I did, too, but neither of them held up a mirror to rural life in a way I considered accurate. The *Hillbillies*, with their

suppers of “squirrel eyeballs and possum gravy” at the billiard table they referred to as “the fancy-eatin’ table,” were over-the-top parodies of country folk—parodies that my papaw, who was as country as cornbread, laughed at no matter how many times he had seen the same episode. I laughed, too, because I knew the Clampetts were meant to be caricatures, but as I grew older, I realized that viewers from different regions often lacked this understanding—when they saw the Clampetts, they thought that’s how country folks really were. *The Andy Griffith Show* was less broadly drawn and more big-hearted with gentle, homespun humor. However, when I thought of the pecking orders and backbiting in our small Appalachian town, I didn’t think *Andy Griffith* held up much of a mirror either—surely not everybody in a small town could be that nice; surely not every conflict could be resolved by a soft-spoken talking-to from a goodhearted but still patriarchal white male community leader. There were other issues with life in Mayberry. Though presented as idyllic, the town was lily-white, and Aunt Bea’s place was in the kitchen. Serious problems like poverty and alcoholism were played for laughs. If *The Beverly Hillbillies* was too silly, then *The Andy Griffith Show* was too sentimental and simplistic.

Books were the main place I sought an understanding of myself and the world around me, but I didn’t fare much better there. The living-room-sized small-town library my mom took me to once a week was not equipped with many recent titles, thus most of what I read were stories from long ago and faraway. These stories fascinated me, of course, and over time, I think I internalized the idea that I was never going to read any stories about rural kids because rural kids’ lives were not interesting enough to write about. There were a few exceptions, of course. The Ingalls girls in the *Little House* series were country, but they were also historical, seemingly depicted to teach readers about a different time. Dorothy Gale from *The Wizard of Oz* was a country girl, too, but she got the hell out of Kansas on page 3 and didn’t return to that prosaic

landscape until the very end of the book. Still, she was my literary heroine for much of my childhood, and I devoured L. Frank Baum's entire *Oz* series multiple times.

Devour is the word that best describes my relationship to books as a child and teen. I was starving for stories all the time and gobbled down whatever I could get my hands on. But most kids I read about were upper middle class or upper class urban or suburban teens, all of them in the parts of the country Appalachians refer to as "Up North." The kids in the Judy Blume books I loved lived in New York City or the New Jersey suburbs; the queer-coded (Bernstein, 2001) titular character in Louise Fitzhugh's *Harriet the Spy* had a nanny and lived in a Manhattan brownstone. These books were and are important to me, but somewhere along the line, reading a steady diet of books set in urban centers and suburbs made me internalize the idea that the stories of rural people and especially rural Appalachian people such as myself didn't matter. We weren't worth writing about; the stories that people cared about all took place in the Big Somewhere Else.

As a teen, I continued devouring books set in New York and L.A. and London and dreaming of the day I could move to one of those places so that something worthwhile might finally happen to me. But then a regional author put a book in my hands that completely exploded everything I had previously believed. Though it was not marketed as a young adult novel, Bobbie Ann Mason's *In Country* was very much the story of a teenaged girl, Sam, told in her own voice. The remarkable thing about Sam, though, was that she did not live in some Northern urban center or a suburb thereof; she lived in a small town in Kentucky, the same as me. She was a regular rural kid trying to figure out her life and future and learn more about her dad who died in the Vietnam War. I was astounded that of all the people in all the places Bobbie Ann Mason could have

written a story about, she chose to write about a country girl in Kentucky. That novel was the first time I can remember a story that, to coin Rudine Sims Bishop (2015), held up a mirror to my life. It changed me as a reader and influenced the writer I would become.

My journey as an emerging queer Appalachian reader and writer is chronicled in this dissertation in the form of a collection of autoethnographic creative nonfiction essays. These essays reflect the fact that Appalachian culture is steeped in stories. If a stranger asked my papaw directions, his response would be something like, “You know where Jim Ed Dobson’s old store used to be? I remember one time I went in there with June—that’s my daughter—when she was little, and she says to Jim Ed...” Papaw would get around to giving directions eventually but not until the listener heard his story. Such a roundabout, narrative-heavy approach to answering a simple question was expected. In Appalachia, the stories we tell and the stories we hear are a big part of how we understand ourselves and each other. Stories ground us. They show us where we’ve been and where we are now. When my papaw would go to the barber shop or to drink coffee at Hardee’s, Nana would say, “He’s out swapping stories.” In a region of the country that is often maligned and ignored, the stories we tell are ways of letting each other know we are seen.

However, in stories, whether written or passed down orally, not everyone gets to be seen. As Adichie observes, the people in power decide whose story gets told (2009). For many years, the literary gatekeepers in power decreed that LGBTQ+ characters would not be depicted in literature for young people. Eventually, when some LGBTQ+ titles did exist, they did not depict rural youth, and rural youth rarely had access to them. This lack of representation and availability leads rural LGBTQ+ young people to feel isolated, as Stacey Reese notes in her positionality statement in her dissertation *Do I Want to Die on That Hill?: Perceptions of Rural*

Appalachian English Teachers About Using Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer/Questioning Young Adult Literature in the Secondary English Classroom (2016):

I realized when I was in third grade that something about me was different from my friends. It wasn't until I was in high school that I developed the understanding that I am a lesbian. I attended a small rural school in an extremely rural, conservative Appalachian town in the 1980s; there were no representations of anyone who identified as LGBT in any aspect of school. When it was brought up, it was with disparaging and hurtful remarks. I do not think I have ever felt as alone as I did during this time (p. 29).

Since one of the major themes in this essay collection is the lack of representation of LGBTQ+ rural Appalachian youth when I was growing up, the collection is followed by a critical afterword which analyzes depictions of LGBTQ+ rural Appalachian youth in contemporary young adult fiction. Fortunately, since times have changed, more stories are being told, though still not enough of them.

Using Autoethnography

Stories, whether nonfiction or fiction, are one of the best vehicles for understanding ourselves and others, and the use of story is one of the strengths of autoethnography as a research method. In narrative studies, *story* is defined as “the actual chronology of events in a narrative” (Felluga, 2011). This deceptively simple definition is complicated by the use of an accompanying term, *discourse*, which refers to “the manipulation of the story in the presentation of that narrative” (Felluga, 2011). This idea of manipulation suggests the unreliable narrators of classic literature, such as Poe's Montresor in “The Cask of Amontillado” and Nabakov's Humbert Humbert. However, stories aren't only manipulated by fiction writers adopting a villainous point of view.

Whether in fiction or supposed “truth,” the story changes based on who the teller is, as memorably depicted in Ryunosuke Akutagawa’s short story “Within a Grove,” the basis for the film *Rashomon*. The manipulation of discourse is one of the ways story is connected to power—whose story goes untold, whose story gets told, and what is the “angle” of the telling? In the words of James Still, often called the father of Appalachian literature, “It always matters who the storyteller is. It’s a lens” (2017). Autoethnography allows the author to tell their story through the lens of their cultural surroundings and heritage.

In their book *Autoethnography*, Tony E. Adams, Stacy Holman Jones, and Carolyn Ellis (2014) describe the qualities of autoethnography as a method:

- Uses a researcher’s personal experiences to describe and critique cultural beliefs, practices and experiences.
- Acknowledges and values a researcher’s relationships with others.
- Uses deep and careful self-reflection—typically referred to as “reflexivity”—to name and interrogate the intersections between the self and society, the particular and general, the personal and the political.
- Shows “people in the process of figuring out what to do, how to live, and the meaning of their struggles.”
- Balances intellectual and methodological rigor, emotion, and creativity.
- Strives for social justice and to make life better (pp. 1–2).

The benefits of this method, especially when researching a topic that deals with the interplay between individual and cultural identity, are numerous. Selfhood does not happen in a vacuum; people are what they are in part as a response to their cultural context. Autoethnography

embraces this fact, allowing the researcher to look both inward and outward. It is by definition personal, emphasizing both self-reflection and the relationship the researcher develops with others, whether through interviews, observation, or hanging out with participants. The flexibility of form with autoethnography is also a strength; the language can be academic or can read like memoir or a prose poem, or it can alternate between styles. For instance, Adams' and Bolen's article "Tragic Queer at the Urinal Stall, Who Now is the Queerest of Them All?" (2017), which deserves recognition as one of the greatest academic article titles of all time, is written in the alternating voices of the two authors, with variation in style throughout the piece, sometimes academic, sometimes lyrical or stream-of-consciousness with graphic erotic content.

Lastly, autoethnography's orientation toward social justice is another benefit which distinguishes it from more ivory tower-bound forms of academic research. The autoethnographer is actively engaged with communities, listening to people and their struggles as well as their victories. Autoethnography is not just theory-bound; it can generate practices that will help people in "the real world."

I come to autoethnography as a creator of LGBTQ young adult literature with rural settings. Although the term didn't exist at the time, my decision to write rural Appalachian LGBTQ+ novels was an example of what Thomas and Stornaiuolo (2016) call *restorying*, of which they write: "...Reshaping narratives to better reflect a diversity of perspectives and experiences, is an act of asserting the importance of one's existence in a world that tries to silence subaltern voices" (p. 314). This technique is often used by Black authors to "race bend" or reimagine white-dominated stories from their point of view. From my perspective, restorying Appalachian young adult literature was an attempt to make the LGBTQ+ people of the region, who had been

conspicuous in their absence from most Appalachian literature, present. I wanted to tell the stories that weren't getting told, the stories that could have made my life much easier and more understandable if they had existed during my adolescence. As James Joshua Coleman observes in his chapter on restorying in *Encyclopedia of Queer Studies in Education* (2021), "For queer people, in particular, recounting personal experiences of queerphobia can provide anchor stories from which to restory or speculate towards new narratives of hope" (p. 606). My young adult novels are anchored in my own experiences and observations as a rural Appalachian queer, but through the imaginative work of fiction writing, they become, as Coleman says, "narratives of hope" (p. 606) with the goal of passing this hope to young readers.

Autoethnography gives me the opportunity for a different type of restorying, which will allow me to ask and explore questions such as how is it different to come of age as a rural—as opposed to an urban or suburban—LGBTQ+ person? How does the representation (or lack thereof) of rural young adults, especially LGBTQ+ ones, in young adult literature affect one's self-perceptions as a teen? Another reason to pursue Appalachian LGBTQ+ autoethnography is that from my perusal of the existing body of work on rural/Appalachian youth—especially LGBTQ+ youth—more work definitely needs to be done.

Literature Review

In their recently published article "The Whippoorwill Award Criteria: Analyzing Representations of Rurality in Middle-Grade and Young Adult Literature," Nick Kleese, Karen Eppley, and Devon Brenner (2022) point out:

In the United States, about one in five students live and go to school in federally classified rural fringe, rural distant, or rural remote communities. About one in four are rural children of color,

with 92% living in the rural South. And yet, a very small portion of books written for and about middle-grade and young adult readers are set in rural places, and those that are often portray rurality in ways that are stereotypical or deficit-based (p. 56).

When focusing on rural LGBTQ+ youth, it becomes clear that they are as underserved in scholarship as they are in literature and in life. In this brief literature review of studies of real-life rural LGBTQ+ teens or the representation of rural LGBTQ+ teens in young adult fiction, three themes emerge:

1. A lack of resources—Rural areas have fewer social support services than urban areas, but this fact is particularly relevant for LGBTQ+ rural youth. Rural schools are less likely to have Gay-Straight Alliances, and small towns are less likely to have community-based programs designed for LGBTQ+ teens. Many young rural queers turn to the internet for support, but in rural remote areas, reliable and consistent internet services may not be available.
2. Feelings of isolation and/or invisibility—The lack of resources as discussed above contributes to rural LGBTQ+ youth feeling unsupported or unseen, as does an often-overwhelming environment of heteronormativity. An especially damaging aspect of this heteronormative climate is that in many rural areas the dominant religious voices are anti-LGBTQ+, either damning LGBTQ+ folks to the fiery pits or—perhaps even more insultingly—trying to “pray away the gay.” It isn’t just loud anti-LGBTQ+ voices that cause damage; it is also the silences. Many teachers and community leaders in rural areas who might not be homophobic/transphobic are fearful to speak out, lest they lose their jobs or their status in the community. As a result, LGBTQ+

youth do not have their identities acknowledged in a positive or even neutral way, and they never hear about LGBTQ+ topics in the classroom. In *“Do I Want to Die on That Hill?”: Perceptions of Rural Appalachian English Teachers About Using Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer/Questioning Young Adult Literature in the Secondary English Classroom* (2016), Stacey Reese reflects, “My entire career teaching English was spent in a small, rural, Appalachian county; I had constraints placed on me concerning what I could and could not teach. I was called into the principal’s office several times because of things I had said or taught. I know what it is like to be frustrated and feel like there is no support from those who should be supportive” (p. 70). Reese’s interviews with other rural Appalachian teachers demonstrate a similar lack of support and academic freedom when it comes to teaching literature with LGBTQ+ themes.

3. A response to metronormativity—Metronormativity, a term coined by Jack Halberstam, is the concept that for LGBTQ+ people, life is centered on the urban. Therefore, the prevailing myth is that if one is LGBTQ+ and born into a rural setting, one’s goal should be to leave the homeplace as soon as possible, make a new home in a large urban environment, surround oneself with a queer chosen family, and leave one’s rural roots behind. Most of the sources pushed back against the idea of metronormativity, showing more of a “bloom where you are planted” mentality in which young people can find community and support in their hometowns and hollers.

The first source which addressed these themes is Angie L. Dahl, Rachel K. Scott, and Zachalee Peace’s article “Trials and Triumph: Lesbian and Gay Young Adults Raised in a Rural Context” (2015), which seeks “...to investigate the impact of the rural context on the experience of

coming out, a vastly understudied context in the literature on sexual minority development” (p. 927). Researchers conducted long, semi-structured interviews with seven rural young adults about their coming-out process.

The trials of the young people interviewed stem from the seemingly universal experiences of a lack of resources and feelings of isolation/invisibility. When Erica, one of the interview subjects, responded to the lack of LGBTQ+ positive resources in her high school by trying to start a Gay-Straight Alliance with some friends, she was told “...no by the principal because he didn’t want to deal with the phone calls or the paperwork, or the outcry from the Christian club on campus who found out about it and pitched a royal fit” (p. 932). Another interviewee, Zeus, speaks of how he only had access to unreliable dial-up internet at home so couldn’t seek information from the larger world and instead had to rely on reruns of the TV show “Will and Grace” as his only source of information about gay life. All the interviewees also discussed feelings of isolation and invisibility that resulted from growing up in a heteronormative climate with rigid gender roles, a situation which led them to be harshly bullied or rejected by classmates and met with judgment or denial by family members. While the article chronicles more trials than triumphs, interviewees do discuss positive experiences as well, such as coming out to a friend at school who turned out to be accepting, or coming out to parents who realized, as one interviewee says, “that being gay is only a small part of who I am as a person” (p. 934). These experiences, the researchers state, demonstrate that “the interplay of an LGBT identity in a rural context is not necessarily completely negative” (p. 933). While this statement is certainly not a glowing recommendation for rural life on the part of the authors, it is an acknowledgment that contrary to the myth of metronormativity, one doesn’t always have to flee to a big city to find acceptance.

Like Dahl, Scott, and Peace's article, Joseph J. Rand and Megan S. Pacely's "Exploring the Lived Experiences of Rural LGBTQ+ Youth: Navigating Identity and Authenticity within School and Community Contexts" (2022) uses semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis. However, this study differs from the previous one in that the interviews were conducted with current high school students rather than young adults looking back at their teenaged experiences. Rand and Pacely interviewed seven students—one asexual male, two transgender males, two bisexual females, and two lesbians—all of whom lived in rural Minnesota. Despite the difference in region from the previous study, many of the findings were similar. Three themes emerged which echo the experiences of the Appalachian rural youth interviewed by Dah, Scott, and Peace: "(1) school-related hostility and challenges; (2) community intolerance affecting personal authenticity; and (3) affirming environments, support, and authenticity" (p. 27). All the teens relayed experiencing some types of bullying or exclusion at school. Most disturbingly, the students stated that teachers did not intervene on their behalf; a couple of students even cited teachers as actively participating in exclusionary behavior, such as refusing to call trans students by their names or pronouns and chastising two gay friends for hugging platonically in the hall. The participants reported that intolerance wasn't limited to the school; it was also a big part of many of the local religious institutions, such as when one church organized a prayer breakfast in protest of the local school starting a GSA, and sometimes extended to the students' homes as well, such as when a trans male's mother threw out his chest binder. The negativity these young people experienced daily made it especially meaningful when they found a source of affirmation and support. They spoke of seeking out teachers, especially those of arts-based classes, who tended to be accepting and the fact that their school did establish a GSA which provided one

reliably safe space. These examples underscore the fact that even in a small community, one can often find sources of support.

Another source that bears mentioning for its sheer creativity is Megan S. Pacely's "In Their Own Words: A Found Poem on the Experiences of Rural LGBTQ Youth" (2018). In an astonishingly imaginative move, Pacely takes the results of her interviews with rural Midwestern teens and arranges their words into a "found poem." The students' words, arranged into verse form, comment on their experiences with lack of resources:

I don't have that many people that I can just talk to.
Straight counselors? They don't know what they're doing.
There needs to be a queer youth shelter. . .
It would be. So. Amazing. (p. 407)

On feelings of isolation and/or invisibility:

Growing up. . . is so confusing.
I'm just like everyone else.
Sexuality is such a small part of me. . .
I mean, we're all a little gay inside. . .
But. . . I'm the only out transgender person I know.
It seems like there's no one in this town that's LGBT (p. 407).

And about metronormativity—or at least the need to look outside one's immediate community for acceptance:

We don't have any LGBT support in our community.

Fridays we go to the LGBT Center. . .

but it's 30 minutes away. . .

I don't even know how to drive. . . (p. 407)

In this found poem, Pacely lets the teens speak for themselves, offering only a bit of commentary herself in the abstract. This method shows the creative possibilities in qualitative research and movingly allows an often-silenced minority to have their say.

While sources focusing on young adult literature about LGTBQ+ rural youth are few and far between, I did find two helpful articles, one on lesbian characters and one on trans girl characters. The first, Wendy Keys, Elizabeth Marshall, and Barbara Pini's "Representations of Rural Lesbian Lives in Young Adult Fiction," is a textual analysis of three novels depicting rural lesbian teen characters: Tawni Waters' *Beauty of the Broken*, Julie Ann Peters' *Pretend You Love Me*, and Karelia Stetz-Waters' *Forgive Me if I've Told You This One Before*. According to Keys, Marshall, and Pini, *Beauty of the Broken* gives an unremittingly bleak view of rural life in New Mexico for its protagonist, Mara. Her father is an abusive alcoholic, and she is surrounded by intolerant Fundamentalist Christianity that sees homosexuality as an abomination. Her only sources of support are one male Native American friend, and the new girl at school, Xylia, who has moved from San Francisco. The pain in Mara's life becomes almost insurmountable when she is raped and outed by a classmate. Except for her two friends, Mara experiences nothing in her rural home except fear, isolation, and sorrow. As a result, she (and seemingly, the author) very much embraces metronormativity in her longing to escape:

I wonder about the rest of the world beyond these barbed wire fences, those majestic mountains. I wonder about places where fairies and faggots and deviant dykes live, where the roads are mostly asphalt instead of dirt, and cows are never seen. I'd like to see all that someday. I'd like to cut through the wires, scale the mountains, go somewhere where there are other people like me (p. 55).

The novel ends with Mara running away to San Francisco to be with Xylia in an accepting atmosphere, leaving her hellhole hometown behind.

The two other novels Keys, Marshall, and Pini analyze present a more complex view of rural teen lesbians' lives. Mike, the butch protagonist of *Pretend You Love Me*, does not find her small hometown of Coalton, Kansas, to be oppressive. Though she sometimes feels isolated because she is not part of a larger lesbian community and she does wish the town had better mental health resources because of her mom's mental illness, she and her gay boy best friend Jamie feel largely accepted: "If we had discrimination, I wasn't aware of it. Jamie and I had grown up here. People knew us; they were used to us. I'm sure they gossiped, but it ever got back to me. I never, for one day, felt judged or excluded or persecuted in Coalton" (pp. 153–154). Near the end of the novel, after she has recovered from her first experience of (unrequited) love, Mike says that when she is older, after she has met The One, "I'd bring her to Coalton. I'd show her this town, these people, we'd build a life here. Because Coalton was a good place to make a life, raise a family. This town was a family. It raised me" (pp. 281–282). This passage is a clear rejection of metronormativity.

Similarly, the character of Triinu in Stetz-Waters' *Forgive Me if I've Told You This One Before* finds some comfort in her rural life, especially when she is at home with her supportive family.

That being said, when she thinks about coming out to her father, her isolation as the only lesbian she knows makes her worry about what might happen: “For a breathless moment, I thought I might tell him the truth, but I did not know one other gay person in the whole world, let alone someone who had looked their father in the eye and spoke the words, ‘I’m gay. I’m in love’. As far as I had proof, it had never been done” (p. 120). Set in rural Oregon in 1992, *Forgive Me if I Told You This One Before* focuses on Oregon’s Ballot Measure 9, which sought to stop government funding for any programs that would “promote, encourage, or facilitate homosexuality” (State of Oregon, 1992). Learning about Ballot Measure 9 and the violence and conflict surrounding it politicizes Triinu’s coming-out process; it is important to note that the bigotry endemic to Ballot Measure 9 is shown to take place in urban as well as rural parts of the state. Being in a big city does not always ensure a lack of prejudice, and when Triinu fantasizes about leaving her hometown, she rejects metronormativity by dreaming of Northampton, Massachusetts, a small town which is often called Lesbianville, U.S.A.

The other article about LGBTQ+ representation in young adult literature is by two of the authors of the previous article, Barbara Pini and Wendy Keys. In “Rural Trans Girlhoods in Young Adult Fiction” (2019), Pini and Keys use metronormativity as a framework to analyze two novels featuring rural trans characters, Brian Katcher’s *Almost Perfect* and Meredith Russo’s *If I Was Your Girl*. Set in rural Missouri, *Almost Perfect*, told from the first-person point of view of a cis male heterosexual teen narrator named Logan, seems to use “rural” as shorthand for narrowminded and bigoted. When Logan finds out that Sage, the new girl in school on whom he’s had a crush, is trans, he reacts with hostility and uses his rural upbringing to justify his reaction: “Did Sage honestly expect me to be some new age, politically correct hippie who thought you could just choose your own gender? I’m from central Missouri, for Christ’s sake”

(Katcher, as cited in Pini & Keys, 2019). Even though Logan refers to his town as a “shithole” he wants to leave as soon as possible, he aligns himself with the town’s narrow-mindedness when he feels his masculinity is threatened. While *Almost Perfect* seems to embrace metronormativity, *If I Was Your Girl* takes a more complicated view of its rural setting. Trans girl Amanda lives in Lambertsville, Tennessee, where evangelical churches and reactionary bumper stickers prevail. She wants to live like a normal teen girl, but her father fears for her safety, telling her, “This ain’t Atlanta, and it ain’t the suburbs” (Russo, as cited in Pini & Keys, 2019). When Amanda is outed at a school dance and then assaulted by a bully on her way home, she is rescued by a group of popular small-town girls who express acceptance of Amanda and outrage at her outing by another student. Keys and Pini write, “This is a rural community where a trans character is shown companionship, care, and support. It is a vastly different depiction of a rural space than that in *Almost Perfect*” (p. 118). While Amanda thinks she still might like to move to a big city for college, she no longer feels the urgent need to bolt. With her friends in Lambertsville, Amanda says, “For the first time ever, I was living *my life*—the life I was supposed to live—I was finally the truest version of myself” (Russo, as cited in Pini & Keys, 2019). One doesn’t always have to flee to the city to find oneself...or to find a supportive community.

One of the most useful sources I found—if only for its sheer scope—is Mary L. Gray’s book *Out in the Country: Youth, Media, and Queer Visibility in Rural America* (2009). In the introduction, Gray says that the book “...addresses how young people in the rural United States who lay claim to LGBT identities confront the politics of gay visibility, expectations, and constraints that define and shape the recognition of of LGBT-identifying people in popular culture and public life” (p. 3). In other words, how do rural LGBTQ+ youth (Gray’s use of “LGBT” is symptomatic of the book’s 2009 publication date) define themselves in light of the larger culture which marginalizes

them for both their regional and sexual identity? How is being a rural queer different from being an urban or suburban queer, and how is it the same? Gray takes an interdisciplinary, ethnographic approach to exploring these questions of identity. The three themes that recur throughout the other sources are spread throughout Gray's book.

Regarding the lack of resources for rural LGBTQ+ youth, Gray observes,

Unlike their urban and suburban peers, young people living between the metropolises of San Francisco, Chicago, and Manhattan face very different access to serving lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender-identifying youth. Many also live beyond the reach of LGBT health programs, community-based support agencies, and visible constituencies able to finance, nurture, and augment such services (p. 5).

Much of *Out in the Country* chronicles rural LGBTQ+ youth and their family members and supportive friends as they try to create resources and a community support system and ensure human rights for all. Readers meet Kentuckian Mary Boyd, a longtime PFLAG member who, under the unlikely auspices of the Grayson County Homemakers Club, attempts to put together a community forum on gay teens. And then there is Gina Cooper, the mother of a bullied son in Monticello, Kentucky, who sets up a local chapter of GLSEN. Gray also introduces a group of Berea College students who instituted a campaign wherein LGBTQ+ citizens sent postcards announcing their existence to State Representative Lonnie Napier, who stated that he refused to support a proposed statewide fairness bill because no gay people lived in his district. The story of all these activists is one of both hardship and hope. Mary Boyd's plans for a forum were stymied when she was denied the use of the county courthouse as a venue and received pushback from several local churches. Gina Cooper's GLSEN chapter was unable to sustain itself due to lack of

financial support. And unsurprisingly, Representative Lonnie Napier did not change his tune on the fairness bill despite being inundated with postcards. However, each of these efforts had positive outcomes: Mary Boyd found a new venue for her forum in the local public library, and it was well attended by a mostly supportive audience. While Gina Cooper's GLSEN chapter folded, she and other supporters went on to found the locally centered Kentucky Advocates for Equality which devoted itself to helping LGBTQ+ students, faculty, and staff in the state. And while the fairness bill did not pass, the Berea activists were able to publicly prove Representative Napier to be either dishonest or terribly oblivious and to increase the strength of their network of LGBTQ+ activism.

From bullied teens to frightened, deeply closeted ones, *Out in the Country* vividly illustrates the feelings of invisibility many rural LGBTQ+ youth experience. However, the book makes it clear that these sad scenarios do not tell the whole story. With a lack of official, adult-sanctioned resources in their schools or communities, many rural LGBTQ+ youth create their own social groups, meeting not just at each other's houses, but also in doughnut shops, public libraries, Christian bookshops, or—in my favorite example—the local Walmart for impromptu amateur drag shows. In re invisibility, Gray makes the point that in rural areas, familiarity does not breed contempt; instead, it breeds a feeling of security. Many rural dwellers like seeing a familiar face in the Walmart and not knowing just that person but her mama and her mama's mama.

Historically, rural life has othered the LGBTQ+ community. Like Representative Lonnie Napier, many rural dwellers deny that there are any people like *that* “around here,” thus rendering them alien and unfamiliar. Gray argues that by making themselves visible in the community through public meetings and activism, LGBTQ+ youth render themselves familiar—as people who live

and go to school in the area, as local folks' sons and daughters—and make it harder for naysayers to dismiss LGTBQ+ people as urban outsiders.

Gray's entire book serves as a rejection of metronormativity. The most commonly told gay stories, Gray writes, imagine rural areas as "gay America's closet" that must be "left behind to reach gay culture and community formation in the cities" (p. 6). But ultimately, does one have to go to the city to find oneself? *Out in the Country* makes the case that the rural/urban binary created by metronormativity can be as limiting and destructive as the binaries surrounding gender and sexual orientation. Just as there is a wide spectrum of ways for LGTBQ+ people to identify, there is a wide spectrum of places for LGTBQ+ people to live and find identity and community. Not all the LGTBQ+ youth featured in *Out in the Country* will stay in rural areas all their lives. Many of them may go to college or seek employment in more urban areas. However, even the young people who will eventually leave are finding community and purpose in their home regions in the meantime instead of regarding rural life as something to be merely endured and escaped.

The small body of research on rural LGTBQ+ youth reflects the common bias that the rural areas of the U.S. are something to be abandoned, flown over, or ignored. My hope is that my research and writing will help amplify the voices of rural youth who are waiting to be heard.

Queer/Quare Theory

One of the many scenes from L. Frank Baum's *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* that did not make it into the 1939 MGM musical version regards the use of green spectacles in the Emerald City. When the grudging gatekeeper finally agrees to admit Dorothy, he tells her that under the Wizard's orders, she is required to wear green spectacles at all times during her visit. When she

asks why, he replies, “Because if you did not wear spectacles the brightness and the glory of the Emerald City would blind you” (Baum, 2013, p. 53). Later, when Dorothy and her friends start to truly see the Wizard for the “humbug” that he is, they discover that the Emerald City isn’t green after all; it is the green spectacles that give the city its dazzling color. In some ways, though, the gift of the green spectacles transcends humbuggery because it gives Dorothy and her friends a new way of seeing. For me, using queer theory is like putting on the green spectacles; the colorful lenses transform whatever I’m looking at into something that transcends the dull grays and tans of heteronormativity and provide a vision of the essence, not just the surface, of the subject.

Queer theory, mainly embodied in the ideas of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Judith Butler, burst onto the scene in the early 1990s when I was an undergraduate English major and then an English M.A. student. The advent of queer theory changed the way I looked at literature, at sexuality and gender, at nearly every aspect of human existence. I was young and newly out, and in my mind, queer theory explained *everything*. If I could have applied queer theory to my dental hygiene practices, I would have. Down with heteronormative flossing! But throughout the past three-plus decades, queer theory has progressed and changed, and I have progressed and changed as well. So, what aspects of my definition of queer theory have emerged for me as a middle-aged writer, scholar, and teacher, and what aspects of queer theory inform my dissertation?

For me, queer theory is not just a rejection of heteronormativity and binary views of gender and sexual orientation; it is also a rejection of other equally destructive binaries that society uses to place limitations on human identity and experience: the “saved” versus the “sinners,” the “trashy” versus the “high class,” the “rural” versus the “urban,” binaries that dominated my rural

Appalachian upbringing. But queer theory is about acceptance, too—an embrace of the kaleidoscope of shifting and complicated human identities that cannot be captured in easy categories. The glass in a kaleidoscope is an apt metaphor for queer theory, not just because it is composed of all the colors of the rainbow, but also because the glass has been shattered (like old, entrenched ideas can be shattered) and put together to make something new and beautiful.

One of the biggest appeals of queer theory is its intersectionality. Originally a tenet of critical race theory, intersectionality holds that no one can be defined by one factor alone; instead, each person has a complex identity based on how different characteristics such as race, gender, social class, and sexual orientation intersect with each other. As Delgado and Stefaniec write, “Everyone has potentially conflicting, overlapping identities, loyalties, and allegiances” (p. 9). These conflicts and overlaps show the complexity of the self.

“Queer” is a term that can be applied to more than sexual orientation and gender identity. A few years ago, I wrote an essay titled “Quare Theory” which was published in the anthology *Walk ‘Til the Dogs Get Mean: Meditations on the Forbidden from Contemporary Appalachia* (Ohio University Press, 2015). The essay’s title played with the way rural Appalachians such as my grandmother pronounced the word “queer,” but it was more than a linguistic joke. Instead, I was attempting to identify my Appalachian identity as part of what made me queer. When I watched MTV or sitcoms as a teenager, I was very aware that my family and I lived in a life that was very different from that of the people on the screen. Alex P. Keaton’s family on *Family Ties* didn’t eat soup beans and cornbread for supper (and indeed, they referred to their evening meal, inexplicably, as “dinner”). No one said “ain’t” or “plum” to mean “very” or “I wouldn’t care to” to mean “I’d be glad to.” The Keaton family, like most families on TV, was solidly upper middle

class. No one worked as a coal miner or knew the words to murder ballads or had a passel of hound dogs on their front porch.

When I watched mass media, I was often struck by the idea that “These people are not what I am,” but I knew I would seem even queerer to them than they did to me. I didn’t know when I wrote “Quare Theory” many years later that it was a term that had already been coined by African American studies scholar E. Patrick Johnson in his article “Quare Studies, or (Almost) Everything I Know About Queer Studies I Learned from My Grandmother” (2001) in which he adopted the term to emphasize how race and class intersect with queerness. The article opens with a list of definitions of the word *quare*:

Quare (Kwa^hr), n. 1. meaning queer; also, opp. of straight; odd or slightly off kilter; from the African American vernacular for queer; sometimes homophobic in usage, but always denotes excess incapable of being contained within conventional categories of being; curiously equivalent to the Anglo-Irish (and sometimes “Black” Irish) variant of queer, as in Brendan Behan’s famous play, *The Quare Fellow*.

—adj. 2. a lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgendered person of color who loves other men or women, sexually or nonsexually, and appreciates black culture and community.

—n. 3. one who thinks and feels and acts (and, sometimes, “acts up”); committed to struggle against all forms of oppression—racial, sexual, gender, class, religious, etc.

—n. 4. one for whom sexual and gender identities always already intersect with racial subjectivity.

—5. quare is to queer as “reading” is to “throwing shade” (Johnson, 2001, p. 2).

As a white-presenting person, I would never attempt to appropriate the identity described in Johnson's treatise on "quareness." However, Johnson's definitions do have some common ground with the Appalachian version of "quareness" I espoused when I was unfamiliar with Johnson's work. First, he acknowledges the Anglo-Irish use of "quare," which explains why my white hillbilly nana used the word to describe, in Johnson's words, "excess incapable of being contained within clear categories of being" (p. 2). Nana used "quare" to describe people she thought might be gay, but she also used it to describe people who just seemed strange to her, as in, "The quarest feller came into the store today." Her go-to term for someone she knew was gay was another Appalachian stand-by, *funny-turned*, as in, "Cricket Needham was walking down Main Street today in a pair of white short-shorts and pink cowboy boots. That boy sure is funny-turned." It is also notable that Johnson states that people who are quare are "committed to struggle against all forms of oppression—racial, sexual, gender, class, religious, etc." (p. 2). Johnson emphasizes that the "quare" should not be confined to the halls of academe. In the last section of the article, "Bringing it All Home: Quare Studies on the Back Porch," he argues, Quare studies must encourage strategic coalition building around laws and policies that have the potential to affect us across racial, sexual, and class divides. Quare studies must incorporate under its rubric a praxis related to the sites of public policy, family, church, and community. Therefore...I offer a manifesto that aligns black quare academic theory with political praxis (p. 18).

Johnson is not content for the quare to remain theoretical; instead, it must put social justice into practice not just for the scholars in the ivory tower but also for the homefolks on the front porch.

For me, “quareness” is the intersection between sexual identity, region, and social class. While teenaged me could look at characters on TV and say, “They’re not like me because they’re upper middle-class non-Appalachians,” I could also look at classmates and family members and say, “They’re not like me because they’re straight.” These intersecting aspects of queer theory affect me as a writer, teacher, and scholar.

In “Hicks, Homos, and Home Cooking: Literary Recipes in Queer Appalachia” (2022), an analysis of gay West Virginia poet Jeff Mann’s food-related poems, Alexander Menrisky writes of the “double bind in which queer Appalachians often profess to find themselves: on one hand, subjected to right-wing violence at home, and on the other, dismissed as regressive ‘white trash’ by urban progressives” (p. 415). It is certainly my experience that progressives who would never mock any other minority group feel that they get a free pass when it comes to making fun of white hillbillies. Dealing with bias against one’s region and social class in the city and bias against one’s sexual orientation in the country can result in moving back and forth between two settings in which one never feels 100% safe or accepted. As Jeff Mann writes in his essay and poetry collection *Loving Mountains, Loving Men*, “Sometimes it feels as if my Appalachian roots and my desire for men are two lovers I vacillate between. When I feel spurned by one, I take up with the other” (p. 42). For LGBTQ+ rural Appalachians, the experience of “quareness” is inextricably linked with region and class. We hillbilly queers are like the philosophical paradox of Buridan’s ass, the hungry, thirsty donkey placed between a pile of hay and a bucket of water. We are pulled both by our regional identity and our queer identity, and even though we need both, too often it feels like we must make a choice between one or the other. I hope that our outcome is better than the poor donkey’s.

One myth that has arisen because of the hillbilly queer's conundrum is what Jack Halberstam (2005) calls "metronormativity" which centers urban areas as the places where everything—especially for the LGBTQ+ community—happens. Metronormativity is the cause of the common storyline in both literature and life in which the rural queer leaves the farm or the small town for the bright lights, excitement, or freedom of a big, supposedly welcoming city such as New York or Los Angeles. But to open up the closet door by being out in a big city, does one also have to shut the door of one's identity as an Appalachian with rural roots? The myth of metronormativity echoes Thomas Wolfe's famous adage that "You can't go home again," that once you have tasted the liberties of the big urban Someplace Else, you can never go back home and be a part of that community again. But what if you can go home again? Or what if you never leave in the first place?

Returning to Johnson's idea of quareness and "Bringing It All Back Home," I believe that quare theory should become *praxis*, that questioning binaries and embracing a full range of expression of gender and sexuality should not be confined to academic texts and settings. The ideas in quare theory have the power to help communities and individuals by dismantling the mental and social systems of oppression that result from either/or, black/white, gay/straight, country/city, rich/poor binaries.

One example of turning Appalachian quare theory into *praxis* is Country Queers, a history project founded by West Virginian Rae Garringer as a reaction against the myth of metronormativity. Garringer (2022) writes,

For a decade I had bought into the dominant narrative in LGBTQIA spaces that because I am queer I could never live back home. I was told—in not so many words—that I could

not have my queerness and my mountains, too, that I would not be safe there, that I would not be able to survive, much less thrive. This is a common experience for those of us who have left the small towns and rural areas where we grew up.

Garringer established the Country Queers project to increase the visibility of LGBTQ+ people who choose to stay in small Appalachian towns or rural areas and work to make things better instead of fleeing for parts unknown. She writes, "...for some of us this highly celebrated narrative of queer "success"—one in which you leave the farm and never look back...isn't all that appealing. For many of us raised in the country, following this normative queer migration narrative rips us from the landscapes, communities, and traditions that are as much a part of ourselves as our queerness." By increasing the visibility of country queers, Garringer shows young LGBTQ+ Appalachians that it is possible to embrace the intersectional nature of their identities. As Sam Gleaves, a gay bluegrass musician whom Garringer interviewed for her project states, "Well, we're fabulous and we're Appalachians, so we're Fabulachians" (2022). The Country Queers project is a strong example of Johnson's idea of "Bringing it All Back Home" and how queer theory can be turned into practice.

A Brief History of LGBTQ+ Young Adult Literature

The first overtly gay young adult novel, John Donovan's *I'll Get There. It Better Be Worth the Trip*, was published in 1969, the same year as the Stonewall Riots and five years after the publication of *Harriet the Spy* (Cart & Jenkins, 2018). After Donovan, the floodgates opened, and queer subtext in young adult literature became text, with the 1970's seeing the publication of Louise Fitzhugh's friend Sandra Scoppettone's *Happy Endings Are All Alike* and M.E. Kerr's *I'll Love You When You're More Like Me* and the 1980's increasing the canon with books such as

Nancy Garden's *Annie on My Mind* (Cart & Jenkins, 2018). For the contemporary reader, many of these early LGBTQ+ young adult titles make for depressing reading, as they tend to focus on the emotional and physical dangers of being queer in a homophobic society. With the notable exception of Garden's *Annie on My Mind*, the emphasis is less on community, acceptance, and love than on survival. To be fair, though, the 1970's and '80's were a time when many young adult novels dealt with so-called "social problems" and heavy subjects such as drug addiction and parental divorce, so it isn't like the kids in non-LGBTQ+ young adult titles were having an easy time of it either.

While the LGBTQ+ young adult literature of the 1990's was less grim than the books in the two decades prior, much of it did handle the subject matter with extreme caution, featuring "best friend" characters who come out as gay to straight protagonists or supporting characters who "just happen" to be gay. In the numerous "coming out" stories, many of the characters were tempted by the confines of the closet for fear of homophobia, violence, and stereotypes based on the AIDS crisis (Cart and Jenkins, 2018). However, as the decade progressed, more titles emerged that showed supportive queer and queer-positive communities and families, such as Francesca Lia Block's *Weetzie Bat* novels and Jacqueline Woodson's *From the Notes of Melanin Son* (Cart and Jenkins, 2016). The content of one young adult novel from the 1990's, though, is particularly relevant to this dissertation.

When I first read M.E. Kerr's 1994 novel *Deliver Us from Evie* I remember thinking, If this book had come out in 1984 instead of 1994 and I had been able to get my hands on it, it would have changed my life. Kerr's novel has the rare distinction of being a queer novel set in a rural area which doesn't resort to stereotype or oversimplification of any of its characters. The titular Evie

is the butch daughter in a Missouri farm family and is comfortable with herself even when others are not, at one point telling her dad, “I don’t give a ding-dong-damn what people say about me!” (p. 57). Like many well-meaning rural people, Evie’s family loves their gay daughter, but they are fearful for her safety and wish she would choose what they see as an easier path. The book does fall into the metronormativity trope when Evie and her girlfriend Patty run away together to New York City; however, Kerr shows readers that the two young women haven’t completely turned their backs on their rural roots when they return to Missouri for a visit. Their visit shows not only that Evie and Patty have made a happy life together but also that Evie’s family has become more comfortable with her identity and relationship with Patty. When Evie and Patty leave, Evie’s mother says, “Now don’t you two be strangers” (p. 177), an indication that they are always welcome.

Upon reflection, *Deliver Us from Evie* did change my life, just not the same way it would have if I had read it as a teen. Reading Kerr’s writing as an adult showed me that it was possible to write an open-minded, open-hearted, non-stereotypical queer YA novel about rural characters. This new knowledge was one of the things that planted a seed in my mind that would lead me to start writing my first explicitly young adult novel, *Finding H.F.*, five years after the release of Kerr’s novel.

Contemporary Rural Appalachian LGBTQ+ Young Adult Literature

In their conclusion to *Representing the Rainbow* (2018), Christine Jenkins and Michael Cart compare the evolution of LGBTQ+ young adult literature to needlework: “Like the knitting of a sweater or sock, it has been a similarly slow, sometimes tedious, and often incremental process plagued by more than a few dropped stitches” (p. 221). However, incremental progress is still

progress, and over many years of knitting, young adult LGBTQ+ literature has emerged and continues to evolve as a genre, often depicting the main character's sexual orientation or gender identity not as a plot point but as simply a character trait. Jenkins and Cart state, "In the area of queer consciousness...even geographically and socially isolated teens now have a wide variety of social media for creating community" (p. 221). This statement certainly holds true for teens who are not so geographically isolated that they lack access to a reliable internet connection; however, there is still a lot of "knitting" to do before rural and small-town youth see themselves reflected in a wide variety of young adult literature.

That being said, the number of young adult novels depicting rural teens in general and rural LGBTQ+ teens in particular has increased since my own adolescence. Young adult authors such as Jeff Zentner, Gretchen Moran Laskas, and Robert Gipe write novels in which characters grapple with their identities as rural Appalachians and with social and environmental issues affecting the region, such the opioid epidemic and mountaintop removal. Novels which combine rural Appalachian identity with LGBTQ+ identity are "rarer than hen's teeth," as the mountain saying goes; however, some do exist. Three notable contemporary examples are *Cub* by Jeff Mann (Lethe Press, 2014), about a gay boy in rural West Virginia; *If I Was Your Girl* by Meredith Russo (Flatiron Books, 2016), about a trans girl in small-town Tennessee; and *Wild and Crooked* by Leah Thomas (Bloomsbury, 2019), about a young lesbian in rural Kentucky. In a close critical reading of each of these titles, I plan to explore the following questions:

- How has the representation of LGBTQ+ rural Appalachians in young adult literature changed since my youth?

- What images of the region and regional identity does contemporary young adult literature depict, and do these images combat negative stereotypes of Appalachia and its people?
- The analysis will address these questions in part by exploring how the critical introduction's common themes for rural LGBTQ+ teens come into play in the novels' characters' lives: a lack of resources, feelings of isolation and/or invisibility, a lack of resources, and a response to metronormativity.

Cub

Travis, the protagonist of Jeff Mann's *Cub*, loves his West Virginia mountain home, his family, and the slow pace and privacy of rural life. A true nature boy, he can identify all the trees in the forest and tend a garden (though he does feel a moment of remorse when he has to kill a bug), and then go inside to help his Nanny fix a tasty supper from garden-fresh ingredients. While most rural-set young adult novels depict characters who are anxious to get out of the boonies as quickly as possible, Travis doesn't want to stray from the mountains. After he finishes his senior year of high school, he plans to join his lesbian friends at West Virginia University before returning to his tiny hometown of Hinton: *"One more year of high school to get through, Travis thought, and, if I keep getting good grades, I can follow my friends to WVU. Living in a city won't be so scary with my Sapphos to show me around. There, maybe I'll meet some wonderful man and fall in love. Then, we can move back here, buy a farm, and spend our lives together"* (p. 4). Travis defies stereotypes of rural Appalachian queers in that he does not see the mountains as something he needs to escape; thus, he resists the trope of metronormativity.

Though Travis loves his mountain home, he also experiences the isolation and lack of resources cited by many young Appalachian queers. He has found support through some individuals—his

lesbian friends who have gone off to WVU, a sympathetic teacher who discreetly introduces him to gay literature—but there is no system in place in his school or community to support LGBTQ+ youth. Travis also undergoes bullying by Brent, a loutish classmate who picks on him for seeming to be both gay and a redneck: “I can’t believe it. You’re a redneck *and* a fag. What a combination. A big old hairy boy like you a cocksucker? Where’s your tutu and tiara?” (p. 15). Travis doesn’t want to leave his home, but the combination of bullying and the fear of how we would be treated in Hinton make him fear that he will ultimately have to buy into the metronormative trope for his own personal safety:

I wish I didn’t want men. Desire makes me feel so vulnerable. If I were straight, I could live anywhere I wanted and be myself. I wouldn’t have to keep secrets and hide who I am. I don’t want to leave my family and farm. But I have to. There’s no way to be gay here. My family would be so disappointed if they knew. Nanny would think I’m a sinner. And guys like Brent would be hounding me everywhere. I’ve got to leave. I’ve got to leave (p. 61).

Here Travis gives voice to the feelings of many rural Appalachian LGBTQ+ youth who would like to stay in the region but don’t feel that they can because they have no rural gay role models and they fear the shame and disappointment of their often conservative Christian family members.

Ultimately, Travis decides not to leave but to stay and fight...literally. He starts working out under the tutelage of Mike, a fellow high school student who also works as a mechanic in his father’s garage. As the titular “cub,” Travis is bearded, furry, strong, and masculine but with the heart of a teddy bear. He is both tough and tender and defies the stereotype of all Appalachian

gay boys as being “sissy.” While some butch gay boys such as Travis might be attracted to boys who are more femme, Travis hungers for beards and body hair, muscles and masculinity. He fantasizes about consensually physically dominating a guy who is his match in strength and stamina. He meets this match in Mike. Travis and Mike’s relationship is sexy, but it’s the emotional intimacy between these two boys that stays with the reader as they share their fears and insecurities and their hopes for the future. Travis originally connects with Mike as a workout mentor who is going to make him stronger so he can face the homophobic bullies at school, but Travis’s relationship with Mike ends up making him stronger in many more ways than just physically.

In *Cub*, Jeff Mann consistently defies stereotypes of what it means to be a young gay Appalachian man. He achieves this feat through the complex characterization of Travis, who is an embodiment of intersectionality. A cornbread-loving country boy who loves other country boys, he doesn’t cast off his country boy identity to better fit cultural expectations of what a gay man “should” be. He embraces his masculinity and his identity as a budding BDSM enthusiast. He is a product of the Bible Belt but identifies as Wiccan and prays to the Horned God throughout the novel. Through loving and losing Mike, Travis also begins to discover himself as a poet. Such intersections of identity are what creates a whole person, and Travis is a whole person throughout the novel, not a stereotype based on his region or sexuality. In his article “Stonewall and Matewan: Some Thoughts on Gay Life in Appalachia” (1999), which appeared in *The Journal of Appalachian Studies* nearly a decade before the publication of *Cub*, Jeff Mann writes of his own experience with intersectionality:

The tension created by a bicultural, or tricultural, identity *can* be enriching. I think, rather than belonging nowhere, as I felt as a gay Appalachian in the mid-eighties, I can cherish more than one heritage: Stonewall and Matewan, [Appalachian writer] Denise Giardina and [gay writer] Andrew Holleran. Changing attitudes for the better, the struggle for justice, is the work of generations. Perhaps the greatest, most productive changes can be wrought by those gays and lesbians who...refuse to join the gay mass exodus to urban areas and instead make their lives in the countryside and small towns, living as openly as possible, resisting the temptation to simplify, to amputate problematic parts of themselves. In the face of such honesty and courage, opinions shift (p. 213).

Reading *Cub*, it is easy to imagine Travis growing up to be one of these courageous country queers who, by being a kind and productive member of his community who is also openly gay, changes hearts and minds.

In the current climate of censorship, I can't imagine that *Cub*, with its lovingly described kinky gay sex scenes, will be on many school library shelves in Appalachia. This fact is unfortunate, as I cannot think of a novel that does as much to dispel the simplistic and reductive myths surrounding what it means to be gay and Appalachian. Mann's writing shows that gayness and love for the Appalachian region are not mutually exclusive, that they are not an "either/or" but a "both/and."

If I Was Your Girl

In the first scene of Meredith Russo's *If I Was Your Girl* (Flatiron Books, 2016), Amanda Hardy is riding a bus from Smyrna, Georgia, where she has been living with her mom, to Lambertsville,

Tennessee. Amanda is transgender, and back in Smyrna, she survived both a transphobic beating in a women's room and a suicide attempt. Her plan is to stay a while with her dad in Lambertsville for a fresh start. However, tiny Lambertsville is not a mecca for LGBTQ+ youth. Upon her first viewing of the town from the bus window, she says, "The mountains looked the same. The trees looked the same. We could have been anywhere in the South, which is to say, nowhere" (p. 3). After her dad picks her up at the bus station, they drive past a billboard advertising "GENERAL BLAMMO'S FIREWORK SHACK" and then "an old brick building with a tarnished steeple. The sign read NEW HOPE BAPTIST CHURCH. A Walmart loomed behind it" (p. 6). Amanda's choice to move to Tennessee is the opposite of the trope of metronormativity. By exiting Smyrna, she is leaving what is basically the Atlanta suburbs to live in a small mountain town dominated by church, Walmart, high school football, and heteronormativity.

Amanda's choice for her "fresh start" in Lambertsville includes not revealing her trans identity to her peers or other community members, which creates an interesting and perilous situation. She is conventionally pretty and easily passes as cisgender, but as her popularity in her new school increases, so does her anxiety. Would her new friends and Grant, her hunky football player love interest, feel the same way about her if they knew her backstory? Observations of her peers indicate that their reception might not be kind. At a party, Parker, one of Grant's teammates, teases Grant about his past friendship with Tommy, whom Parker describes as "Grant's little gay boyfriend" (p. 58). Parker goes on to say to Grant, "The new girl know you've got a vagina?" (p. 58). Amanda is so upset she leaves the party, musing, "I wonder why people still made comments like that. I wondered when I'd stop caring" (p. 58). Amanda also discovers from her

new goth friend Bee that LGBTQ+ kids in Lambertsville don't feel safe coming out. Bee, who is bisexual, keeps the fact that she is dating Chloe, a member of Amanda's girl squad, a secret.

While it may be strange that Amanda lets everyone in Lambertsville assume she is cisgender, the choice is understandable given the trauma she has experienced as a trans teen. But also, her choice reflects her personality. As a character, Amanda is not iconoclastic or rebellious; she is a normal Southern teenaged girl and would like to be treated as one.

Amanda's struggle for what she considers a normal life can be seen through her encounters with religion. She states that after she figured out she was trans, "I still believed in God and for a long time my faith had been the only thing keeping me afloat" (p. 81). Despite her faith, she and her mother stopped attending their church in Smyrna because their minister suggested that Amanda needed conversion therapy, a strong male role model, and a leave of absence from the congregation. Still, when Amanda's friend Anna invites Amanda to church in Lambertsville, Amanda wants to go. The ensuing conversation between Amanda and her dad indicates his worry about raising a trans daughter in a small town in the Bible Belt:

"My friend Anna invited me. Why can't you see me there?"

"The text's pretty hostile to people like you," Dad finally replied, chewing slowly.

"But they don't have to know everything about me, do they?"

"Just be careful," he said. "This ain't Atlanta, and this ain't the suburbs. People around here seem nice, but you gotta be careful who you trust" (pp. 81–82).

Amanda's father's comments reflect the belief that small-town Appalachia is not a safe place for LGBTQ+ people. It is important to note, however, that the dangers Amanda faces are not

exclusive to Lambertsville, Tennessee, and other Appalachian towns of comparable size. It was the beating and bullying she received in suburban Smyrna which drove her to Lambertsville in the first place. Russo seems keen to indicate that while the rural/small-town South can be a hotbed of heteronormativity, larger and supposedly more sophisticated places are not immune to bigotry.

Amanda's father acts as the voice of fear about raising a trans kid in a small Appalachian town. He worries about the possible consequences of her attending a conservative church and dating a football player. He scolds her, "...why are you going to church with fundamentalists? Why are you having boys alone—and not just boys, mind you, but athletes from the look of that Grant character...I trusted you to keep your head down" (p. 128). When Amanda replies, "I just want to have a normal life," her dad responds, "And I just want you to live past your senior year" (p. 128). Amanda's dad, who is still adjusting to having a trans daughter, believes that the only way for Amanda to be safe in Lambertsville is by not calling attention to herself.

Despite her dad's fears, Amanda thrives socially in Lambertsville, and her relationship with Grant becomes closer. The only person Amanda comes out to is Bee, who is supportive. But even though she is a social success, Amanda is still fearful of how Grant and her friends would feel if they knew she was trans. When Virginia, Amanda's trans mentor, comes for a visit, Amanda is afraid for Virginia to meet her friends. Virginia does not pass for cisgender like Amanda does, and Amanda worries that "...if my friends saw me with her, and my friends figured out *she* was trans, then they might figure out me next" (p. 178). Amanda's fears become justified at the school's homecoming dance, which rivals Stephen King's *Carrie* in the category of fictional prom-night disasters. When Amanda, the newly elected Homecoming Queen,

excuses herself to the restroom after dancing with Grant, she finds a drunk and stoned Bee who tells her, not untruly, “You work so, so hard to be *boring* so you can impress *boring* people... You could be so much more” (p. 219). Bee then tells Amanda she is in love with her, and Amanda firmly but politely rebuffs her, telling her she only likes boys.

Bee’s private revelations in the restroom are nothing compared to the public ones she makes on the homecoming stage. She starts out by announcing, “I hate this fuckin’ town, I hate this school, and I hate all of you” (p. 221). Bee proceeds to out a gay male student and her own ex-girlfriend and then points out a student who is having an affair with a teacher and another student who sells drugs. Inevitably, Bee turns her attention toward Amanda, saying, “Look at our homecoming queen. Ain’t she sweet? Ain’t she beautiful?...Smart, pretty but not pushy or intimidating...she’s everything this fucked-up town wants a girl to be. ...But guys, guess what! She’s a *he!*” (p. 222). In service of the novel’s plot, it was inevitable that Amanda be outed as trans; however, it’s unfortunate that this outing comes from a fellow member of the LGBTQ+ community. Earlier in the novel, Bee complained to Amanda about bisexual characters in media being depicted as duplicitous and untrustworthy; it is ironic that this particular piece of media goes on to do the same thing. Also, it strains credibility that an obviously inebriated Bee is given so much time to insult her peers before a chaperone finally removes her from the stage.

As Amanda runs away from Homecoming, her dad’s fears come to pass when she is attacked by Parker, who hits her and attempts to rape her, saying, “You coulda had this the easy way. Now, let’s see how close you are to the real thing” (p. 231). At this point the novel recalls early grim LGBTQ+ young adult fiction such as Sandra Scoppettone’s *Happy Endings Are All Alike*, in which a young lesbian is raped by a homophobic peer. The book also seems to be in danger of

depicting small Appalachian towns as unsafe spaces populated entirely by bigots. However, this image is flipped when Amanda's girl squad, one of them brandishing a rifle, comes to Amanda's rescue. When a self-pitying Amanda describes herself as a "freak," her friend Layla says, "Don't you dare talk about my friend that way" (p. 235). Amanda's friends, it turns out, were her real friends all along, and Amanda being trans doesn't change their feelings. These feelings do not extend to Grant's mentally ill mother who calls Amanda a "faggot" and demands that she leave her property (p. 240). In the aftermath of Amanda's outing, her father, terrified for her safety, tells her to pack her bags for Smyrna. However, after a cooling-off period, Amanda returns to Lambertsville for the second semester of her senior year, where she is reunited with her friends and is given reason to hope that she might have a chance with Grant. The last line of the book is, "I knew now—I believed now—I deserved to be loved" (p. 273).

If I Was Your Girl deserves commendation not only as an Own Voices book about a trans girl but also as the first novel about a trans girl in small-town Appalachia. While Russo peppers her rural landscape with churches, Walmarts, and right-wing bumper stickers, she doesn't resort to stereotyping her small-town characters. Some characters may use Appalachian idioms and drop the final "g" from "-ing" words, but Russo never suggests that the characters are ignorant bumpkins. Amanda's peers at Lambertsville High School enjoy many of the same activities as suburban and urban teenagers. In depicting small-town Appalachian life, Russo resists the two most common pitfalls: overwriting the Appalachian-ness so broadly that the characters seem like rejects from *The Beverly Hillbillies*, or underwriting the Appalachian component such that the characters seem like they could be in Anywhere, U.S.A. It's a difficult balance to strike, and Russo does it well.

From a queer theory perspective, the most stunning aspect of *If I Was Your Girl* is its outright rejection of the trope of metronormativity. It is surprising that a trans character moves from the suburbs to a small Appalachian town for her own safety. And it is even more surprising that when given the opportunity, Amanda chooses to return to Lambertsville because she wants to be with her friends and see if she has a future with Grant. Some readers might also express surprise at how accepting Amanda's girl squad is, but since they already know and love her before she is outed, the fact that she is trans doesn't change their feelings. Even Grant offers some hope that he and Amanda might be able to make their relationship work. *If I Was Your Girl* dispels the myth that urban equals accepting and rural equals prejudiced.

While *If I Was Your Girl* is commendable both for depicting a trans girl in a small-town setting and for working to dispel the myth of metronormativity, certain aspects of the text may raise eyebrows, particularly those of trans readers. In her "Note from the Author" at the end of the novel, Meredith Russo writes:

I am a storyteller, not an educator. I have taken liberties with what I know reality to be. I have, in some ways, cleaved to stereotypes and even bent rules to make Amanda's trans-ness as unchallenging to normative assumptions as possible. She knew from a very young age. She is attracted exclusively to boys. She is entirely feminine. She passes as a woman with little to no effort. She had a surgery that her parents should not have been able to afford, and she started hormones through legitimate channels before she probably could have in the real world (p. 276).

Russo presents *If I Was Your Girl* as a work of realistic fiction, yet she admits to stacking the cards in Amanda's favor so that she will have the maximum chance of passing as a cisgender girl. These are advantages that many of the book's trans readers might not share. They, unlike

Amanda, might be attracted to the same gender, might be nonwhite, might be unable to pass for cisgender. As a result, these readers might not find “normal girl” Amanda to be a relatable or helpful trans role model. The most improbable element to me as a reader was that Amanda has already had bottom surgery. This story element rankled me for two reasons, first because it is not common for doctors who do gender corrective surgery to perform it on such young patients, and second, because as Russo points out in her Author’s Note, Amanda’s parents—who are lower middle class at best, income-wise—couldn’t afford such a procedure even if they found a doctor who was willing to perform it.

From a novelist’s point of view, Russo’s decision to have Amanda be fully physically female is a lazy way to avoid a plot complication when Amanda is dating Grant. But it is troubling on a deeper level, too. What if Amanda’s ability to have surgery despite her age and family income sets up a false sense of expectation in some young trans readers? I understand that Russo is “a storyteller, not an educator” (p. 276), but when writing what is supposedly realistic fiction, it seems to me that the storyteller has a responsibility not to be intentionally misleading. A caveat in the Author’s Note is insufficient to address this issue because many readers simply stop reading when the story is over and ignore any supplemental material.

Interestingly, when I consulted reviews of *If I Was Your Girl* in publications such as *School Library Journal*, *Kirkus*, and *VOYA*, all the reviews were glowing, and none of them addressed the intentionally unrealistic aspects of the story. The only reviewer who discussed this issue was by a Tumblr blogger identified as Reading While Queer (n.d). In re Amanda’s unlikely scenario and Russo’s Author’s Note, the blogger writes,

Reading that author's note, I was left wondering what purpose Amanda serves, then, if getting on hormones at her age (let alone GRS) would have been a much more arduous—even impossible, given her family's income—experience in real life. Just what are young adult readers supposed to gain from this book? (para. 3, n.d.)

It is a valid question. *Reading While Queer* speculates that perhaps Amanda was intended to be a power fantasy for trans girls, but then they decide that if this is the case, Amanda isn't a very effective power fantasy. She endures bullying, abuse, and assault over the course of the novel, and her story's ending is more hopeful than happy. While "Reading While Queer" states in re the novel, "I just didn't get it," I think they get it all too well. *If I Was Your Girl* is a novel that gets many things right in re its depiction of being LGBTQ+ in a small Appalachian town. Ultimately, though, it also sends some confusing mixed messages to young trans readers.

Wild and Crooked

Kalyn Rose Tulip Spence, the protagonist of Leah Thomas's *Wild and Crooked*, has just moved back to Samsboro, Kentucky, so her mom can take care of Kalyn's grandma who has had a stroke. Kalyn's dad is incarcerated for a murder he supposedly committed which has tainted the Spence family name in the small community. To protect her from the effects of having a "bad name," Kalyn's mom suggests that she start the new school year under the name Rose Poplowski. Kalyn adopts not only the new name but a new persona. During the school day, she is no longer her foul-mouthed, cigarette-smoking, feisty self. Instead, she is sunny and sweet Rose who catches the admiring attention of male and female students alike. But there is one student who can see through the Rose façade and becomes a real friend to Kalyn: Gus Peake, who is often reduced to an object of pity by his classmates both because he has cerebral palsy

and because his dad was murdered. After they've started to become close, Kalyn and Gus discover that it was Kalyn's father who allegedly murdered Gus's father. Obviously, this fact serves as an obstacle to their friendship at first, but as both teens unearth more family secrets, it begins to seem possible that Kalyn's dad might have been falsely accused. Kalyn and Gus join forces to try to find out the truth. They are aided in their efforts by Gus's neurodivergent friend Phil, who takes the quote that "All the world's a stage" literally, seeing the events of the case in Shakespearean terms.

Wild and Crooked is different from *Cub* and *If I Was Your Girl* in that the plot doesn't hinge on the main characters' sexual orientation or gender identity. Instead, the novel is a fairly realistic "cold case" murder mystery which is also the story of Kaylyn and Gus's friendship. In keeping with her pull-no-punches personality, Kalyn is matter-of-fact about her lesbianism. When Kalyn's alter ego Rose Poplowski is nominated for homecoming court, Kalyn reflects, "...the whole situation seems old-fashioned to me. Oh, more forced girl-boy pairings? Because everybody's straight, right, and everyone who ain't doesn't matter, right? Well, *whoopee*. It's confusin', though, because even if I'm gay, maybe Rose Poplowski isn't" (p. 72). Clearly, Kalyn's gayness is a lens through which she sees the world; as a result, when she learns about homecoming queens and kings being paired up, she sees the forces of heteronormativity at work.

In a later scene in the book, Kalyn has another opportunity to smash heteronormative assumptions surrounding the homecoming dance. Phil has given Gus the awkward task of asking Kalyn to the dance on Phil's behalf. When Kalyn tells Gus she isn't interested in Phil, he asks if it's because of Phil's acne. Kalyn replies,

"It's the penis, actually. Not my thing."

I wait for some loud reaction—years back, when I told Mom, she knocked over some vegetable oil and set the stove on fire before hollering that I was officially the most rebellious Spence in history—but this is Gus (p. 113).

Kalyn's forthrightness doesn't faze Gus, who, as he tells her, has two moms. Kalyn's recollection of coming out to her mom also shows a healthy perspective on gayness—yes, Kalyn's mom was surprised enough that she accidentally started a grease fire, but when she says that Kalyn is “officially the most rebellious Spence in history,” it is clear to readers who already know Kalyn's mom that she means this statement to be a compliment. As this remarkable scene between Kalyn and Gus continues, she suggests that he himself might be in love with Phil. Gus denies having romantic feelings for Phil and then he says that he doesn't think he's “gay, exactly,” but he is “confused” (p. 144). When Kalyn suggests that what he just said sounds pretty gay, he replies, evoking the role-playing tabletop games he and Phil play, “Phil would say, um, that it's too much for one character. I'm already the disabled kid. I have a tragic backstory. The last thing my character arc needs is another complication” (p. 115). Kaylyn responds, “Does it have to be a *complication*?” (p. 115).

This scene between Kalyn and Gus flies in the face of the tropes of earlier LGBTQ+ young adult novels in which characters' sexual orientation—or at least their peers' reaction to it—was treated as a plot complication. In fact, when considering the different intersections of Kalyn's identity that include being the poor, trailer park-dwelling daughter of a convicted murderer, her gayness may be the aspect of her identity that causes her the fewest complications. It's also an unconventional choice for the novel to leave Gus's sexual orientation ambiguous to both him and the reader. In a more traditional YA novel, a character who describes himself as “confused”

about his sexual orientation would have resolved this confusion by book's end. Instead, we see Gus making realistic baby steps in learning more about himself, but he doesn't experience an epiphany about his identity over the course of the story. *Wild and Crooked* is not about the "struggles" of being gay, nor is it a coming-out story. It is about two friends working together to solve a mystery which has been shrouded in lies perpetrated by the rigid social caste system of a small Appalachian town. One of these friends happens to be gay; the other is in the early stages of figuring himself out but seems content to take his time about it.

Even though *The Wild and Crooked* doesn't contain any elements of romance, it is about love, both learning to love oneself and one's family of origin and also loving the friends who become chosen family. Near the end of the novel, Kaylyn realizes there are aspects of her Rose persona in her personality but also in her mother's and grandmother's: "Just because other people only see thorns in us, because for so long *I* couldn't see anything else, doesn't mean we've got no petals" (p. 275). She also says of her friendship with Gus: "I'll say it plain: you can love someone without wanting to fuck them. You can love someone without it being anything more or less than that. I don't know why some people can't see nuances like that, why they can't be happy that some relationships can be crooked but loving" (p. 275).

In its depiction of rural and small-town Appalachia, *Wild and Crooked* shows that not one type of identity is representative of the whole region. There are poor families, like Kaylyn's, rich families like Gus's, and middle-class families like Phil's. There are people with a twang in their voices who drop the final *g* from *-ing* words and people who speak textbook-proper English. There are families, like Kaylyn's, who are accepting of their children's gayness, and families, like Gus's mom's parents, who resort to bullying and conversion therapy. There are those who

use religion for love and those who use it for hate. And yes, there are LGBTQ+ people in rural Appalachia because *there are LGBTQ+ people everywhere*. In her review of the novel in *The Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books*, Kate Quealy-Gainer (2019) describes it as “a savvy contemplation of how identity is formed by a million histories, both small and large” (p. 410). This description can apply to individual identity but to the identity of a region as well.

The most obvious difference between these contemporary LGBTQ+ Appalachian novels and the novels of my youth are that the contemporary novels are both unapologetically LGBTQ+ and unapologetically Appalachian. Young queers no longer have to imagine themselves into a text by reading between the lines like I did as a kid, not always knowing if a story was queer-coded or if I just really, really wanted it to be. These novels and other contemporary Appalachian YA titles also give many rural kids the opportunity to see their people and culture reflected in a story in which the region is depicted with accuracy and complexity. These stories present Appalachia as something more than a hellhole to escape, and the young LGBTQ+ Appalachian characters defy the myth of metronormativity by blooming where they are planted, at least for the time being.

While *Cub*, *If I Was Your Girl*, and *Wild and Crooked* all offer strong depictions of rural Appalachian life for LGBTQ+ teens, it is important to note that they are rare examples. YA novels featuring queer rural Appalachians (or queer rural kids in general) are still scarce, and there is much space on the shelves to fill. There is also a lot of empty shelf space waiting for books that depict rural queer Appalachians (and other rural queer kids) of color. The protagonists of the three discussed novels are all white, as are all the books' supporting characters. It is a huge misconception that all Appalachians are of Scots-Irish descent, and yet there is a dearth of young adult fiction featuring Appalachian or indigenous Appalachian LGBTQ+ characters. Another gap

is in the literature is YA fiction about the children of immigrants who are raised in the region, an experience Neema Avashia explores in her essay collection, *Another Appalachia: Coming Up Queer and Indian in a Mountain Place* (2022). Seeing more Own Voices stories by writers of color would move readers to a more inclusive view of what it means to be Appalachian.

In her book *Doubly Erased: LGBTQ Literature in Appalachia* (2023), Allison E. Carey says that a common theme that emerged in her study was that the work of LGBTQ+ Appalachian writers often addresses “feeling voiceless in an already voiceless region, being outsiders-yet-insiders in a marginalized yet stereotyped culture” (p. 4). To defeat these feelings of voiceless and marginalization, so many more stories need to be told, both to reflect young queer Appalachians’ experiences and, for a wider audience, to dispel long-standing myths about the region.

Guiding Questions

Although this dissertation is mostly creative in nature, it is guided by two research questions:

1. What was my lived experience growing up and growing into a queer reader and writer in rural Appalachia? How did the lack of representation of rural Appalachian LGBTQ+ characters in young adult literature affect me as a queer reader and writer?
2. How has the representation of LGBTQ+ rural Appalachians in young adult literature changed since my youth? What images of the region and regional identity does contemporary young adult literature depict, and do these images combat negative stereotypes of Appalachia and its people?

The first question will be addressed through the autoethnographic creative nonfiction essays and the “Character Development” book responses which make up much of this dissertation. The

second question will be answered in the critical afterword which makes up the last section of this dissertation. My hope is that the journey chronicled in these pages will hold up at mirror that reflects not only my experiences but also the experiences of other LGBTQ+ Appalachian readers and writers.

PART II: ESSAYS

The Purple Duck

“Color the duck *yeller*,” my kindergarten teacher said through clenched teeth. She had seen me raising a purple crayon over my coloring sheet and apparently felt she was stopping a crime against nature. “There’s no such thing as a purple duck.”

I knew for a fact there was such a thing as a purple duck.

The previous spring, after a dreaded visit to the doctor in the next town over, Mom had taken me to the dime store to pick out a reward for what I regarded as my considerable suffering. As soon as we walked into the store, our ears were assaulted with the sound of peeping. When I went to investigate, I found two small pens set up on a tabletop, filled with chicks and ducklings that had been dyed pink, green, and purple to be sold to children as probably ill-fated Easter pets. Was it animal cruelty? No doubt, though my five-year-old eyes couldn’t see past the beauty of the pastel baby birds which, even though I knew it wasn’t true, I imagined hatching from colorful Easter eggs.

I hinted to Mom shamelessly about getting a purple duck, but she explained that it wouldn’t be safe around our menagerie of cats and dogs and steered me to the toy aisle to select a more inanimate prize.

So I knew purple ducks were real. I had seen them. But I was too shy and terrified of my kindergarten teacher who, unlike the gentle kindergarten teachers in children’s books and TV shows, yelled a lot and publicly paddled uncooperative students. Fearing punishment, I set down the purple crayon and picked up a “yeller” one.

My five-year-old self couldn't articulate how simultaneously revelatory and disheartening this experience was. But I think on some level it made me realize I was a purple duck in a yellower duck kind of town.

I didn't know I was queer, but I did know I was different. While I was a chatterbox at home, I was struck shy at school. An adored only child, I was more comfortable with my parents and their adult friends than with other children. I loved books and drawing and elaborate imaginative play, and it was hard to see how my rambunctious classmates could fit into these introspective activities.

The rigid gender roles the other kindergarteners ascribed to also confused me. I was an androgynous child who spent absolutely no time thinking about what girls are "supposed" to do versus what boys are "supposed" to. This flexibility with gender was completely supported by my parents. One day I might run around in a long brunette wig and a metallic purple Harlequin mask, wearing a sheer negligee over my play clothes, pretending to be Catwoman. The next day, I'd be out in the yard barefoot, wearing nothing but a pair of cut-off jeans shorts, as carefree as Huck Finn. As long as I was making my own fun, my parents were happy. This free thinking did not extend to my peers or even the teachers at the school, two of whom I once heard describing me as "peculiar."

I know that in some circles in our small Appalachian town, my parents were considered peculiar, too. They were artists and teachers who had bought and refurbished an Addams Family-style Victorian house which local kids considered too spooky for Halloween trick-or-treating. Both Mom and Dad were first-generation college graduates, my dad having gone on to earn a master's degree. Dad taught English at a small Baptist college, then came home and threw pots at our

family pottery shop, where Mom did hand-building and sculpture and minded the small retail store. Some weekends my parents would pack Dad's light blue VW bug with apple crates full of pottery, and we'd sell our wares at a craft fair in another town or state. I made little clay frogs and turtles and sold them for a quarter apiece, thinking myself quite the entrepreneur.

Books were all over the place in our house. The desk copies of literature anthologies Dad would bring home from work, the best sellers Mom would check out from our tiny library, my personal collection of Beginner Books, Little Golden Books, and Whitman Tell-a-Tale books, plus whatever library books I had checked out that week. There was always a sense that whatever you read in books was alive, and this seemed especially true for my dad, who had a tremendous command of the Western canon. At bedtime, he would often recite me poems from memory, long narrative ones like "Tam O' Shanter" or "The Lady of Shalott." Even before I could read myself, I knew that books weren't just physical objects; what was inside them was something I could carry inside myself, too, in my head and my heart.

With such an idyllic home life, perhaps it was inevitable that school would remain a continual source of disappointment, anxiety, and despondency. As kindergarten dragged on, I developed an "illness" such that around lunchtime, I would get a terrible stomachache and have to go to the girls' room with a long-suffering teacher's aide, where I would throw up. Puking was automatic dismissal for the rest of the day, so once the necessary unpleasantness was over, my mom would pick me up, and the rest of the day would be school-free bliss. This pattern became so entrenched that my mom took me to the doctor who prescribed a "stomach medicine" (which, I learned years later, was a placebo in the form of a mint-flavored sugar syrup). I took the medicine every day before school. I was still miserable, but I didn't puke—a statement which summarizes many

of my school years. I had expected school to be about learning and creativity and fun like my life at home, but instead it was about the kind of social control and conformity that requires all the ducks to be the same color.

Character Development: Dorothy and Ozma

sAs a rural queer kid who knew she was different but could only articulate some of the reasons why, I responded most strongly to characters in books who also felt different, who were searching for or longing for something. I was also drawn to stories in which characters did not conform to gender roles and often formed close, unconventional relationships or chosen families. Queer theorists looking back at my childhood tastes would say I was responding to texts which rejected heteronormativity and embraced homosocial bonding and gender fluidity (Tyson, 2015). They would be correct, but of course as a child in the late 1970's and early 1980's, I would have had no access to or understanding of these terms, some of which hadn't even been coined at the time. I just knew what kind of stories I liked and what kind I didn't.

L. Frank Baum's Oz books were at the top of the list of stories I liked. Certainly, the MGM film *The Wizard of Oz* is famous for being beloved by the gay community, spawning the euphemism of gay men calling themselves "friends of Dorothy." But one only has to read the first two books in Baum's series, *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* and *The Marvelous Land of Oz*, to see that Oz's gay iconic status is not just a result of Judy Garland and movie magic. While it would be silly to suggest L. Frank Baum wrote the Oz books as a gay allegory, his imagined world still lends itself especially handily to a queer reading and is a place where many LGBTQ+ readers feel right at home. The citizens of Oz welcome diversity, are open to chosen family and non-heteronormative relationships, and accept a much wider range of gender expression than was the norm in Baum's day. If Lewis Carroll's Wonderland is a weird place, then Baum's Oz is a queer one.

After the cyclone sweeps Dorothy away from the dull heteronormativity of Kansas and she hits the yellow brick road toward the Emerald City, *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* begins a

good-natured undermining of gender norms. Chapter 3 is titled “How Dorothy Saved the Scarecrow” which already hints at Baum’s unconventional views of gender. Traditionally, a little girl would be depicted as the rescued, not the rescuer, especially not the rescuer of a character who, even though he has just been created by a Munchkin farmer, still presents as an adult male. Dorothy, though, is the hero of the story whose journey follows the trajectory of Joseph Campbell’s hero’s quest. As Tison Pugh observes in the article “‘There Lived in the Land of Oz Two Queerly Made Men’: Queer Utopianism and Antisocial Eroticism in L. Frank Baum’s Oz Series” (2011), “Assuming the masculine narrational role of a questing hero, Dorothy queers the quest narrative from its heteronormative generic foundations” (p. 91). One of Dorothy’s main appeals to me was that she isn’t a princess who sits around and looks pretty while waiting to be rescued; she is in charge of her own destiny.

Dorothy isn’t traditionally feminine, and her traveling companions who turn into her chosen family aren’t traditionally masculine. While literally heartless, the Tin Woodman possesses extraordinary sensitivity. He is frequently moved to tears, even weeping when he accidentally steps on a beetle on the Yellow Brick Road. Ironically, it is his awareness of his lack of a heart that makes him so kind and gentle: “The Tin Woodman knew very well he had no heart, and therefore he took great care never to be cruel or unkind to anyone” (p. 32). Perhaps the character who plays most against masculine stereotype is the Cowardly Lion, who is physically intimidating and possesses great physical strength yet defines himself by his lack of courage. A male admitting that he is afraid flies in the face of gender norms to the point that some might see the admission itself as an act of bravery. Actually, the most traditionally “macho” member of the party of travelers may be Toto.

If Baum's *The Wizard of Oz* goes over the rainbow, then *The Marvelous Land of Oz* flies the rainbow flag. The story, which is less familiar to most people than *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, focuses not on Dorothy but on Tip, a boy who, in the fairy tale tradition, is the non-biological child of a wicked sorceress, Mombi. Lonely, abused, and isolated, Tip "makes friends" by sprinkling some of Mombi's magic "Powder of Life" on two playthings he has created, a Pumpkin-headed stick man named Jack and a crudely fashioned wooden horse called Sawhorse. Jack and his newly minted friends escape Mombi and soon become embroiled in Oz's political intrigue. Throughout the story, gender roles are merrily undermined, friendships border on the homoerotic, and readers are treated to one of the queerest plot twists in the Golden Age of Children's Literature.

The Marvelous Land of Oz plays with gender roles throughout, with General Jinjur and her all-girl army taking over the Emerald City and taking the crown from the Scarecrow who has been acting as ruler since Princess Ozma, the rightful ruler, has gone missing. The gender upheaval in the novel hits its peak when Glinda, the Scarecrow, and friends capture the witch Old Mombi and urge her to tell them where she has hidden Princess Ozma. What follows is the most shocking gender reveal in the Golden Age of children's literature, as Mombi confesses, "I transformed her into...into a boy!" (p. 264). Tip, the boy protagonist who has led readers through the story which up to this point has seemed to be more of a "boy book" than *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, is Princess Ozma. Naturally, he is shocked and protests that he is not a girl. Glinda answers, "You are not a girl just now...because Mombi transformed you into a boy. But you were born a girl, and also a Princess, so you must resume your proper form, so that you may become Queen of the Emerald City" (p. 264). Here one must pause to reflect on what a shocking plot development this would be for a child reader in the early 1900's. I found it so shocking as a

child I had to reread it several times to make sure I was understanding it, and even now, it still packs a punch. Shannon Murphy, in her dissertation examining feminism in Baum's original *Oz* books and in Danielle Paige's contemporary *Dorothy Must Die* series, writes, "The complete change of character is startling for readers as they receive few foreshadowing clues, and this scene is made even more striking because of its reliance on gender presentation" (49). Even for contemporary readers, Ozma's gender reveal seems to come out of nowhere.

Tip is as shocked as readers that he is actually a "she." Before Tip's transformation, he faces some of the same emotional struggles experienced by transgender women. His "son" Jack Pumpkinhead is upset because he won't be able to call Tip "father" anymore. Tip also worries that the nature of his friendships from before his transition will be negatively affected. This concern is quickly laid to rest by the Tin Woodman who says, "...to be honest with you, I've always considered girls nicer than boys" (p. 264). The Scarecrow adds, "They're just as nice, anyway" (p. 264). Tip is anxious about the finality of this transformation and asks Glinda if he can just try being a girl and change back if it doesn't work out. Glinda lets him know that once he is a girl, a girl he will stay. Once Tip's magical gender confirmation is completed, she is indeed Ozma, a beautiful princess who says to her friends, "I hope none of you will care less for me than you did before. I'm just the same Tip, you know, only—only—" (p. 267). Jack completes the thought, "Only you're different!" (p. 267). Jack and the rest of Ozma's friends accept her transformation. And herein lies one of the reasons the *Oz* books were a source of both wonder and solace to babyqueer me. Unlike where I was growing up, in *Oz* difference is not just tolerated; it is treasured. Tison Pugh (2011) writes, "Ozma's magical sex change demonstrates the ease with which sex and gender roles are swapped in *Oz*, and additional examples of gender

switching about” (pp. 91–92). In addition to outright gender switching, Oz is also the site of fluid gender roles such that girls can be conquering heroes and males can show vulnerability.

In Oz, males can also violate traditional gender norms by showing affection for each other, as is illustrated by the depiction of The Scarecrow and the Tin Woodman’s relationship in *The Marvelous Land of Oz*. When the Tin Woodman (whose given name is Nick Chopper) and the Scarecrow are reunited after a long absence from each other, Baum writes, “And then the door burst open and Nick Chopper rushed into their midst and caught the Scarecrow in a close and loving embrace that creased him into many folds and wrinkles” (p. 188). When the Tin Woodman and the Scarecrow pull back from their hug, Nick “held him at arms’ length while he surveyed the beloved, painted features” (189). There is no question from the way their closeness is described that these men love each other. Near the end of the novel, after the Scarecrow has happily relinquished his crown to Ozma, he announces, “I shall return with my friend the Tin Woodman...We have decided never to be parted in the future” (p. 271). The Tin Woodman declares his intention to appoint the Scarecrow as his royal treasurer, and in future books in the series, the Tin Woodman and the Scarecrow are shown living together happily.

Tarzan and Jane

“You want buttermilk or sweet milk?” Nana called from the kitchen while I sat in the cheaply paneled living room watching a *Beverly Hillbillies* rerun with Papaw.

I wanted neither. I didn’t like drinking milk of any kind, but I was raised in the era when Children Should Drink Milk Until It Spews Out of Every Orifice was considered a medical fact, so I said, “sweet” because the only thing worse than sweet milk was buttermilk.

Supper with my maternal grandparents, who lived within walking distance of my house, happened at least once a week. The fare didn’t vary much: pinto beans and cornbread, fried taters, some kind of greens like mustard or turnips. Nana had learned how to cook for a man who was going to work in the mines all day, and her meals sat heavy in the gut, but they were salty and bacon-greasy and delicious. She was a good country cook.

Unlike Mom and Dad, Nana and Papaw didn’t have much formal education. Raised in a coal camp, Nana dropped out of school just before ninth grade to help her mentally ill mother care for the babies that kept popping out at a steady pace. Papaw, who also grew up in a coal camp, quit school at age twelve to work in the mines. But despite their lack of formal education, Nana and Papaw knew a lot; they especially knew how to *do* a lot. Nana excelled at quilting and needlework of all kinds, which she tried—and failed—to teach me due to her impatience with my lack of aptitude. Papaw could fix or build nearly anything. Whenever my dad suggested a new project to him, no matter how elaborate, Papaw would chew tobacco thoughtfully for a few seconds, then say, “Yeah, buddy, I reckon we could do that.”

Perhaps Papaw's greatest gift was the way he related to children. He was one of those rare adults who loves children without looking down on them, who could meet them at their level and enter their world on equal terms. At the IGA grocery store where he worked in the produce department, mothers would often drop their little kids with Papaw so he could entertain them while they got their shopping done. Even though he was in his sixties, Papaw was my only childhood playmate who seemed to become fully immersed with me in my imaginative world. In retrospect, this effect was probably because he let me call the shots entirely and do what made me happy; whereas other kids would want to contribute to or change the game, thus breaking my immersion and activating my control freak tendencies.

For whatever reason, Papaw was the most fun to play with. When I would turn his unfinished basement workshop into a "haunted house" by arranging a stuffed rubber glove so it hung out of his tool trunk like a corpse's hand and rigging a chair with a rope to the rafters so it "floated" unconvincingly, Papaw had the good grace to feign terror and run yelling from the basement. When I became obsessed with the old Johnny Weissmuller Tarzan movies that ran on the early show (not seeing how racially problematic they were, but thinking it would be great fun to swing on grape vines and be surrounded by jungle animals that would do my bidding), Papaw and I played Tarzan and Jane in the back yard, concocting elaborate plots and acting them out. So deep was my immersion that for a while I insisted that my name be changed to Jane, and I would only call Papaw Tarzan, which he gamely answered to. His coworkers at the grocery store started calling him Tarzan, too, thinking it was hilarious, especially since he only stood 5'4".

Nana was less fun and more complicated; however, in her way, she impacted my writer's imagination just as much as Papaw. She didn't play with me, but she told me lots of stories, most

of them morbid. She told me about the coal camp where she was raised, about miners who were injured in cave-ins and other accidents, about women whose babies died. She sang me murder ballads like “Silver Dagger” and “Knoxville Girl” which contained acts of shocking and inexplicable violence.

There is a stereotype that rural Appalachians are a morbid and fatalistic people, and I’ve thought more than once that whoever developed this stereotype must’ve met my nana. I have never known anyone as fascinated by death as she was. Her favorite activity was to go to the funeral home when there was a “viewing.” She would gawk at the corpses of people she knew well and people she knew only vaguely, and she often took me along. In the tacky-fancy, gilt-adorned “viewing room,” she’d take my hand and lead me up to the open casket. The flower arrangements always had a weird perfume-y smell that was different from the flowers that grew in the yard.

Together we’d look at the body. If it was a woman, she’d be in a church dress; a man would be in a suit and tie. The effect was that they were sleeping but in uncomfortable clothing that you’d never sleep in if you were alive. Their skin would be made up in a funny orangey color to mask the pallor of death. Sometimes Nana would take my small hand and touch it to the corpse’s hand so I could feel its cold lifelessness.

Years later, in college, I found myself in a conversation with drinking buddies about whether anyone had ever seen a dead body. I was shocked that most of them hadn’t. During my childhood, it had been an almost weekly occurrence. They were always bodies that had been embalmed and prettied up by a mortician, but that didn’t make them any less dead.

Nana and Papaw were not bookish people. In their small house, the only books were a family Bible, a few popular religious books by Southern Baptist icon Billy Graham and apocalyptic doomsayer Hal Lindsey, and some old Zane Grey Westerns. However, the time I spent with my maternal grandparents shaped me as a writer as much as anything I ever read, Papaw by living with me in my imaginative world, Nana by filling me with dark Appalachian tales and general weirdness. Nana and Papaw's voices—the way they talked—still live with me and come out in my writing. Mom and Dad went to college in a time when it was thought best to strip mountain kids of their accents, idioms, and culture so they could assimilate successfully into the larger world. As a result, their grammar was perfect. Nana and Papaw spoke pure mountain English. Their subjects and verbs rarely agreed, and their speech was full of aints and plums and what in the sam hills. In some ways growing up with my parents' "proper" English and my grandparents' mountain English was like growing up bilingual. I was fluent in two languages, and I loved them both.

Two Truths

I loved my papaw. My papaw was a racist.

That first sentence was easy to write. The second one was incredibly difficult. Even now, looking at those black words on the white screen, I'm tempted to back space over them. But like a lot of Americans in general and Southerners in particular, I am learning that you can't just keep the truths you like and erase the ones you don't.

But first things first. I loved my papaw. I still think about him almost every day, and he has been dead, unbelievably, for almost thirty years. Papaw was a small man, which came with some advantages in the coal fields of Appalachia. Like a boy in a Dickens novel, he started working at the age of twelve, but instead of finding Dickensian employment as a chimney sweep or a boot blacker, he climbed on a cart and took a ride into the blackest of places, a coal mine. Because he never grew much after his twelfth birthday, he became a useful miner who could dig out the coal in tight spaces bigger men couldn't squeeze into. Well-liked by his coworkers and known for his work ethic, he was eventually promoted to foreman. After the mines closed in the 1950's, he struggled to find a way to support his family. For a while, he worked a low-paying job in a gas station. Then, he and his wife and daughter (my mom) moved to Ohio so he could get a better paying job in a tannery. This foray to the flatlands didn't last. My nana was too homesick for the mountains. They moved back home, and eventually Papaw found work in the produce department of a local grocery store. However, he still spoke with pride of his years as a miner, and he was a lifelong member of the United Mine Workers of America.

One of the main reasons I love my papaw is that he helped make my childhood magical. He was one of those special people who had a genuine gift for relating to children on their level without

condescension or sentimentality. Like a lot of budding fiction writers, I was an imaginative child who lived inside the stories I made up, read, or saw. If my imaginary worlds were less real to Papaw than they were to me, he never let me know it. He spoke to the bevy of dolls I called my “children” as if I had given birth to each of them, and if he was making me a peanut butter sandwich for lunch, he made tiny sandwiches for them, too. When I was living in the Land of Oz, he always called me Dorothy. And when I was obsessed with the old Johnny Weismuller Tarzan movies that played on the Early Show, he called me Jane, and I called him Tarzan.

On Christmas or my birthday, I could tell that Papaw took genuine pleasure in seeing my excitement and watching me tear into my presents. But he was there for the small difficulties of childhood, too. If I skinned my knee playing, he cleaned the wound with soap and water and painted it with the dreaded iodine-based “red medicine” that mountain people of his generation swore by. On days I was home sick with a cold or virus, he would come over, sit on the edge of my bed, and play board games with me. Whatever the game, he played by the rules and never let me win on purpose. He said if he made it too easy for me, I’d never learn to be a good player.

But Papaw played by the rules in other ways, too—the rules of the society in which he had been raised. The flip side of his pride in being a miner was that he never acknowledged the personal and environmental exploitation of the coal industry. Even when he was dying from chronic lung disease caused by his years of mining and literally gasping for breath, he said that if, as a young man, he had had the knowledge that it would eventually lead to a slow and painful death, he would still have chosen to be a miner. His views of gender were also typical of his upbringing and environment. While he was always very supportive of all my ambitions, he still believed there were some jobs women couldn’t/shouldn’t do, and while he was a big fan of FDR, he hated

Eleanor because she had once visited the inside of a coal mine, which was “no place for a woman.”

Papaw was a believer in every existing ethnic stereotype, and if there wasn't an existing one, he'd be happy to make one up based on his limited experience. He told a story about how when he was working at the gas station, he dropped a five-dollar bill on the ground in front of the Jewish department store owner who was there buying gas. He said, “And of course, when the Jew saw that money, his mouth took to watering.” He had worked with some Italian immigrants in the mines and observed that “they left chickens out to rot before they'd eat ‘em,” “worshipped Mary,” and “was bad to drink.” When the watermelons came into the produce department at the grocery store where he worked...well, you can guess what ethnic group he said would be “busting through the doors to get at ‘em.” This confused me as a child: didn't just about everybody like watermelon?

The thing about how my papaw relayed these stereotypes is that there was never a tone of anger or bitterness. His observations about Jews or Eye-talians or, his preferred racist slur, “jigs” were delivered as humorous anecdotes, the same way he'd tell you a funny story he heard from one of the fellers at the barber shop.

Since I grew up in the '70's and '80's, a lot of the shows I watched on TV with my papaw and nana featured Black characters and spotlighted social issues. Nana and Papaw laughed at Archie Bunker on *All in the Family*, not because he was a bigoted buffoon but because he was telling the “truth” that other people were too weak or scared to say (Maybe Archie Bunker was the Donald Trump of the 1970's in that respect, but he had the distinct advantage of being a fictional character). Nana and Papaw also enjoyed *Sanford and Son* and *The Jeffersons*, but the way they

laughed at Fred and George was different than the way they laughed at Archie; they laughed at the black characters, not with them. In the late '70's and early 80's, there was a strange fad of sitcoms about wealthy white people adopting adorable, diminutive Black children. Probably because he loved children, Papaw especially enjoyed these shows, but the way he talked about them probably wasn't what the show's producers had in mind. On the days when *Diff'rent Strokes* aired, Papaw would inevitably ask, "Does that little n****r come on tonight?" I winced at that word, but later, Nana and Papaw and I would laugh together when Gary Coleman's Arnold uttered his catch phrase, "Whatchoo talkin' bout, Willis?"

Papaw thought Gary Coleman and Emmanuel Lewis, who starred in the other popular "let's-adopt-a-precocious-Black-child" sitcom, *Webster*, were cute and endearing, and he felt the same way about Black children he encountered in real life. Only a few Black families lived in our little mountain town, but one of them lived just up the street from my grandparents. The two youngest children, Lisa, a girl who was barely school age, and Michael, her preschooler brother, would often walk up to Nana and Papaw's house to "visit," where they would be rewarded with Little Debbie snack cakes from the kitchen breadbox. Their visits always made me uncomfortable because while both of my grandparents were outwardly nice to the kids, I was also aware that their tone with them was different than it was with me or the other white kids in the neighborhood. It was a tone associated with the sort of kindness you extend to someone or something that is worse off or lesser than you. Though Lisa and Michael were well cared for children, Nana and Papaw still fed them Little Debbies the same way they would feed table scraps to the stray dogs that showed up in the back yard. While Nana and Papaw were no one's definition of nobility, their behavior toward Lisa and Michael still smacked of *noblesse oblige*.

There is a spectrum of racism, and my grandparents' prejudice was much less blatant than some other white adults I knew. There was the substitute teacher who asked me why I was jumping rope with the one black girl in my class. When I said, "because we're friends," she asked, "Does your mother and daddy know you play with her?" There was the old man who used to live across the street from Nana and Papaw who got so angry when a young black man walked across his yard without permission that he went into a screaming rage, had a heart attack, and died. While my grandparents were far from progressive in their racial views, they were not in danger of dying from the intensity of their bigotry and hatred.

It's no mystery why I'm reflecting on these things. While no particular part of the country has a copyright on racism, I feel like those of us in the South have a lot to reckon with. Faulkner famously said, "The past is never dead. It's not even the past." Only a Southern writer could've come up with this line. Here, we are surrounded by our past, right down to statues of Confederate soldiers who died for a (thankfully) Lost Cause. As those statues topple, so should the lies white Southerners have often told themselves about our region's history.

But it's hard. Because when we white Southerners acknowledge the history of racism in our region, we also must acknowledge the racism of people whom we love(d) who also love(d) us. Mamaws or nanas or grannies who made us chicken and dumplings and taught us how to crochet hats for our dolls. Papaws or Pawpaws or Grandads who taught us how to play checkers and made us cups of warm milk tanned with a splash of coffee. Cousins we swam with in the summer and had snowball fights with in the winter. My own parents were antiracist, but many parents of my peers were not and would have been appalled to have a daughter like me who wanted to jump rope with her Black friend and whose favorite Saturday daytime TV show was

Soul Train. When white Southerners unconvincingly argue that racism was not one of the primary tenets of the Confederacy, maybe they're not saying this because they feel the need to defend Nathan Bedford Forrest or Jeb Stuart or any other long-dead white Southern "gentlemen." Maybe it's because they're telling themselves that racism isn't a component of the beliefs of people who have held them, laughed with them, cried with them, raised them, or grown up with them. It's hard to reconcile that kind of love with that kind of hate.

Character Development: Mary Lennox

The year I was in fourth grade, I carried *The Secret Garden* with me everywhere I went; I couldn't be physically separated from the book, and I often opened it to random pages and read, as some Christians do with the Bible. What was it about Burnett's book that captured my baby queer imagination? It certainly wasn't the gardening itself, as my black thumb was well established in childhood. Some of the appeal was no doubt the book's "baby gothic" sensibility, with dark and spooky Misselthwaite Manor, with its secrets and mysterious noises in the night. However, there is something deeper in the book that I was responding to; it is a story about children who are different from the norm—"queer," as Burnett calls them—who band together and, like many people in the LGBTQ+ community, form a chosen family and create their own Utopia separate from the fallen adult world marked by a rigid social class system and heteronormativity.

Each of the child characters in *The Secret Garden* is described as "queer" in some way. In her article "Outing in the Garden: Queerness and Queer Space in *The Secret Garden* (2011), Lori N. Brister observes, "The word *queer*, or variations of it, appears in Frances Hodgson Burnett's *The Secret Garden* sixty-one times" (p. 99). Brister does not believe—nor would any other rational person—that Burnett was using the word *queer* in the modern, queer theory sense of the word. However, *queer* is used as a marker for when the characters demonstrate behaviors or show feelings that are unusual for their gender or social class. Mary Lennox, the novel's protagonist, is described as having "queer thoughts" when she is reflecting on her lack of emotional attachment to her now deceased parents (p. 13). Because Mary was brought up by servants while her father worked and her mother socialized in India, she has had an isolated childhood with no other children to play with. As a result, she lacks the social skills and playfulness associated with

childhood. Mary does not fit into clear binaries: She is an English child because her parents are English but she has grown up in India, a product of colonialism and a part of neither culture.

Dickon, the moor boy who becomes Mary's friend and mentor, is also marked by difference. Unlike stereotypical boys of the time, he has a gentle, nurturing nature, caring for orphaned baby animals and helping to plant flowers. When Mary asks Dickon if he can keep a secret about the garden she has "stolen," he replies, "I'm keepin' secrets all th' time," he said. "If I couldn't keep secrets from th' other lads, secrets about foxes' cubs, an' birds' nests, an' wild things' holes, there'd be naught safe on th' moor. Aye, I can keep secrets" (p. 100). Here Dickon establishes himself as different from other "lads" who are rambunctious and destructive. Instead, Dickon has a gentle spirit and wants to protect and preserve nature. It is Dickon's difference that makes Mary respond so strongly to him, to feel fond of him when she has never truly felt fond of anyone before: "Oh, how she did like that queer, common boy!" (p. 118). To call someone both queer and common seems an oxymoron, but Mary is embracing both Dickon's unusual, gentle nature and the fact that his social class is quite different from hers.

Perhaps the queerest child character of them all is Colin Craven, Archibald Craven's invalid son whose mother died in childbirth and who has been kept a virtual prisoner in his room in Misselthwaite Manor. The combination of being bored and isolated and having attentive servants has made Colin into quite the high-maintenance diva. During their first meeting, Colin, lying in bed as he always does, tells Mary about the servants who hover over him, "Everyone is obliged to do what pleases me," he said indifferently. "It makes me ill to be angry. No one believes I shall live to grow up" (p. 126). Like Mary, Colin is a queer child who has been deprived of parental love and the pleasures of childhood. However, Colin differs from Mary in that the

source of his deprivation is the belief of the adults around him that he is terminally ill even though there is no evidence to support this belief. Thus, Colin is also a child who does not fit into binaries. Just like Mary is neither English nor Indian, he is neither sick nor well. Colin is also feminized in his appearance and demeanor, with his long hair and frilly nightgowns, but also with his stereotypically female tendency toward emotionalism and hypochondria. Mary dismisses his worries about his health as “hysterics,” a term that at the time would generally be attributed to a female (p. 168).

Just like Dorothy and her traveling companions in *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, Mary, Dickon, and Colin create their own chosen family, and the garden becomes the safe space where they can make their own world, away from the damaging influences of adult society. While a queer analogy certainly wasn't Frances Hodgson Burnett's intent, it still isn't too much of a reach to compare Mary, Colin, and Dickon's friendship and nurturing of the garden to the way that LGBTQ+ people have banded together and created safe spaces for themselves for centuries.

One of the main appeals of *The Secret Garden* is transformation. Mary, Dickon, and Colin transform the garden into the wonderland it was prior to Colin's mother's death. But in doing so, Mary and Colin also transform themselves—discovering their true natures and healing from the parental emotional neglect and narrow social expectations that have damaged them. They learn to accept and care for themselves and accept and care for other people, in part because of what Colin calls “the Magic”: “The sun is shining—the sun is shining. That is the Magic. The flowers are growing—the roots are stirring. That is the Magic. Being alive is the Magic—being strong is the Magic. The Magic is in me—the Magic is in me. It is in me—it is in me. It's in every one of us” (p. 231). A newly formed child Transcendentalist, Colin has discovered through nature the

spark of the divine that is in everyone. And while it was unintentional on Burnett's part, it is still easy for LGBTQ+ readers to relate to the message of turning one's back on the damaging labels of society and embracing one's true nature.

The 1949 film version of *The Secret Garden* seems to take a moment of inspiration from the film *The Wizard of Oz*. Just as Oz is a Technicolor contrast to black and white Kansas, when Mary escorts Archibald Craven into the transformed garden where Colin is waiting for him, the previously black-and-white film explodes into technicolor. The camera lingers on the lush foliage, on the fully bloomed flowers in every color of the rainbow. This film adaptation takes many liberties with Burnett's book, but in this moment the message very much reflects Burnett's: The gray, restrictive world created by adults is left behind in favor of an Edenic natural world where the only rules are love and acceptance of oneself and others.

Appalachian Anglophile

My upbringing in small-town Appalachia in the 1970's and early '80's was a study in contrasts. My parents were both went to college, but each of them was the first member of their respective families to do so (My mom was a bona fide "coal miner's daughter," and my dad's father had left Eastern Kentucky for factory work in Indiana). Our house, an *Addams' Family*-style Victorian my parents had bought cheap and fixed up, was full of books, bestsellers and classics and desk copies of literature anthologies Dad brought home from his job as an English professor at the local Southern Baptist college. Once I set foot outside the door of the house, though, things were different. Our down-the-road neighbors were prone to fighting and sometimes shooting at each other. The much nicer across-the-road neighbors had two daughters around my age whom I played with frequently, but their small, aluminum-sided house was not like ours. There were no books except for the gigantic family Bible on the coffee table. The TV was always blaring at top volume, and the younger daughter's bed, which her daddy had made for her, was in the shape of the General Lee, the car driven by the Dukes of Hazzard. When I left my neighborhood to go to the local elementary school, there was no obvious place for me to fit in. A daydreaming, androgynous, imaginative child, I was dismissed as strange by students and teachers alike. My relationship with my home region was confusing. I was of the place but different at the same time, at home but also a little lost.

I found myself in books.

Perhaps because our tiny local library was poorly funded, the children's section was stocked mostly with older titles, "classics" and series fiction like the Bobbsey Twins, the Hardy Boys, and Nancy Drew. Eventually, I would become a Nancy Drew fanatic, but as a younger child, I

loved British children's literature with magical components. I adored Mary Poppins—not the prettied-up Disney version (no disrespect to the divine Julie Andrews) but P. L. Travers' prickly, acerbic original incarnation, who openly called out the incompetence of Jane and Michael's parents and used magic to *get shit done*. Even more than the Mary Poppins books, I was crazed for the work of Mary Norton, author of *The Borrowers*, in which tiny people live secretly alongside regular-sized people in a big, old house like the one where I lived, and *The Magic Bed-knob*, in which three children have hilarious magical adventures with Miss Price, a not-always-competent witch-in-training. If someone had told me at that age that I could grow up to be a magical British nanny, that would have been my ultimate career goal.

Another contribution to my pre-adolescent Anglophilia was my utter hero worship of one of my dad's colleagues, Dr. Darcy (a pseudonym), a British Jane Austen scholar who amassed an adoring legion of female undergraduate English majors. I was way too young to be an undergraduate, but I counted myself as one of Dr. Darcy's most rabid fans. Once a month or so, she would come over for supper and regale us with tales of her travels, her British childhood, her multiple marriages. An attractive middle-aged woman, she had Elizabeth Taylor's black hair and English rose complexion, and she dressed more flamboyantly than most women I knew, with big scarves and earrings and red lipstick. Her accent, so clipped and proper and different from my mountain twang, was—I thought at that time—the most beautiful thing I ever heard. I had a huge, hero-worship crush on Dr. Darcy, and she was very kind to me, bringing me little gifts from her travels and saving me stamps from the international mail she received. How could she not like me at least a little bit when she saw the adoration in my eyes and the way I literally sat on the edge of my seat to hear her stories?

Flash forward to the late '90's by which time I had a Master's in English, a published novel, and was living in a queer polyfidelitous relationship with my two partners. I was teaching part-time so I could devote most of my energy writing my second novel and taking care of our four-year-old son. Taking him to a regular checkup, I got into a conversation with the pediatrician about what his kids were reading, and he asked if we had read *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, which had just come out in paperback. He insisted it was so good we should stop at the bookstore on the way home and buy it, which we did (It's never hard to convince me to stop at a bookstore). That afternoon, I started reading the book aloud to Ian, and neither of us wanted to put it down. That night, after he fell asleep, I stayed up and finished it.

The first Harry Potter book had all the wit and magic I loved from the British children's fantasy I had devoured as a kid. Plus, Rowling had a gift for making up her own terminology (Muggles, Squibs, etc.) that reminded me of Tolkien and a way of drawing upon world mythology that reminded me of C.S. Lewis. Also, when I thought back on a lot of the old British magical fiction, the child characters were observers or recipients of the magic, whereas in Rowling's work, the kids, too, were the owners of the magic. From a kid's perspective, this idea seemed way, way better. No need to wait to grow up to be a magical nanny—Go to Hogwarts and learn magic right now! I loved the humor, wordplay, and suspense of the book, but a lot of what drew me into the world of Harry Potter was the sense of longing and lack of belonging I'd felt as a child. Harry's story gave hope to every kid who had felt like they didn't belong. Just as Hans Christian Anderson's unappreciated ugly duckling turns out to be a swan, orphaned, neglected, Muggle-raised Harry turns out to be a wizard and thus is entitled to a life of magical delights.

As soon as Ian and I finished *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, we gobbled up *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* like a hungry basilisk. The wait for *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* tested our patience but was totally worth it; we agreed it was the best in the series to date. Of course, there were the movies, too, which we saw and enjoyed, though they never held the place in our hearts the books did. Since we had started reading the series before the films existed, the cast of characters in our heads was never quite the same as the movie cast, no matter how stellar. Part of the reason my feelings for the Harry Potter series are so intense is because they're tied to my love for Ian; he and Harry grew up together. My younger son, Alec, who came along in 2002, was a casual Harry Potter fan once he got old enough, but Harry Potter was never his chief fandom, and he and I found other pop cultural and literary loves together.

Flash forward again. I write this on the eve of Ian's twenty-eighth birthday, and Alec is twenty and a junior in college. Both have grown into fantastic people. But the sparkle of childhood is gone, and the sparkle from J.K. Rowling has been tarnished because of a series of tweets about trans rights. There's probably no need to rehash the details of Rowling's social media shitstorm, from her "accidental" likes of posts describing trans women as "men in dresses" and supporting a woman who lost her job due to holding anti-trans views, to her undeniably intentional later posts touting the absolutism of sexual dimorphism and waxing snarky about an article that used the phrase "people who menstruate." As one wit on Twitter put it, "Wingardium transphobia!"

I am a fifty-three-year-old queer cis female who has lived in the Bible Belt all my life. I have had people yell in my face, tell me I'm going to hell, and deny me jobs and opportunities because of my sexual orientation. I have known LGBTQ+ friends and acquaintances who have been kicked out of their homes, thrown out of their schools, forced into conversion therapy, fired from their

jobs, and physically and sexually assaulted. I have read Rowling's "defense" of her tweets, and while some of it smacks of disingenuous backpedaling, I want to make it clear that I don't put her in the category of the phobes who commit direct physical or psychological violence against trans people. However, it is undeniable that Rowling has A Thing about refusing to accept trans women as women, and when she starts holding forth on the dangers of giving "men" access to women's restrooms, she sounds as bigoted as the members of the current Tennessee state legislature who, instead of working on solving some of the state's real problems, have turned their attention to banning drag shows.

Compared to Rowling and other bestselling mainstream authors of commercial YA fiction, I am and will forever be small potatoes. But as miniscule as my cultural influence is, whenever I post something on social media or answer a question in an interview, I am aware that I have responsibility about the message I send to readers—especially young readers. I am also aware that the fact that I've written some novels for teens doesn't automatically make me an expert on anything...except perhaps on writing novels for teens. Rowling has been given ample opportunity to back down or tone down her insistence that trans women are not women, but she only becomes more deeply entrenched. It's like everyone is saying "Just don't talk about elephants," and she answers by screaming "Elephants!" even louder. Or, perhaps more aptly, it's like there's an elephant in the room that she keeps loudly insisting is not an elephant.

In a graduate-level children's literature course I took, I was genuinely moved by the pain of the twenty-somethings in the class who had grown up with Harry Potter and now felt betrayed by its author. To my knowledge, none of these students identified as trans, but I kept thinking, what if you were a trans kid who grew up seeing Harry's hero's journey from isolation to self-

acceptance as a metaphor for your own journey? In effect, Rowling has said, “No, these stories are not for or about you.” It’s a heartbreaking thing to consider.

So how do we deal with the fact that Rowling’s injudicious use of the Muggle institution of social media has, Dementor-like, sucked the joy out of her magical creation? I will say that for me, it’s hard to go back and revisit the books without looking for further evidence of Rowling’s biases. Why are nonwhites only minor characters? Don’t the goblins at Gringotts seem a little like Shylock-style Jewish stereotypes? Why did Rowling only out some characters as gay after the series was completed rather than depicting gay characters directly in the books? And why—and I really think I’m onto something here—does Rowling so often use “fat” as shorthand for greedy, selfish, and mean? The part of me that embraced New Criticism as an undergraduate English major wants to say we should just take the books on their own terms, separate of the author’s intent or any biographical information we know about her. However, the New Critics didn’t live in the time of social media, where the creator and their creation are inextricably linked. And once you know about Rowling’s biases, it’s hard not to look for more of them in her writing.

All this being said, I am more in favor of conversation than cancellation. Should teachers have copies of the Harry Potter books on the shelves of their classroom libraries? Sure, if they want to. Should teachers automatically choose the Harry Potter books as the gateway into kids’ reading for pleasure? Absolutely not. That classroom library bookcase should be stocked with plenty of other titles that show that adventures and magic are not just for white cisgender males. Just as white/straight/cis should never be the default setting for characters in literature, handing a kid a

Harry Potter book should not be the default setting for getting a kid to read. There are so, so many good books to choose from.

One more flashback: As I got to be an older kid, I noticed that Mom and Dad's friendship with Dr. Darcy was starting to fray. There were fewer meals and visits together and more phone calls requesting favors: that my parents drive her to the airport in Lexington, that my dad mow her lawn while she was on vacation, that my mom take her elderly Golden Retriever to be euthanized. Friends do favors for each other, but the favors in this "friendship" had become one-sided and also expected, as though my mom and dad were Dr. Darcy's household staff. Later, when my dad was appointed department chair of English, a position Dr. Darcy thought she was more qualified for, the friendship ended completely. Once, hilariously, when speaking to a colleague, she referred to my family as "peasants."

Needless to say, I was not gifted with a trip to England for my sixteenth birthday. Dr. Darcy got another job at a college in a faraway state, and we never heard from her again. She was my first but not last experience of idealizing someone, only to be disappointed. Still, I can remember the tingly, exciting feeling I'd have when she'd visit and we'd sit in the living room, me perched on the edge of the chair hanging on to her every word. Then, I didn't know about her biases or snobbery or other human failings. All I knew was that she told great stories.

Apologetics

The churches where I grew up were mostly varieties of Pentecostal (Church of God Mountain Assembly, Church of God Cleveland Assembly, and various independent churches, also “of God”) and Baptist (Southern Baptist, Free Will Baptist, and Primitive Baptist, which always made me imagine Baptists clad in animal skins who were just learning to use tools). Methodists were regarded with suspicion; after all, they sprinkled when baptizing instead of fully submerging like the Baptists and Pentecostals did. And Catholics—many of them the families of Italians or Irish who immigrated to work in the mines—were not regarded as Christians at all, but as worshippers of the Pope or, even worse because she was a woman, the Virgin Mary.

My parents and I went to the Southern Baptist-affiliated First Baptist Church downtown. Unlike the country Baptist churches, the preacher, who always used the title “Brother,” did not have a hellfire and brimstone preaching style. The music was not the lively Southern gospel sometimes called Jumpin’ Jesus Music, but hymns chosen from *The Broadman Hymnal* sung by the choir, the congregation, or both and accompanied by piano and pipe organ. Unlike Pentecostal services, nobody shouted or spoke in tongues. The services were, in fact, pretty dull. I remember coloring in all the O’s in the church bulletin to fill the time and my mom discreetly doling out Lifesavers from her purse to my dad and me when she sensed we were growing extra restless.

But just because church was dull didn’t mean it was harmless. Even though I was distracted by candy and coloring, I was still soaking in a toxic baptismal vat of white supremacy, sexism, and heteronormativity. It was an all-white congregation, and anyone who has done even a cursory Wikipedia skimming of the history of the Southern Baptist church will know why. Women could teach children’s Sunday school but were forbidden to preach or to take any leadership role in the

church. The Apostle Paul is practically the mascot of the Southern Baptist leadership, and his misogynist words were often spouted from the pulpit. Here are some of Paul's greatest hits, which I remember hearing time and time again:

- But I want you to realize that the head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is man, and the head of Christ is God. (1 Cor. 11:3 NIV)
- Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands as you do to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything. (Eph. 5:22-24)
- Women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the law says. If they want to inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church. (1 Cor. 14:34-35)
- A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. I do not permit a woman to teach or to assume authority over a man; she must be quiet. For Adam was formed first, then Eve. And Adam was not the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner. But women will be saved through childbearing—if they continue in faith, love and holiness with propriety. (1 Tim. 2:11-15)

Well, at least we have childbearing to save us.

I don't want to oversimplify things here. I know that a lot of Paul's beliefs came from his understanding of Judaism, an understanding which would be shared by the Jews of his time.

Also, theologians have pointed out that Paul did commend individual women for their spiritual

strength and that he considered women to be capable of salvation. However, none of these points were brought up during the church services of my youth; instead, it was always the same old propaganda meant to silence women.

That being said, it was women who kept the church going. They cared for and taught the children. They visited the sick and so-called “shut-ins.” They made the casseroles and Jell-O salads and Bundt cakes for the potluck suppers, organized the missionary fundraisers, and herded the children into some semblance of a nativity scene for the Christmas pageants. Also, in the personal relationships I observed, most of these allegedly subservient Baptist women, such as my mom and Nana, took very little shit. There seemed to be a vast female conspiracy going on to make the males feel like they were in charge, with the women doing pretty much what they wanted while loudly disavowing feminism. This inconsistency was one of many I noted during my time as a church girl.

I was a long way from figuring out my queerness during my Sundays at the First Baptist Church. But anything that was said about “homosexuality”—evangelical preachers always drew that word out into such long, hateful syllables—came straight out of Leviticus. As a child, I probably took more notice of the church’s proscription against dancing. My mom, who attended the same Baptist college where my dad now taught, remembered that when she was in the homecoming court, she donned a white ball gown just so she could eat fried chicken at a homecoming banquet...because a homecoming dance would have been a sin. When I heard our preacher denounce dancing as “hugging set to music,” I was confused. I loved hugging. I hugged my family and friends. And I loved music. Hugging set to music sounded nice. Why would it be a sin?

Despite my burgeoning doubts, I did officially join the church by “opening my heart to Jesus” when I was eleven. To be honest, I didn’t open my heart to any deity but instead responded to the enormous social pressure exerted on almost-pubescent children in the church to go ahead and get baptized (perhaps before those naughty hormones kick in). I stood before the whole congregation in a white baptismal robe with just my underwear beneath it. The preacher, wearing a matching robe, announced that he baptized me in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, and fully submerged me in the water of the giant jacuzzi-like baptismal fount. But it was not warm like a jacuzzi—Some might have attributed my gasping for breath when I emerged from the water to the Holy Ghost entering my body, but in fact it was a reaction to the freezing-cold water. I stood, shivering in front of the pulpit, as the adults of the congregation came to shake my hand or hug me and tell me how proud they were of me for letting Jesus into my heart, many of them saying that this was no doubt the happiest day of my life. Except for cold and wet, I felt absolutely nothing.

As an adolescent, I became more and more aware that despite the fear of displeasing Jesus and burning in hell, fundamentalist Christians still struggled with the desires of the flesh. Alcohol was strictly prohibited, but my best friend’s parents, also Baptist, had a wet bar in their den. Sometimes I overheard my mom gossiping on the phone with a friend about who in the congregation was sleeping with whom. Once, on a church youth group trip to see a concert by contemporary Christian singer Amy Grant, a teen couple commandeered the back seat of the church van and made out passionately all the way to Knoxville. The fact that they were lying down in the back seat and panting and moaning made me wonder if they were going “all the way” in another fashion as well. The mom who was driving the church van didn’t say a word to

them. Maybe she was too uncomfortable to say anything, or she figured it was God's job to punish them, not hers.

My first boyfriend was, in the words of the old Dusty Springfield song, "the son of a preacher man." But he was a preacher man himself, too. An eighteen-year-old high school senior, he traveled to little country Baptist churches all around Southeastern Kentucky to deliver guest sermons, wowing the congregations with the fact that not only had he already been called to preach, but he was also a National Merit Scholar and an Eagle Scout. Before he approached me, he had befriended my mom on a field trip she was chaperoning for the high school Gifted and Talented Club. Befriending her first probably seemed like a good idea because the idea of dating me seemed like kind of a hard sell. After all, he was a senior, and I was just in eighth grade. It was an age difference that wouldn't have been significant in adult life, but the developmental differences between an eighteen year old and a barely fourteen year old are pretty vast.

In retrospect, what brought us together may have been that we were both unknowing queers. We were theatre kids who liked to act in plays (I had made a special request to join the high school drama club a year early) and who were singled out as different from our football and cheerleading obsessed peers. John was slender and effeminate, with a breathy, girlish speaking voice that made him sound like a white Appalachian Michael Jackson. He was bullied a lot and would've been bullied more if his Baptist preacher status hadn't formed a cloak of protection around him. Queer or not, he was certainly attracted to me, though perhaps part of it was that my body hadn't developed all its curves yet, and I still cut a somewhat androgynous figure.

Nothing illustrated the Fundamentalists' struggles with desires of the flesh as dramatically as my dates with John, which always resulted in him developing a self-inflicted case of Baptist blue

balls. As soon as we had even a few minutes alone together, he would be on me, with his high school boy Pez Dispenser kisses and his hands under my clothes. But even as he poked and pressed and prodded, he was always making up rules for what was and was not a sin. The Lord didn't mind kissing, and he wouldn't smite us for touching above the waist, both over and under clothing. We could touch each other's legs, too, but laying so much as a fingertip on the area our underpants covered was exiting directly onto the Highway to Hell.

The only sinless way John and I could cover the forbidden territory within each other's chaste cotton briefs was to marry, but even though I was a fourteen year old Kentucky girl, I wasn't the kind of Kentucky girl who married at fourteen. John had it all figured out, though. After we each graduated from college, we would marry and have lots of sex and become missionaries to China, where we would convert godless heathens to the Baptist faith. One thing I had already figured out about myself was that writing was what I wanted to do. Oh, well, I figured, I guess I'll write about being a missionary in China.

The most memorable moment in John's and my quasi-sex life came one afternoon when we were—and this was a rare occurrence—alone at his house. Without the looming presence of parents in another room, his groping and gasping became less furtive and more frenzied. At one point, he pulled away from me and whispered, "I'll be right back." After a few minutes of me wondering what he was doing, he returned dressed entirely in his mother's clothing. We're not talking glamorous drag here—his mom was a Baptist preacher's wife. As a result, his ensemble consisted of a fuchsia and white floral-pattern polyester dress, a white cardigan and white summer sandals, which surprisingly, fit his big feet. His skinny legs were hairy, and he clutched a white patent leather handbag. "Does this turn you on?" he whispered in his feminine voice.

Clearly, it turned *him* on, but it wasn't doing a thing for me. Baptist preacher's wife drag was the opposite of sexy; the outfit reminded me of the "Mama" character played by Vicki Lawrence. But I didn't want to disappoint him. Clearly he was showing me something about himself—something he had probably never felt safe to show anyone else. "Yes," I said, as convincingly as I could (I was a theatre kid, after all).

We made out some more. He particularly dug it when I slid my hand under his dress to stroke his furry thighs.

John broke up with me after he moved across the state for college. Shortly after that, I broke up with the Baptist church as well. I couldn't be contained by the church's narrow confines, and unlike a lot of people who chose to stay Baptist, I wasn't going to pretend I could. My parents soon fell away from attending church as well, relaunching their spiritual lives as open-minded, non-denominational Christians. Once, when I was a junior in high school, I passed a very pleasant hour of homoerotic cuddling and canoodling with the daughter of the preacher who baptized me.

Character Development: Pippi Longstocking

Some critics have suggested that Maurice Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are* marked a major turn in children's literature because its protagonist, Max, is the first child protagonist to be unrepentantly chaotic and naughty without suffering any negative consequences for his behavior. With all due respect to the genius of Maurice Sendak, I would say that another even more unrepentantly chaotic child protagonist predates Max by almost two decades, Astrid Lindgren's *Pippi Longstocking*. When I discovered Pippi as a child, my response was laughter mixed with shock. I was constantly surrounded by authority figures telling me that "nice little girls did not do such-and-such," and Pippi, who at nine years old lives in a house by herself with only a horse and a monkey for companionship, does not give a flying fig what "nice little girls" do or do not do! Pippi does what she wants. She rejects traditional notions of girlhood and all other prescribed social roles besides. Pippi smashes social norms and expectations. Pippi is an iconoclast, an anarchist, a force of nature. Pippi is super queer.

As a young reader, I remember being shocked by Lindgren's initial descriptions of Pippi: The most amazing thing about her was that she was so strong. She was so incredibly strong that there wasn't a policeman in the whole wide world who was as strong as she was. She could lift a whole horse if she wanted to. And she did. She had her own horse that she had bought with one of her many gold coins on the very same day she arrived home at Villa Villekula (p. 10).

I was also surprised by Lindgren's description of Pippi's physical appearance, with her carrot-colored pigtails that stick out on either side of her head, her "odd" dress that she patched together herself, her mismatched stockings, and her gigantic black shoes. Most stories I read as a child described girl characters in terms of their goodness, obedience, and beauty. Pippi was described

as strong, rich, and independent, with unconventional looks and unconventional everything else as well. She can certainly be called a feminist icon, but she's something queerer as well.

In "Pippi Longstocking and the Father of Enjoyment" (2007), Karen Coates, after a brief survey of pre-Pippi children's book, arrives at this conclusion: "To put it bluntly, Pippi queers children's literature" (p. 15). Coates clarifies that she isn't using the word "queer" regarding sexual orientation but rather in the context of queer theory: "Rather than being a generic, more inclusive term for non-normative forms of sexual preference and identity, queerness challenges the very idea of a norm" (p. 16). Pippi's responses to the various episodes in the novel vividly demonstrate her rebelliousness—or maybe even obliviousness—to the existence of norms. When the police come to Villa Villekulla to take her to a "children's home" where she will be cared for, she replies, "I am a child, and this is a home, so it's a children's home" (p. 45). She then begins a campaign of police harassment which consists of her playfully harassing the police. When her straight friends Tommy and Annika convince her to join them at school, she is a complete system crasher. When the teacher asks her how much seven plus five is, she answers, "If you don't know the answer yourself, I have no intention of telling you!" (p. 61). By the end of the school day, Pippi and the teacher mutually agree that Pippi will not be returning. By the time readers reach the chapter titled "Pippi Goes to the Circus," it will come as no surprise that Pippi is not content to just sit in the audience and watch.

The baby queer me read about Pippi's deconstruction of social norms with surprise and delight. The middle-aged queer me still does. While Lindgren may not have consciously written Pippi as queer, it still seems a safe bet that Pippi would be as opposed to heteronormativity as she is to every other system that restricts freedom and fun.

Fatalism and Flamboyance

My mom and I are sitting in the tiny living room of the woman who makes the best fried pies in the county. I'm eleven years old and super stoked because peaches are in season and so we're getting peach pies, not just the usual apple. Mrs. Parrot, the fryer of pies, is an old-school Pentecostal woman. Her hair, which has never been so much as trimmed, is piled on top of her head in "the higher, the hair the closer to God" Holiness hairdo. She wears a modest brown checked dress which covers not just her knees but also her elbows.

Because nothing is a simple transaction in Appalachian culture, especially when in someone's home, this pie purchasing trip has taken on the qualities of a visit, with Mom and me sitting on Mrs. Parrot's couch under the watchful eyes of her velvet Jesus painting, making small talk until she decides to sell us the pies.

My mom looks at an orange, yellow, and brown afghan draped over a chair. The crochet basket sitting nearby signals that it is a work in progress. "That's a pretty afghan you're working on," my mom says.

"I should have it done by Dottie's birthday, if the Lord lets me live," Mrs. Parrot answers.

"If the Lord lets me live" was said casually, as though at any second, the pissed-off God of the Old Testament could easily strike her down. For Mrs. Parrot, this was a given. Her daughter Dottie's birthday was two weeks away, and even though she wasn't that old and didn't seem infirm, she didn't write off the possibility that sometime over the next fourteen days, God might see fit to smite her.

In Amy Tan's novel *The Joy Luck Club* (1989), the character Rose discusses how her life as a Chinese American woman has been shaped by both fate and faith. Growing up Appalachian and queer, I'd say my life was also shaped by two f-words: fatalism and flamboyance. In his presentation on Appalachian fatalism at the 2014 Appalachian Studies Association, J. P. Van Horn defined fatalism as "the doctrine that events are fixed in advance so that human beings are powerless to change them" (2014). I grew up surrounded by this kind of grim determinism in which any references to future events were punctuated with phrases such as "Lord willing," "Good Lord willing and the creek don't rise," or—Mrs. Parrot's favorite—"if the Lord lets me live." Flamboyance—the often queer-coded term for, in the words of the *Oxford English Dictionary*, "the quality of being bright, colorful, and very noticeable"—is a quality I developed as a reaction against the fatalism that surrounded me. I decided I would rather be an exuberant pink flamingo than a doomed chicken waiting for the axe to fall.

I am five years old and in full Dorothy mode. Militant about the fact that the "real" Dorothy's shoes are silver, not ruby red, I am wearing the kitten-heeled silver Springolator sandals my mom saved from when she was in the homecoming court in college. I am sitting on the floor of Nana and Papaw's living room with my poodle (named Toto, naturally), enacting some private, Oz-related drama which necessitates my saying, "Don't worry, Toto. Things will come out fine in the end. They always do."

Nana, sitting on the couch in her ubiquitous blue housecoat, looks up from her crossword puzzle. "Well, that's the foolishhest thing I ever heard," she says. "Nothin comes out fine in the end because we all die. This life is but a vale of tears. And the sooner you learn it, the better off you'll be."

This was some pretty heavy shit for a kindergartener trying to immerse herself in make-believe. But I was used to Nana's morbidity. Her perpetual pessimism formed a protective function. If you always think things are going to come out for the worst, then you'll never be disappointed. Maybe sometimes you'll even be pleasantly surprised, though if Nana was ever pleasantly surprised by anything, I never heard her say it.

If fatalism provides protection against disappointment, it also produces a sort of inertia. Why work toward change or improvement if you're not in charge of your own life anyway? Instead, just grimly and stoically accept the hand you're dealt. Thus, Papaw and Nana's decision, after a brief, ill-fated stint in Ohio, to stay where they'd always lived after the mines closed, even though Papaw could only find a low-paying job at a gas station. Thus, on the other side of my family, my Mamaw Watts staying in a marriage that was always unhappy because that's what women did. Neither set of my grandparents had a happy marriage, but divorce would have never crossed their minds as a possibility, partly because of social stigma, but mostly because of fatalism. This person who drove them crazy was who they were supposed to end up with, and now they were resigned to their fate.

The phrase "God's will" was also used a lot by my Nana and other Appalachian adults I encountered. It was God's will that Nana's first baby, a little boy named Lorne, died of what was probably sudden infant death syndrome. Nana also said that it was God's will that an adorable toddler in our church had been born with defective hips and would have to have extensive surgery. She opined that the little girl's health problems were because God was punishing her parents for going to beer joints. This baby-killing, pain-inducing God was hard for me to

reconcile with the fact that I was perpetually being told that God loved me, his creation, and all the people in it.

Even when I was little, I knew I didn't want to be buffeted around by forces beyond my control. I wanted to make choices. And I wanted them to be choices that made me happy—not like when Nana asked me if I wanted buttermilk or sweet milk, and I chose sweet milk because it was the less nasty of two nasty choices. I wanted the kind of choices where there were lots of options and most of them were good, like when we went to Baskin-Robbins on the way to visit Mamaw and Papaw Watts, and I got to choose from rainbow of thirty-one ice cream flavors.

Most of all, I wanted to choose the kind of person I would be and the kind of things I would do. So far, most of my role models had been fictional: Dorothy, Glinda, Ozma. Strong, decisive females who were also very glam. But then, courtesy of my grandparents' enormous, wood-framed, clunky piece-of-furniture TV set, I saw a real person who also embodied those qualities, who had her own voice and spectacular flamboyance, all born from an Appalachian upbringing with more than its fair share of fatalism.

Dolly Parton held the underappreciated title of “the girl singer” on *The Porter Wagoner Show* from 1967-1974 (cite). Porter, described as “The Thin Man from West Plains,” knew a little bit about flamboyance himself. Sporting a peroxided pompadour and sequined, candy-colored Manuel suits, Porter would sometimes give a campy, knowing smile and eye roll in the middle of a song. He was the closest thing country music had to a glam rocker. I was a big fan of Porter, his songs, and his suits, but when Dolly appeared onscreen, it was something else altogether.

I am five years old with a belly full of beans and cornbread, sitting on the floor in front of the TV, practically resting my eyeballs against the screen, because The Porter Wagoner Show is on, and soon I know I will see Dolly. Tonight, Porter is wearing a spectacular purple suit decorated with multicolored designs that remind me of the pinwheels they sell at the dime store. An enormous rhinestone brooch sparkles at his throat. He introduces Dolly in an affectionate but condescending tone as “one of the prettiest, singin’-est, songwritin’-est little blondes in country music.” I inch even closer to the screen.

Dolly is wearing purple tonight, too...an orchid jumpsuit with flared sleeves and bell-bottomed legs, studded with silver sequins and accessorized with a silver sequined belt. It looks like a feminized version of something Elvis would wear, but it’s hard to tell if the suit itself is feminine or if it’s just feminized by Dolly’s curvy hips and the ample bosom that launched a billion double entendres. Her hair (a wig, but I don’t know that) is huge, shiny, and Barbie doll blonde. Her eyelashes are long, thick, and sooty, and her purple eyeshadow matches her jumpsuit. Her lips are a frosty strawberry ice-cream pink.

“You know, I think she’d be prettier if she didn’t wear all that warpaint,” Nana says from the couch. Her only cosmetic concessions are powdering her nose and smearing on a little rose-colored lipstick when going to church.

“Well, you know what they say,” Papaw says, chuckling. “A little paint on any old barn...”

But it’s clear that Dolly isn’t any old barn. If you scrubbed off all the makeup, took off the wig, and put her in the kind of modest dress a Holiness woman would wear, she would still be beautiful. The magical smile, the dimples, the cute little nose, the sparkling eyes, not to mention

the whole situation going on below her neck. But five-year-old me can't agree with Nana that she'd be prettier undecorated. I like plain cake, but it's not very exciting compared to a birthday cake covered in frosting and sprinkles and lit candles. Dolly is like a human birthday cake.

And then the music starts. It's "Jolene" in its ominous-sounding minor key, and Dolly's voice is full of pain but also determination as she begs the titular character not to take her man. The words are puzzling to me because, being literal-minded, I can't imagine how this Jolene person could possibly be more beautiful than Dolly. What could Dolly's husband be thinking? If I were her husband, I'd never take her for granted that way.

There is one thing about the song I fully understand, though. Dolly **wrote** this song. It's **her** song, and she gets to perform it on TV and onstage and record it so people can listen to it whenever they like.

My childhood feelings for Dolly were complex. I had a huge crush on her, of course. But I also wanted to be her. It certainly wasn't going to happen, looks-wise...no woman in my family was over a B cup. And even at five, I knew I couldn't carry a tune in a bucket. But I felt Dolly's creative drive, and there was a creative drive inside me, too.

Raised a generation before me in crushing poverty in Sevier County, Tennessee, Dolly had a much larger dose of Appalachian fatalism than I did. Her early songs feature a disproportionate number of dead children and babies, probably inspired in part by the infant baby brother she lost when she was a little girl. But even as she endured tragedies, she didn't embrace fatalism and instead used the drive within her to create herself as the kind of person she wanted to be in addition to creating enduring music and positive social change. I may not have had the

vocabulary to describe her yet, but at five I knew what is still true—Dolly is fierce, fabulous, and flamboyant. I was amused a few years back when I started seeing t-shirts and bumper stickers with the slogan “WWDD” (What Would Dolly Do?) because it was a question I had been asking for decades.

* * * *

The 99-cent bargain bin at the Kmart in Corbin, Kentucky, just about saved my life.

I was a high school sophomore. It was my first year attending the tiny Catholic school, which served as a sort of Island of Misfit Toys for kids who had been bullied or shunned or had gotten into trouble at the area’s public schools. I had been bullied some at my public high school but mostly shunned. Many school days passed without me speaking or being spoken to, and I fell into a profound depression such that my parents worried about my wellbeing. St. C wasn’t perfect, but it was better. The nuns didn’t put up with bullying or shunning and maintained the sensible rule that while everybody might not be friends, everybody could at least be civil.

I had cast off my Baptist upbringing by that time and had adopted a flamboyant fashion style which stayed within the letter but not the spirit of the school’s dress code: rings on every finger and lots of sparkly jewelry hanging from everywhere it could be draped, black kohl eyeliner and purple Wet ‘n Wild lipstick, vintage thrift-store dresses, and Chuck Taylor high tops. None of this would have been shocking on a city kid, but in conservative Southeastern Kentucky it was positively scandalous.

I had also—in part because of my conversion from religion—gotten more seriously into listening to music. I had tossed out my Amy Grant cassettes and replaced them with Culture Club, the

Eurythmics, and Prince. I loved—and still love—these artists’ music, but I was also entranced by Boy George’s, Annie Lennox’s, and Prince’s gender-bending styles. Whenever I read interviews with contemporary rock stars I liked, they invariably named David Bowie as an influence, but except for his ‘80’s stuff, I hadn’t heard any of his work. It was the dark period when all his ‘70’s albums were out of print, and I longed to hear him, to know why he was the hero of so many of my musical heroes. It’s strange to think about, in these days of the internet and on-demand streaming, how much time I spent in my teen years longing for music I might never hear and movies I might never get to see.

But this afternoon in the Corbin Kmart, as I pored over the cassette bargain bin, riffling through the dregs of Cristy Lane and Boxcar Willie, I saw a title on the side of a tape that made me gasp out loud: *The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars*. I blinked hard and did a double take like a cartoon character. How could *this* be *here*? And then I snatched it up as if the store were full of people itching to fight me for it.

I listened to *Ziggy* on my headphones, wearing my bikini and “laying out in the sun,” as everybody called it, which was ironic given Ziggy’s famed “snow-white tan.” But it was the ‘80’s, when even Bowie was bronzed. I enjoyed the first couple of tracks, “Five Years” and “Soul Love,” but it was track 3, “Moonage Daydream,” when Ziggy personally spoke to me, seemingly literally, describing himself as an “alligator,” a “mama-papa,” and a “space invader” who’d be “a rock ‘n rolling bitch” for me. By the time I hit Mick Ronson’s soaring sci-fi guitar solo, I was transformed.

Or maybe I wasn’t. Maybe I was the person I’d always been, but now I saw things about myself I hadn’t seen before.

I had seen photos of Bowie in Ziggy mode—the skin-tight glittery bodysuits, the shock of orange hair, the makeup that accentuated his mismatched eyes and prominent cheekbones and added color to his astonishing pallor. As I listened, I closed my eyes and imagined this androgynous space oddity singing to me. In my mind, I saw Ziggy, and Ziggy saw me. After I listened to the Side A, I flipped the cassette—and my sunbathing carcass—to Side B.

I had always had a sense of the theatrical and loved sparkles and bright colors and jewelry. As a little girl, I loved looking at Dolly and Cher with their sequined dresses and shining hair and big, dangly earrings. But I was a girl. It was expected for me to like these things. On the surface, this love of glamor was no different from little girls of today who express cultlike devotion to their favorite Disney princess.

But there was more going on than what was on the surface.

* * * *

My first crush was on a woman sixteen years my senior. I was four years old.

My parents have taken me to watch a dress rehearsal of **Cyrano De Bergerac** at the college where Dad teaches. The director, a bearded, deep-voiced theatre prof who reminds me of Orson Welles in the wine commercials on TV, has graciously agreed for me to attend. The play is the best, most exciting thing I've ever seen. I love Cyrano and his long nose and sharp quips, even if I don't understand them all. I am dazzled by the swordplay. But however great these things are, they're not what sets my heart aflutter.

I've never seen anyone so beautiful as the actress playing Roxanne. Her blonde hair is in a partial updo, forming a waterfall of cascading curls. She's wearing a light blue silky floor-length gown with matching evening gloves and a glittering rhinestone necklace with matching earrings. She has an enchanting beauty mark on her face (makeup, but I don't know that yet) and a stunning décolletage. I've only seen cleavage in TV and movies, and I can't stop staring at it. It's a wonder Roxanne doesn't stop the rehearsal to say, "My eyes are up here, kid."

For weeks after seeing the play, I swoon around the house obsessing over Roxanne almost as much as Cyrano did. I love just saying the name. The student actress who plays Roxanne, it turns out, is enrolled in one of my dad's British literature classes. He asks me if I'd like to meet her. The mere possibility flabbergasts me almost too much to speak, but I finally get out a "yes, please."

A few days later, I go to campus with my dad and sit in on his British lit class. It's always fun listening to Dad read and discuss poetry, but all the time, I'm scanning the classroom and thinking, where is Roxanne?

Once class is over, Dad comes up to me with a college girl wearing jeans and a sweatshirt. Her face is bare, and her ash blonde hair hangs loose around her shoulders. But when she smiles at me, I see that she's my Roxanne after all. She's like a princess disguised as a pauper. "I made you something," she says.

She hands me a piece of red construction paper that has been cut in the shape of a heart. Printed in black magic marker is "To Julie with love from Roxanne." She has written something in cursive below it—presumably her real name—but I can't read cursive yet. She squats down on

my level and kisses my cheek. I've never been kissed by anybody outside of my family. My face heats up, and I'm suddenly so shy I feel like I might never speak again. For the first time, I am struck silent in the face of feminine beauty and kindness.

My early love of glamor wasn't just about being a girl. It was about loving other girls while still being a girl myself. The older I got, the more I realized how different these feelings made me.

* * * *

As teenaged me lay in the sun with my headphones on, Ziggy gave voice to some of my unexpressed feelings about sexuality and gender. Ziggy was both masculine and feminine. He was the weary but insatiable cocksman of "Suffragette City," but he was also Lady Stardust. He could be both or neither; he was a creature of his own creation. I started trying on the word *bisexual* in my head, though I would be in college before I said it out loud to anyone to describe myself.

Subsequent obsessive listening to *The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars* behind the locked door of my bedroom revealed that Ziggy's flamboyance was paired with a fatalism that, while not Appalachian in origin, still felt familiar. The first song on the album, "Five Years," describes a dying earth with a mere five-year shelf life. The last song, "Rock 'n Roll Suicide," chronicles Ziggy's decline and death. But in between those two tracks is a whole life of flamboyant decadence and creative genius. Over time, the album helped me make sense of the role of fatalism in my life. Were we all going to die at a time that was not determined by us, just like my nana and all her morbid Appalachian lady friends said? Of course. Did this fact

mean that life on earth was just something we suffered through so that we could go to a better place once we died? I decided that one was a big no.

So little of what I read and saw in the media reflected my feelings and experiences, but Bowie opened a gate which granted me access to other musicians who flamboyantly smashed heteronormative expectations: Lou Reed, both as a solo artist and with the Velvet Underground, Iggy Pop, Patti Smith. All these artists had been producing great work in the country music-dominated days of my childhood, when I had been watching the Thin Man from West Plains instead of listening to the Thin White Duke. But country music, which grew from the hills and the hollers like I did, was part of who I was, too, embodied most spectacularly by Dolly Parton. I have no idea if Bowie and Dolly ever met each other, but if they did, I'm sure they had a delightful conversation, probably covering favorite music, songwriting techniques, and fashion accessories. Both of them showed me, contrary to the fatalistic murmurings of my Appalachian elders, that life is what you make it, and you might as well make it bright and loud and colorful, and while their creative genre is different than mine, both rank high in my personal pantheon of artists who showed me what is possible.

The Watts Line

Words you have put into print take on a life of their own. Publications, no matter how small or obscure, never die. That's why I wasn't as surprised as I probably should have been when a woman browsing my table of titles at the Kentucky Book Festival said, "You're 'The Watts Line' girl, aren't you?"

That's me. Or rather, that was me when as a high school student in Corbin, Kentucky, I wrote a weekly entertainment column for *The Corbin Times-Tribune*. I'm still not sure why the newspaper's editor, a cigar-chomping Appalachian version of Lou Grant, agreed to let a fourteen-year-old contribute to his publication. He had gone to high school with my very pretty mom. Maybe he had a crush on her. Or perhaps he had been amused by my confidence when I pitched the idea to him. He had nothing to lose. *The Times-Tribune's* pitiful weekend entertainment supplement consisted only of TV listings and a few syndicated filler pieces.

It was probably an act of adolescent hubris to think I could produce a weekly entertainment column in Southeastern Kentucky, which is not exactly a mecca of popular culture. Movie reviews were the staple of my column, yet within easy driving distance there were only two movie theatres (one with only one screen) which changed movies every three weeks. In the best of times, my parents would drive me to Knoxville or Lexington for a play or concert which I'd review. In the worst of times, when I'd seen all the movies at the nearby theatres and had no prospect of leaving the immediate region, I'd trudge to the video store (which, for the record, also had a tanning bed) and select a VHS tape from the new releases.

To truly do this essay justice, I suppose I should rummage through my messy garage for the box filled with my old "Watts Line" clippings and revisit the writing of my teenaged self. But I'd

rather not. “The Portrait of the Artist as a Young Woman” seen in those columns makes me wince. As a young writer, I showed promise but no restraint. I never passed the opportunity for a pun or what I thought at the time was a witty aside. Under all the Dorothy Parker Wannabe witticisms, I see a lonely kid who masked her insecurity with arrogance, who aspired to bohemianism without fully understanding it, who wanted to be an iconoclast but with every breath was screaming, “Like me! Like me!” I also see someone who doesn’t know herself nearly as well as she thinks she does, especially when it comes to her sexuality. Honestly, was I in such deep denial that I convinced myself that I had a crush on Bruce Willis? *Moonlighting* Bruce Willis, mind you, not *Diehard* Bruce Willis. But still.

While it’s easy for middle-aged me to laugh at the teenaged smartass I was then, I have to say that the years I spent writing “The Watts Line” taught me some lessons that are still with me today. The first and most important was to sit down and write, no procrastination and no excuses. My copy was due on Wednesday afternoon so it could make the weekend edition. I got it done no matter what school or extracurricular activities I had going on. Sometimes I’d be writing about something amazing I couldn’t wait to tell people about, a play or concert I’d caught out of town. Many other times I had nothing to write about but a mediocre movie I’d watched on the VCR while gorging on Doritos. Not inspiring, but I wrote anyway.

I know a teenager hammering out a movie review isn’t the same as a real writer laboring for hours over a story, poem, essay, or play. But writing every week still demystified the process for me thanks to the power of the deadline. I had to write my column. They didn’t pay me \$20 a week for nothing. So I did. My small experience with newspaper work made me remarkably un-

neurotic about writing. Some days produce better quality writing than others, but I never have trouble with the act of sitting down and working.

Other than the writing itself, the greatest pleasure I got from “The Watts Line” was having readers—not just my parents, but people who didn’t have to read my work because they loved me. Periodically, I would get “fan mail” sent care of *The Times-Tribune*. Often these readers expressed astonishment that “The Watts Line” was written by a teenaged girl (As an adult, I am astonished by their astonishment; I might as well have been dotting my i’s with hearts). Kids at school who never took notice of me otherwise asked me about—and often argued with me about—my columns. A disparaging comment I made about David Lee Roth caused me a few particularly dark school days, but at least I was being shunned for my written opinions and not for something stupid like my shoes.

The most surprising piece of “Watts Line” correspondence came after I reviewed a Neil Diamond concert I’d seen in Knoxville with my mom for Mother’s Day. In the column, I praised Diamond’s talent but poked fun at his (to my eyes then) aged female fan base and his propensity for displaying his graying chest hair. I have no idea how a copy of *The Corbin Times-Tribune* found its way into his hands, but Diamond himself wrote me a charming note in which he called my wise-ass comments “fun and funny and true.” The note was signed “your fan, Neil Diamond.” I still have it.

Cranking out “The Watts Line” every week was a good introduction to the writer’s life, both because of the steady writing habits it instilled and because of the reader response that made a lonely artistic type feel less lonely. And come to think of it, that twenty bucks a week may have been the steadiest income I’ve ever earned from my writing alone (It also allowed me to have an

enviable collection of Chuck Taylor All-Stars). And so while I don't want to look at any of my old columns any more than I want to look at pictures of myself in braces and big eighties glasses, I know that being "The Watts Line" girl helped shape me into the writer I am today.

Character Development: Harriet M. Welsch

While all the previous titles explored here have implicit gay subtext, one title has such explicit subtext that it's not subtext at all. Louise Fitzhugh's 1964 novel *Harriet the Spy* is the work of an author who, to those who knew her, made no secret of her lesbianism. Fitzhugh preferred the name Willie to Louise and, according to her close friend, ex-lover, and fellow author Sandra Scoppettone, Fitzhugh "was always out. She wore little men's suits. So there wasn't any question" (Scoppettone quoted in Bernstein, 2001). Harriet M. Welsch, Fitzhugh's creation and possible child alter ego, is a writer in the making but also a queer in the making. It is no wonder that according to Bernstein (2001), many girls who read *Harriet the Spy* as children count it as a milestone in the process whereby they discovered and accepted their sexual orientation as lesbians" (para 12). What is it, then, about this wealthy Upper East Side control freak that holds up a mirror so that baby dykes can see themselves?

We can start with Harriet's appearance. Though she wears the required uniform at her fancy private day school, when she gets home, she puts on her "spy clothes" which include "an ancient pair of blue jeans, so old her mother had forbidden her to wear them, but which Harriet loved because she had fixed up the belt with hooks to carry her spy tools" (p. 41). The rest of her ensemble consists of an old blue hooded sweatshirt, a pair of ratty sneakers rescued from the garbage, and a pair of lens-less black glasses which Harriet thinks make her "look smarter" (p. 41). Adult queer readers will recognize Harriet as a well-equipped utility dyke, but even to non-queer readers, it should be obvious that Harriet's chosen outfit is not typical little girls' wear for 1964. She dresses for practicality and to feel like herself...not to fulfill anyone else's expectation of what is pretty or appropriate. Fitzhugh, in her "little men's suits," probably followed a similar sartorial philosophy.

Harriet's status as a queer icon goes much deeper than her clothing choices, however. Her status as a "spy" who writes down her often brutal observations about adults is a way for her to enact her queerness. Harriet writes from a queer position; she is "other" than the adult (read, straight) people she spies on, and she is often disgusted or horrified by their foibles. Of a rich lady who lies in bed all day, Harriet writes, "HOW DOES SHE PAY FOR ANYTHING JUST LYING THERE? I GUESS SHE JUST LIVES ON HER HUSBAND'S MONEY. DOES MY MOTHER MOOCH OFF MY FATHER? I'LL NEVER DO THAT" (p. 46). When Harriet spies on her beloved nanny, Old Golly, who is acting uncharacteristically giggly and girlish while out on a date with her boyfriend, Harriet writes, "LIFE IS A GREAT MYSTERY. IS EVERYBODY A DIFFERENT PERSON WHEN THEY ARE WITH SOMEBODY ELSE? OLE GOLLY HAS NEVER BEEN THIS WAY. I WONDER IF PEOPLE ACT LIKE THIS WHEN THEY GET MARRIED" (p. 97). Often, the child "spy" both puzzling out and judging adult behavior sounds like a queer "spy" puzzling out and judging heteronormativity.

Harriet experiences two traumas over the course of the novel. The first is that Ole Golly, whom Harriet is much closer to than her emotionally distant and self-involved parents, marries and leaves her position as Harriet's nanny. The second comes when her classmates get their hands on her notebook and discover the judgmental things that she has been writing about them. They outmatch Harriet's often cruel comments with their cruel behavior, bullying her and turning her into an outcast. Even her best friend, Sport, a boy who exhibits both traditionally male and female behaviors, turns his back on Harriet. Like many bullied queer kids, Harriet becomes depressed but will not open up to her parents about what's happening. When her mother asks her, "Honey, is something bothering you?" Harriet's one-word response is "No" (p. 235). When Harriet's parents finally take her to a psychologist, he suggests that she write Ole Golly about her

problems. Ole Golly suggests that in re the notebook situation, she needs to learn both how to apologize and how to occasionally lie to spare people's feelings. She ends the letter by saying, "You're eleven years old which is old enough to get busy at growing up to be the person you want to be" (p. 278). It is a message telling Harriet to be her (queer) self but also reminding her that she has to learn to live in a world full of people who are different from her. By the end of the novel, Harriet, who has begun a journalistic career with the sixth-grade newspaper, has found an appreciative audience for her work and has become more empathetic. She writes in the newspaper,

THIS PAGE WISHES TO RETRACT CERTAIN STATEMENTS PRINTED IN A CERTAIN NOTEBOOK BY THE EDITOR OF THE SIXTH GRADE PAGE WHICH WERE UNFAIR STATEMENTS AND BESIDES WERE LIES. ANYONE WHO SAW THESE STATEMENTS IS HEREBY NOTIFIED THAT THEY WERE LIES AND THAT A GENERAL APOLOGY IS OFFERED BY THE EDITOR OF THE SIXTH GRADE PAGE (p. 296).

As a baby queer reader and writer, I reread and re-reread *Harriet the Spy*. Even though she was rich and lived in New York City, she still reflected my emerging identity and inner conflicts. As I reread it for this essay, I was still astounded by the novel's psychological complexity and Harriet's emerging queer identity. I still relate to Harriet the curmudgeonly baby dyke, even in middle age. Clearly, many other queer readers over the years have felt the same way, making Fitzhugh's book a knowingly coded classic.

Rise of the Cryptids

The Appalachian region claims a disproportionate number of cryptids, those mysterious creatures which have been identified by witnesses, often under the darkness of night and sometimes under the influence of substances: Mothman, the Skunk Ape, the Hopkinsville Goblins, the Flatwoods Monster. Growing up in rural Appalachia in the 1970s and '80s, LGBTQ+ people, when they were discussed at all, were discussed like cryptids, as mysterious, shadowy beings who because of their extreme *otherness*, were objects of fascination and fear.

Just like with cryptids, the “facts” about LGBTQ+ people were based on second- or third-hand accounts. So and So’s first cousin had seen that bagboy from the IGA parked in his truck out by the lake with another boy, and they had been *kissing*. And you remember X, who moved Up North after high school? Well, So and So saw her in the dollar store, and she was dressed just like a man and was with some woman who looked about as mannish as she did.

But here’s where my cryptozoology analogy gets a little shaky. As a kid, when I heard these *sotto voce* bits of gossip about LGBTQ+ people, the mixture of fascination and fear I felt was because I feared I might be “one of them” myself. Surely no kid, when hearing adults talk about how scary and gross the Skunk Ape is thinks, *But what if I grow up to be a skunk ape?*

* * * *

“That Cricket Needham is funny turned,” my nana said over our beans and cornbread one evening. This comment was in response to the fact that Cricket, the adult son of the most prosperous funeral home director in our town, liked to parade down Main Street wearing a white

ermine jacket and thigh-high ermine boots, his hair bleached Barbie blonde, his face aglow with bronzer.

My nana wasn't the only person who noted that Cricket was funny turned, but while people talked behind his back, they didn't say anything to his face because he was from the richest family in town, and in small-town life, the caste system trumps all other prejudices. I was pretty little when I first saw Cricket turning Main Street into his own fashion runway, and while I was still pretty vague on what "gay" meant, I found him fascinating and fabulous.

My second encounter with a hometown homo came in eighth grade, when the powers that be decided that since I was "gifted," I should be placed in a special algebra course (Never mind that I wasn't gifted *in math*). My teacher was Miss Lois Swafford. She emphasized the "Miss" by saying, "I am a *Miss* because I have been *missed*." Miss Swafford looked like a caricature evangelicals might draw to warn young women about the dangers of lesbianism. Or its fashion dangers, anyway. She wore a self-inflicted mannish haircut and men's aviator glasses. Her favorite outfit, based on the frequency with which she wore it, was a powder-blue polyester leisure suit, with an accompanying faux-silk polyester shirt, the long collars of which spanned the width of her broad shoulders. The ensemble was accessorized with a Western belt with a saucer-sized buckle and roach-stomping cowboy boots.

I was tolerant of Miss Swafford's sartorial eccentricities as I was developing a few of my own, but for some reason I got along as badly with her as I did with...well, algebra. Maybe her systematizing brain was frustrated by my creative, chaotic one. Or maybe it was gaydar—that she knew I could see her queerness just as she could see mine, that like calls out to like. Or in this case, dyke calls out to dyke. In a more open, inclusive atmosphere, this kinship might have

turned into a mutually fulfilling mentor-mentee relationship, but in small-town Southeastern Kentucky, it turned into animosity. Recognition was dangerous.

I should add that while I recognized her for what she was, at the age of fourteen, I was nowhere near recognizing myself. This was the period when I was still regularly attending church and dating the Son of a Preacher Man.

While Cricket and Miss Swafford were my most vivid “cryptid encounters,” I was also privy to secondhand anecdotes. My parents, for the time and place, were not homophobic but still regarded “homosexuals,” as they called them, as exotic and *other* simply because they hadn’t been exposed to much gay culture. They were aware of the existence of these cryptids and regarded them with curiosity and surprise but not with fear or hatred.

Still, the stories about gay faculty members and students at the Baptist college where my dad taught were unsettling. One story, over a decade old by the first time I heard it, focused on a closeted gay art professor who received an anonymous note from an “admirer” who suggested they meet at a certain address on a back street. The “admirer’s” note said the professor would recognize him because he would be wearing a white carnation as a boutonniere in his sportscoat. When the professor arrived at the designated place at the designated time, he was greeted by the college’s entire basketball team, all of them wearing white carnations in their sportscoats. They proceeded to mock and laugh at the professor, who drove away as quickly as possible. At the college, this was treated as funny story about how those lovable scamps on the basketball team pulled a great practical joke on the old queer. There was no thought given to how scared and humiliated the professor must have felt. Though they didn’t, the athletes could have very easily dragged him out of the car and beaten him up. Even after the professor drove away, I can’t

imagine that he felt safe. With the knowledge that so many students knew what he thought was a secret, he surely feared more harassment, beatings, being fired from his job.

Stories about students at the college who were caught engaging in “homosexual activity” always ended in their expulsion. When I heard my parents talk about these cases, they didn’t seem to approve of the kids getting kicked out of school, but the rationale was that it was a Baptist college. If students weren’t allowed to dance or drink or have opposite-sex dorm room visits unless the door was wide open, what did you think would happen if you were a boy who got caught in the same single bed with another boy?

People who claim to have seen Mothman or Bigfoot generally express terror. But we never get to hear the cryptids’ accounts of their encounters with the gawking, screaming humans. Maybe the cryptids are even more terrified than the “regular people” who report seeing them. Maybe this fear is the reason that cryptids are so rarely seen...because the “regular people,” with their unfounded fear and prejudice, have forced them to hide in the shadows.

* * * *

It wasn’t just the region that made me anxious about the kind of creature I might be. My glimpses into the larger culture showed either no reflections at all or distorted funhouse mirror ones. As a little kid, I was drawn to picture books where characters disrupted gender norms: Munro Leaf’s sensitive, pacifistic, flower-sniffing Ferdinand the Bull, Arnold Lobel’s cozy queer-coded amphibian pair Frog and Toad. As an older elementary school student, I was obsessed with Nancy Drew, she of the titian hair and blue roadster and strangely dangerous lifestyle. Escaping into Nancy’s exciting life was intoxicating, and I largely ignored her

relationship with her boyfriend Ned Nickerson (as did Nancy, a great deal of the time) but was obsessed with her best friends Bess and George. Bess and George, though cousins, present like a butch/femme couple. Much is always made of what a tomboy George is, and Bess is full-figured and sensual, a great enjoyer of the food that is always described so lavishly in the novels.

And of course, I loved the queer-coded characters in various classic works of children's literature, from Ozma to Pippi to Harriet. But I wasn't really cracking the code. There were things about these characters I was responding to emotionally, but except for the fact that these characters were different and I had always felt different, it's only in hindsight that I can see how these books influenced my emerging babyqueer identity.

When I hit young adult literature age, I crashed into a wall of silence where even queer coded characters were concerned. It was the age of New Realism in YA literature, and I read novels about divorce, scoliosis, teen pregnancy, poverty, racism, and drug addiction. But I came across no books with LGBTQ+ characters. A few of these books did exist. John Donovan's *I'll Get There, It Better Be Worth the Trip* was published in 1969, the year of my birth. Sandra Scoppettone's YA lesbian novel *Happy Endings Are All Alike* was published in 1978, and Nancy Garden's now classic *Annie on My Mind* came out in 1982. But were any of these novels available in my public or school library? I didn't know these books existed, and if you're in a rural area and you don't know something exists, then it might as well not exist.

Popular culture—at least the popular culture I was exposed to—was also a mixed bag of funhouse mirrors and absences. There were always some gay men on TV, and while they weren't allowed to talk openly about being gay, they were allowed to be funny—exotic, flamboyant, an other to be laughed with but also at. Paul Lynde on *Hollywood Squares* was the *prima donna*

absoluta of this phenomenon. My grandparents, who described gay men as “funny-turned” and as “having ruffles on their drawers,” inexplicably loved Paul Lynde. Well, it wasn’t really inexplicable. Lynde was hilarious—the lightning-quick wit, the simpering, sarcastic delivery. And so my heteronormative hillbilly grandparents would howl with laughter when host Peter Marshall asked Lynde “Why do Hell’s Angels wear leather?” and he replied, “Because chiffon wrinkles so easily.” Even though some of his adult humor swooped right over my head, I loved Lynde, both as the version of himself he played on “Hollywood Squares” and as the queeny prankster warlock Uncle Arthur on reruns of my favorite sitcom, “Bewitched,” a show which both upheld and subverted heteronormativity.

When there was gayness on TV, it was always men. There was the episode of “All in the Family” in which Archie Bunker discovers that one of his best friends, a hypermasculine guy, is gay, thus defying all the stereotypes Archie has ever held. A few years later, the hilarious soap opera parody “Soap” featured a young Billy Crystal as Jodie Dallas, one of the first regularly appearing gay characters on TV. But I don’t remember seeing any shows that focused on lesbian or bi women. There were some hilarious women on TV, such as Lily Tomlin and *Match Game*’s Fannie Flagg, that I later learned were gay, but unlike Paul Lynde, there were no hairpins dropped about their sexuality in their TV appearances. Instead, it was a subject to be purposely ignored.

As the ‘80’s progressed, the laughter at or with gay men on TV stopped. As the AIDS epidemic spread, gay men were treated as monsters by the media. Often, the journalistic emphasis in covering AIDS was to call it the gay plague or gay cancer, as if gay sex were the only way the disease could be contracted. Bloated, bloviating televangelists such as Jerry Falwell insisted that

AIDS was God's punishment for "ho-mo-sex-you-al-ity." Gay men were depicted in the media as either death-dealing hedonists or as death itself, emaciated bodies in hospital beds, their eyes huge and soulful in their shrunken skulls. The image of these suffering strangers was haunting, but to see a celebrity such as Rock Hudson, always assumed to be straight because of his leading-man good looks and charisma, ravaged and terminally ill, was shocking, especially to his straight-women admirers. Seeing gay men like Paul Lynde on TV had always brought me comfort and joy. But now the images of gay men on the screen filled me with sadness and fear. Unlike a lot of America, though, I was not afraid of them; I was afraid for them. And as I began my walk on the knife's edge of adolescence, I was also, in ways I didn't fully understand, afraid for myself.

* * * *

The Oxford English dictionary defines cryptozoology as "the search for and study of animals whose existence or survival is disputed, such as the Loch Ness Monster and the yeti." Growing up, I was both cryptid and cryptozoologist, searching, often in vain, for evidence of my own existence, for proof that there might be others like me.

My survival cannot be disputed. I have made the long journey out of the shadows to say, along with other LGBTQ+ Appalachian spiritual siblings who have made a similar journey, "We're queer, and we're *here*."

Character Development: Sam

I cannot make the argument that Sam Hughes, the seventeen-year-old protagonist of Bobbie Ann Mason's 1985 novel *In Country* is a queer-coded character. In fact, over the course of the novel, Sam is enthusiastically heterosexual in both her fantasy life, swooning over Jim Morrison and Bruce Springsteen, and in reality, having intimate encounters with both her uncomplicated high school boyfriend Lonnie and a very complicated—and much older—Vietnam vet who runs an auto shop. What I can argue, however, is that despite having been marketed as adult literary fiction, *In Country* is a young adult novel. It puts its young protagonist front and center, staying in her teenaged point of view as she tries to make sense of her country's and her family's history and understand how those forces shape her own identity. But for me, the most important aspect of *In Country* was that it was the first book in which I saw myself and my culture reflected, and it taught me that stories set in big, exciting places weren't the only stories worth telling.

In Country was a mirror for me, but not because Sam and I are similar people. Sam is lots of things I have never been: straight, athletic, impulsive. Her family situation also differs from my nuclear-family-plus-grandparents upbringing. Her father, whom she never met, was killed in Vietnam, and during the time frame of the novel, she is living with her lovable but traumatized Uncle Emmett, a Vietnam vet, who is more of a buddy to her than a parental figure, sharing with his niece a love for classic rock and *M*A*S*H*. Sam's mom has remarried, has a baby with her new husband, and is living with him in Lexington. Unlike Sam's dad, my father did not fight in Vietnam, though some of my schoolmates' dads served. The quiet, taciturn dad of the across-the-road neighbor girls had a prosthetic leg because he hit a landmine when crawling through a tunnel. I had heard my dad talking about the anxiety of walking to mailbox every day during the draft, fearing his number would come up. It never did.

Sam and I may not have been twins in terms of personality and familial experience, but when sixteen-year-old me first read *In Country*, Sam's world was so like mine that I often couldn't believe what I was reading. Sam's hometown of Hopewell is in the cornfields of Western Kentucky rather than the coalfields of Eastern Kentucky which were my stomping grounds, but still, the similarities were stunning. Sam deals with the small-town scrutiny that comes from being in a family that is considered different. She and her peers deal with the tedium of living in a small town by buying beer from the bootlegger and "cruising" from one fast food spot to another. Sam, like teenaged me, struggles with whether she can make a life for herself in this rural place, populated by people she loves but often feels different from, or if she needs to strike out into the bigger world to build a future.

The smaller details in the book were the most stunning. Sam had a mamaw. I had called my paternal grandmother Mamaw, and most of the kids I knew I had mamaws. But I had never seen a Mamaw in a book before, nor had I ever met a character in literature who talked the way the older people around me talked. In the first couple of chapters alone, when Sam and Emmett and Mamaw are on a road trip to see the Vietnam War Memorial, Mamaw's lines of dialogue could have been transcribed from my own grandparents: "You're too skinny...you look holler-eyed" (p. 5). And, when she discovers she'll have to share a hotel room with Sam and Emmett to cut costs: "I never slept in the same room before with a man that wasn't my husband...What will they think of me back home? They'll think I've gone wild and started running around. I didn't even bring my good housecoat" (p. 10). My nana had said nearly the same thing when she and Papaw shared a hotel room with Mom and Dad and me on a trip to Nashville to see the Grand Ole Opry.

And then there was the food these characters ate...beans and cornbread, fried rabbit and biscuits, washed down with iced tea, buttermilk or sweet milk, or Pepsi. These people were *my people*, and I had never seen my people in a book before.

And there was a reason I never had. The literary establishment was ensconced in the large coastal cities and had long displayed a bias that rural areas were “flyover country,” a cultural wasteland where there were no stories, at least not any that anyone would want to read or hear. And yet here was this book I was holding in my hands. A major company had published it, it had received a glowing review in *The New York Times*, and a film version was in the works. *In Country* showed me that contrary to what I had seen in the media, rural and small-town Appalachian people—*my people*—had stories that were worth telling. Because of Bobbie Ann Mason, I began to think about what kind of stories I might like to tell.

Closer to Home

As soon as I became a fluent reader, I became a writer, too. My first “book,” written when I was eight, was *The Tales of the Clark Family*, a red spiral-bound notebook of handwritten, crayon-illustrated stories based on the dolls I carried around with me everywhere and called my adopted children. The Clark children—Betsey, Bitsy, Billy, and Baby Bethy—were orphaned siblings who had escaped a life of beginning-of-a-fairy-tale-style poverty and privation to be adopted by me (inexplicably a child but also a parent). In the stories, the children, as I collectively called them, go on adventures and solve mysteries. Many of the stories contain cameo appearances by my real family and friends, and most of the plots are heavily lifted from other literary sources such as Charlie Brown holiday specials and “Scooby-Doo” episodes. My writing in *Tales of the Clark Family* is hilarious. The purple prose of my descriptions is a pale imitation of the style of the classic children’s literature I voraciously fed upon. I also—I have no idea why—tended to make all the children speak in unison in a way that made no sense unless they shared some kind of science fictional hive mind.

The stories were terrible. And yet I remember how I felt when I was writing them. I felt great—better than I had ever felt doing anything else. I loved to draw and to make things out of clay, but there was something about writing stories that transported me in a way no other creative pursuit did. I didn’t have a separate existence from the story; I disappeared into it.

Once a story was finished and I emerged from my dreamlike state, I would show it to my parents. As an only-child people pleaser, I loved when they praised the story and showed it to their friends, who also praised it. However, once they showed a story of mine to one of their

friends who took it as an opportunity to praise only the neatness of my handwriting. I was deeply offended. It wasn't about the handwriting; it was about the story!

While they may have contained fantastical (and highly derivative) elements, my childhood stories were set in my immediate world and surroundings. While the spunky orphans in the tales may have occasionally hopped a plane to London to solve a mystery, their home base was the same as mine, small-town Appalachia. Some stories even contain my ham-handed efforts at capturing rural Appalachian speech in dialogue. But the loss of confidence I experienced in adolescence kicked in caused me to feel ashamed of my Appalachian heritage (and many other things about myself as well). I complained about eating the pinto beans and cornbread my nana cooked, dismissing all her meals as “hick food.” Instead, I longed for the “sophisticated” meals I ate when we visited Lexington and Knoxville in fine dining establishments such as T.G.I. Fridays and Olive Garden. I disdained the country music I'd grown up with in favor of the pop and rock songs I saw dramatized when I watched “Friday Night Videos” because MTV hadn't come to our neck of the woods yet. With the absolutism of adolescence, I was inventing either/or choices where none existed. It never occurred to me that I could like pinto beans and eggplant parmesan, George Jones and Culture Club. I thought I had to reject the familiar to love the new.

Unfortunately, this either/or fallacy affected my writing, too. I loved writing that was sophisticated, witty, and urbane. I adored the snappy dialogue of Neil Simon plays and their movie adaptations. I gobbled up Woody Allen films. I memorized Dorothy Parker poems and went around reciting them, no doubt to the annoyance of many. I still love a lot of this writing; however, my relationship with it as a teenager was not wholly healthy. I thought witty, urbane,

and preferably Jewish was what a writer needed to be—that being a rural Appalachian was something to be ashamed of, something nobody wanted to read stories about.

My self-loathing was encouraged in a playwriting class I took on the weekends in Knoxville when I was a high school freshman. For one class, I wrote a scene which fictionalized what was going on with our across-the-road neighbors whose daughter, a year older than I was, had become pregnant. I knew the family well and had played with the daughter throughout my childhood, so I was definitely writing about something I knew and cared about. I'm not saying the scene was good because I'm sure it wasn't. I was by far the youngest person in the class, and I have no doubt that what I wrote was amateurish and melodramatic. However, the way the workshop leader and my classmates critiqued my scene sent a damaging message. They made fun of the way I'd tried to capture the characters' Appalachian speech and questioned why I was writing about low-income country people, the kind of people whose stories weren't worth telling. I left class devastated, not even able to enjoy my fancy lunch at T.G.I. Friday's.

I took the class's criticism to heart, went back home to the hills, and spent all my free time that week working on a new scene, this one with two divorced New Yorkers snowed in together in a Connecticut cabin, spitting Neil Simon-style witty repartee at each other. It had nothing to with my own experience and was only an imitation of things I'd seen and read. When I took this scene to playwriting class that next Saturday, they absolutely loved it and marveled at how much improvement someone could show in one short week.

Always one to lap up approval, I was delighted with their comments and let them dictate the direction of my writing. Okay, I thought. So this is what I'm supposed to write—clever, snarky, snappy comedy about characters who are unlike people I've ever met before. It was fall, and I

dressed as Dorothy Parker for Halloween, determined to become my own little Algonquin Round Table for one. I developed the snowbound in Connecticut scene into a one-act play which earned me a spot in the Kentucky Governor's School for the Arts. At Governor's School, where I had a great time but still had an inferiority complex about what a hick I was compared to the kids from Louisville and Lexington, I wrote another witty, urbane play about an unemployed actress who becomes a televangelist as a money-making scheme. This play went on to win several competitions and earn me a decent amount of college scholarship money. Clearly, in order to be a successful writer, all I had to do was completely erase my cultural identity and set my work in places I had only briefly visited. Because that was where stories always happened, right? The Big Somewhere Else?

I didn't know the word metronormativity back then (in part because it hadn't even been coined), but I was still embodying the concept. I was writing what I thought I was supposed to be writing because only urban experiences had value. I enjoyed writing my little comedies; however, there was something that felt performative about it, as though I were acting on a stage. I had fun being other people, and I loved the laughter, applause, and praise. But once I was alone, I felt strangely empty.

There was no single moment that turned me from a teenaged hillbilly shiksa trying to write like middle-aged New York Jew into the Appalachian writer I am today. However, there was one book which set me on the right path. When Gurney Norman, author of the Appalachian classics *Kinfolks* and *Divine Right's Trip*, was visiting the college where my dad taught, he suggested that I should read the recently published novel *In Country* by Kentucky author Bobbie Ann Mason since I was about the same age as the novel's protagonist. My parents bought me a copy

of *In Country*, and the book proceeded to change the way I thought about myself, my home region, and my writing.

The protagonist of *In Country* is Sam, a sixteen-year-old girl (Like me! I thought) growing up in a small Kentucky town (Like me!). Sam is trying to figure out what she wants from her life (also like me!) and is haunted by the legacy of the Vietnam War which killed her father and traumatized her Uncle Emmett. Here was a novel that didn't take place in New York or L.A. or London but in a place very much like the one where I lived and focused not on upper-class urbane raconteurs but on people very much like me and the people I was surrounded by. It was ironic. By depicting things that were so familiar to me, Mason showed me things I didn't think were possible—or allowed—in fiction writing. It was an absolute revelation that a writer from what often got characterized as the middle of nowhere could create compelling fiction based on her place and her people. And it was astonishing that a major publisher would print this book and that people would buy and read it.

I'm not saying that reading *In Country* instantly cured my Appalachian inferiority complex, but it was an important step in the process. If the Kentucky-centric stories Bobbie Ann Mason told had value, maybe my own experiences and observations had value, too. I still loved writing by witty New Yorkers, too, but for my writing inspiration, I started to look closer to home.

Vampire Cowgirl

It's surprising that I became a young adult novelist because when I was in the demographic for young adult novels, I didn't read a single one. The issue was really one of availability. Before I was a teenager, I had read my way through the "juvenile" section of my hometown library, including its small young adult collection, which included titles such as Beverly Cleary's squeaky-clean romance *Fifteen* as well as more realistic fare such as Judy Blume's *Tiger Eyes*. Blume's most notorious YA title, the devirginization-themed *Forever*, was not available on the shelves, though I do remember a dog-eared paperback of it being surreptitiously passed around beneath desks in seventh grade, resulting in an entire generation of females who had to suppress laughter when hearing the name "Ralph."

There were a few other realistic YA novels which I read; I especially remember the bizarrely titled Paul Zindel books such as *Pardon Me, You're Stepping on My Eyeball*. But I gobbled up all these books before I was twelve, so there was nothing for me to do but jump up to reading from the adult section. My mom was perfectly fine with this, but the librarian would raise an eyebrow when I brought up a Stephen King novel to be stamped. She flat-out refused to let me check out anything by Harold Robbins or Judith Krantz, stopping just short of slapping my hand.

When I transferred to Saint C as a sophomore in high school, I had high hopes for the school library, but those hopes were quickly dashed. The library was governed by a tiny nun with horn-rimmed glasses and a prominent nose who nervously rubbed her hands together and obsessed over students pushing the library chairs back under the table just so. Because of her size, snouty appearance, and scurrying manner, most of the students referred to her as Sister Rat. I found her inoffensive if a little highly strung.

It was immediately apparent that Sister Rat's domain wasn't going to offer much in the way of reading pleasure. The library offered a couple of sets of encyclopedias, a big dictionary, and a periodical section which mainly consisted of issues of *Our Sunday Visitor*, *Saint Anthony's Messenger*, and old copies of the unintentionally hilarious Catholic comic book *Treasure Chest* (The series of stories titled "This Godless Communism" especially tickled my funny bone, though laughter in the library sent Sister Rat over the edge). The fiction section was a particularly depressing affair, with antiquated novels with Catholic-friendly themes: *The Silver Chalice*, *The Robe*, *Ben-Hur*. I did see one nonfiction title that caught my eye: *Nun with a Gun*. But on closer examination, it was a biography of a nun who had been a charity hospital administrator. I had study hall in the library three times a week; it became obvious that it was going to be a "Bring Your Own Book" affair.

I sat in the library, under the watchful bespectacled eyes of Sister Rat, reading adult mass market paperbacks I had bought new off the rack at Butch's Market or used at one of the many thrift shops I frequented. I especially liked books featuring vampires—it was the days of Anne Rice mania—or hippie counterculture, which I felt drawn to, probably because it was one of the few countercultures I knew. I figured both subjects were pretty salacious as far as Sister Rat was concerned, and sometimes she'd glance at the flashy foil-lettered cover of one of my vampire novels and crinkle her nose in seeming distaste. But she never said a word.

If Sister Rat had known what was between some of those paperback covers, she probably would've had to cleanse herself with holy water. It was in those books in Catholic school study hall that I read the first depictions I had ever seen of lesbian sex, one in a vampire novel and one in a hippie novel.

Since I was sucking down Anne Rice novels faster than she could write them, I had to branch out to discover other authors of vampire-populated fare. I don't remember at which thrift shop I came across a more-than-gently used paperback copy of Whitley Strieber's 1980 novel *The Hunger*, but I remember the cover vividly. A beautiful Hollywood-blond woman, bare-shouldered and apparently nude, is staring out at the reader with a feral expression, her blood-red lips parted, as she cradles the also probably nude body of an unconscious man, clutching his head and throat with her red-nailed fingers. A beautiful, predatory woman vampire? Since the book was in a thrift store, I probably didn't pay more than a quarter for it, but for a premise like that, I would've have shelled out as much as my teenaged budget allowed.

The Hunger, which I read opened flat against the table in study so Sister Rat wouldn't see the titillating cover, exceeded my expectations. While his prose can border on the purple (which is true of many authors of vampire fiction, Bram Stoker included), Whitley Strieber is an underrated horror writer, and the vampire universe he creates is compelling and imaginative.

The plot focuses on the three members of a vampiric romantic triangle. Sophisticated and beautiful Miriam Blaylock is a "natural born" vampire who is immortal. Over the centuries she has had numerous lovers, both male and female, all of them mortals whom she has turned into vampires. The problem with this arrangement is that "made" vampires are not immortal. They live much longer than regular people, but they still come with an expiration date after which they start to age rapidly into a sort of mostly-but-not-quite dead state. John, Miriam's lover, has begun this rapid aging process and is looking for a cure. Enter Sarah Roberts, a young doctor who specializes in aging research. Miriam is attracted to Sarah because of her beauty and brains but

also because she thinks Sarah's research could hold the key to immortality for "made" vampires. The obstacle to Miriam and Sarah's romance is Sarah's boring and pedantic boyfriend, Tom.

I read *The Hunger* multiple times in high school but hadn't looked at it since. Revisiting the book was an exercise in the deceptiveness of memory. I remembered it being brimmingly, blushingly full of lesbian content, with numerous erotic scenes between Miriam and Sarah. But rereading the novel, there wasn't that much; I kept thinking I must have skipped some pages. In a scene in which Sarah gives Miriam a medical examination, Miriam uses her telepathic powers to make Sarah kiss her breast. She then sits up and pulls Sarah onto her lap so that she is straddling her knee, but this activity is described in only a few sentences. Later, Sarah visits Miriam in her glamorous brownstone, and there is a scene in which Miriam suggests that Sarah take a shower. Sarah strips naked, and Miriam washes her from head to toe, but nothing else happens. This scene, which I found sexy as a teenager, now just seems peculiar. Why does Miriam bathe Sarah if it doesn't lead to lovemaking or at least a makeout session? Sarah is an M.D.; she is surely capable of taking care of her own personal hygiene.

I think the reasons for my misremembering of the amount of lesbian content in *The Hunger* are twofold. One was my own hunger for lesbian content of any kind; I was so desperate for LGBTQ representation that a few crumbs felt like a whole meal. The other is that I conflated the content of the novel with that of Tony Scott-directed 1983 film version starring the devastatingly attractive trio of Catherine Deneuve, Susan Sarandon, and David Bowie, which features a steamy and stylish scene of Deneuve and Sarandon in bed together. I checked out the VHS tape of *The Hunger* so many times that the lady who owned the local video store/tanning bed said, "You know, you've paid enough rentin' this movie that you could own it ten times over."

I avoided eye contact and said, “I just like vampires.”

The second novel with lesbian content which I devoured during study hall featured actual mortal women. Tom Robbins’ *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues* (1976) is a hippified picaresque featuring small-town Virginian Sissy Hankshaw, who puts her outsized thumbs to good use by hitchhiking. The novel is as meandering as Sissy herself, with Robbins pausing the plot numerous times to digress on a wide range of esoterica. Few novels have chapters that begin with the statement “The normal rectal temperature of a hummingbird is 104.6” (p. 9), but *Even Cowgirls Gets the Blues* does, along with other digressions on whooping cranes and the unnecessariness of feminine hygiene sprays. It is a hard story to summarize; countercultural novels are not known for their linearity. Well into her journey, Sissy arrives at the Rubber Rose Ranch, “the largest all-girl ranch in the West” (p. 4), where she becomes fast friends with cowgirl Bonanza Jellybean.

Imagine my surprise reading in study hall when Sissy and Jelly’s friendship turns into something more as they “roll around” together beside the lake (p. 153). This scene, with the occasional Robbins digression, goes on for four pages and was the most graphic lesbian sex scene I had ever read. The writing in this passage is lyrical and uses the second person point of view to give the reader the illusion of experience: “Long, thick tongues painted each other; painting away gradually the feminine fears so you could extract your fingers from her sterling scar and slide them down her belly” (p. 155). It is a slow, sensual scene and the first time I remember reading about female genitals described as something beautiful: “a ballet slipper, a gaping shellfish” (p. 153). A virgin in all senses of the word when I read this scene, it made me imagine what making love with a woman might be like.

As revelatory as both these novels were to teenaged me, they each had a catch—one that I was fleetingly aware of at the time and am wholly aware of now. These novels, both written by male authors, held up a male-gaze-distorted funhouse mirror to queer women's relationships.

In *The Hunger*, Miriam Blaylock, for all her attractiveness, is still a monster and a predator. She uses telepathic signals and hypnotism to lure Sarah into a relationship, which raises the question of whether Sarah is truly consenting. Miriam also begins transfusing her own blood into Sarah's system without telling her she is going to do so. The story, like Miriam, is an old one—that of the predatory queer manipulating and seducing an innocent straight girl. And Sarah, despite being a prestigious doctor, is painted as naïve where Miriam's advances are concerned; Sarah's attraction to Miriam is often described as “silly” or “childish” (p. 124), echoing the old “sexologists” who thought homosexuality was a sign of immaturity. At the novel's climax, Sarah ends up killing her boyfriend and undergoing the premature aging of the “made” vampire in seemingly record time. In the end, Miriam stows Sarah in one of the wooden boxes where she keeps her not-quite-dead lovers. Miriam is ready to recruit another companion.

Rereading *The Hunger*, I was struck by its similarity to lesbian pulp novels from the 1950's with their requisite tragic endings, where one member of the couple dies and the other one marries a man. Both these novels and *The Hunger* offer a kind of backhanded representation, where the queer reader sees glimmers of herself but knows that the story is not going to end well for the queer characters. The queer reader, the novel implies, doesn't deserve a happy ending.

The catch in *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues* comes just a couple of pages after Sissy and Jelly's lovemaking scene. Sissy asks Jelly if she has had sex with girls before, and the response is a mishmash of mixed messages:

Only since I've been at the Rubber Rose...every eligible male has been scared away from here, and there's usually trouble of one kind or another if we fool around with the hicks in Mottburg. That leaves your fingers or other women, and at least half the cowgirls have been in each other's pants by now. There's not a queer among 'em, either. It's just a nice, natural thing to do. Girls are so close and soft. Why did it take me all these years to learn it's okay to roll around with them? (p. 158).

While the lack of sexual moralizing in Jelly's speech is refreshing, it also trivializes women's same-sex relationships. The women on the ranch aren't queer; they just enjoy each other's bodies as a sort of second-best choice when there are no available men, comparable to prisoners who are "gay for the stay" because they're in a single-sex environment. I remember feeling disappointed and betrayed when I first read Jelly's speech because I had thought that her and Sissy's lovemaking had meant something. Jelly insists that it didn't, that it was almost a form of masturbation. Jelly's proclamation that despite their sexual encounters, none of the women on the ranch is "a queer" is offensive. As the old saying goes, if it looks like a duck and walks like a duck, it's probably a duck (And if it looks like a dyke...). Soon Sissy sticks up her thumb and hits the road again, but she does return to the Rubber Rose Ranch for the novel's climax, during which Bonanza Jellybean is killed in a shoot-out while trying to protect a flock of whooping cranes. While the circumstances may be stranger, once again we have the trope established in the old lesbian pulp novels: If two women have sex, one of them is going to die. Lesbian sex, these books suggest, should come with a warning label like cigarettes.

Despite these obvious failings, I can't lose my nostalgic attachment to Strieber and Robbins' novels. As novels with lesbian content, they were my firsts, and first times are always memorable. It wasn't until college, when I was introduced to Rita Mae Brown's *Rubyfruit Jungle* and Jeanette Winterson's *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* that I saw lesbian desire depicted in a way that wasn't leering, backhanded or lethal. Until then, like a vampire, I had been unable to look in a mirror and see my image reflected.

Far From the Tree

Part I: Young Adult

Things changed, but slowly. When I was in high school, my rare media exposure to queer women might be spotting a tabloid cover in the grocery line with a headline screaming something like “Starlet Discovered in Lezzie Love Nest with Secret Gal Pal!” The depictions were lurid and implied that queer relationships were always secret, always shocking, always exclusively sexual. No one ever suggested that heterosexual married couples’ relationships were sexual only, with no conversations, no shared meals, no hobbies or chores or errands. It was difficult for young me to picture what having a life with a same-sex partner might be like. Many years later, during lockdown, when I watched an awards show which Jodie Foster and her wife attended via Zoom in their pajamas along with their dog (in matching pajamas), I couldn’t help thinking, what if teenaged me had seen such a normalized domestic image of queer married life? How would it have changed me?

I spent my childhood and the bigger part of my adolescence dreaming metronormative dreams of The Big Somewhere Else, the magical city where I could finally start living my life. The college I dreamed of most was Sarah Lawrence, the artistic and intellectual haven right next to New York City. But as I edged closer to my senior year in high school, it became obvious that I wasn’t going to Sarah Lawrence or any other frou-frou Northeastern liberal arts college. The reasons were threefold. First, my parents simply couldn’t afford a school that expensive unless I received substantial scholarships. I wouldn’t be receiving any of those because of reason number two: my abysmal mathematical ability, which meant my standardized test scores weren’t good enough to get me accepted, let alone given a scholarship, to a super-competitive private college. But the third reason felt the realest: I was afraid.

I had always been close with my parents, and the thought of being more than a day's drive away from them was scary. I was also afraid of social and academic failure. What if everybody at the fancy Northern college thought I was an ignorant hillbilly and treated me as such? The fear wasn't ungrounded. After my time at the Kentucky Governor's School for the Arts, I had been invited to go to Miami for the National Association for the Advancement of the Arts scholarship competition. Even though the event was held in Florida, the competitors were from all over the country, and Southerners were definitely in the minority. I met some nice kids, but there were also a lot of kids who wouldn't pay attention to the content of anything I said because they were too busy making fun of my twangy accent.

After much agonizing, I chose to attend The University of Tennessee. Knoxville wasn't New York or San Francisco, but I told myself it could be my "starter city" since I had never lived in a city before. And it was less than two hours away from home in case of an emergency in which I required parenting. I felt comfortable with my choice but also a little disappointed in myself. I had spent so much time dreaming of faraway fabulousness that I feared I had failed by escaping only to a mid-sized city that was still very much in Appalachia. It was as if Dorothy hadn't fled to the Emerald City but to Wichita.

Living on the UT campus, I discovered that one didn't have to go to New York or San Francisco to experience queer culture. In the literature courses I took as an English major, I was introduced to books which featured lesbian characters and same-sex desire: Jeanette Winterson's *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*, Rita Mae Brown's *Rubyfruit Jungle*, Marguerite Duras' *The Lover*. I learned that Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* was written in gay code and that some of Shakespeare's love sonnets were written to a man. On Saturdays, I walked down the

Strip to David-Kidd Booksellers, which had a small, two-shelf section labeled “Gay and Lesbian.” I parked on the floor in front of those two sacred shelves and read whatever was there, Joe Orton’s diaries, JoAnn Loulan’s *Lesbian Passion: Loving Ourselves and Each Other*, the first two volumes of Allison Bechdel’s *Dykes to Watch Out For* comics. I didn’t have money to buy these books, so I just sat there and read them. It was like going into a grocery store and helping myself to all the food I wanted without paying for it, but no bookstore employees never tried to kick me out.

Always an introvert, I fared much better with the bookish aspects of coming out than the social ones. But over time, I started sitting in on meetings of UT’s Lambda Club and going to drag shows at the Carousel, the now much-missed gay bar near campus. I began to identify as bisexual, though that identity was more in theory than in practice. I had a boyfriend, and I got crushes on girls but was always too shy to act on them. Later, I would come to prefer the term queer over bisexual, but at that time “queer” was a highly politicized term associated with Queer Nation, an anti-homophobia activist organization with branches in many major urban areas. I admired Queer Nation but was not a member, which made me feel unentitled to the name (Donohue, 2019). The term “pansexual,” which I occasionally use to describe myself now, did not exist at that time with its current meaning; instead, it was a relic from the notebooks of Freud, referring not to the potential to be attracted to all genders but rather to Freud’s idea that all human psychology is rooted in the sexual (Lopez, 2022).

The more I came to understand myself, the more tension I felt between my sexual identity and my Appalachian upbringing. Even though I had forsaken Fundamentalist Christianity, the ghosts of guilt still haunted me. My biggest fear was about my relationship with my family. I knew that

for my grandparents, my queerness would go on the long list of things about me they would never understand, like why I purposely wore jeans with holes in the knees (“You need me to patch them britches for you?”) or listened to rock music, which they insisted contained no lyrics except for “Baby, baby, yeah, yeah, yeah.” They still loved me despite what I wore and listened to; I wasn’t sure if they could love me if they knew I was queer. And what about my parents? They were open-minded and open-hearted, but the fear that anything might make them love me even a little less was terrifying. One of the scariest aspects of coming out is the fear “What if the people who have loved me all my life won’t love me anymore?”

These worries combined with others about what was happening back home. My papaw’s years of working in the mines were taking a toll on his health. He had the miner’s disease bluntly known as black lung but was also suffering from repeated lung infections which further reduced his breathing capacity as well as his blood count, making him require supplemental oxygen and frequent transfusions. Meanwhile, my nana was losing her mind. At first, she forgot how to do normal things around the house. She no longer understood how to screw in a lightbulb. She tried to heat soup by placing an unopened can on a hot eye of the stove. When her reality contact slipped further, she started having conversations with long-dead family members she insisted were in the house. They were so real to her that she could smell their cigarette smoke.

I don’t always know where my stories come from, but the path of the short story I wrote which combined my emerging queer identity with my Appalachian identity was the clearest route from mind to page that I’ve ever experienced. Titled “Far From the Tree,” it focused on a young woman visiting her rural Southeastern Kentucky home on a break from the large state university she attends. Most of the story takes place during a family meal during which she observes how

much her papaw's physical health and her nana's mental health have deteriorated since she was last home. The main character has come out to her friends at the university but not to her family and is conflicted about how to reconcile the person her family has always known her as with the person she is now. The story, a revised version of which would later be the title story in my master's thesis, seems a little too on the nose when I read it now....as well as too brooding and navel-gazing for my contemporary taste. Flaws aside, though, "Far From the Tree" was a breakthrough work. It was the first time I had written about an LGBTQ character, and it was the first time I had directly written about being a rural Appalachian. The creation of that story was like the water breaking before a birth—in this case, the birth of a queer Appalachian writer.

Part II: Young Adult Writer

Between reading and writing and living, somehow I grew up. I fell into a queer polyamorous relationship which has now lasted for over three decades. I moved to a bigger city, Louisville, to work on a Master's in English with a creative writing thesis. I went there swearing to be 100% out of the closet, and I was (perhaps exhaustingly so, to some people). I was active in the university's Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Alliance (It was the '90's, so the full LGBTQ+ acronym hadn't emerged yet). After I finished my M.A., I returned to Knoxville to live with my partners, planning to develop two projects: a baby and a novel. Both were successful.

My first novel, *Wildwood Flowers*, was a fish-out-of-water comic novel about a lesbian English professor who moves with her partner from Boston to Southeastern Kentucky for a teaching job at a small Christian college. It's interesting that I chose a main character who looked at my home region from an outsider's perspective. Perhaps it was because my own queerness gave me a sort of double exposure where small-town Appalachia was concerned...it made me feel like a fish out

of water even though it was the same water I'd been swimming in all my life. *Wildwood Flowers* was published in 1995 by Naiad Press, the nation's oldest lesbian press. Naiad published lesbian paperback originals but with a very different philosophy than the old lesbian pulps: they accepted a variety of genres, but the rules were that the lesbian characters had to be depicted positively and that the endings had to be happy instead of tragic and punitive. Barbara Grier, Naiad's formidable publisher, wanted lesbians to see validating reflections of themselves in the press's novels. It was a noble mission.

A curious thing happened after Naiad Press published my second novel, *Phases of the Moon*, which was about a fictional rockabilly singer from Kentucky's coal fields who rises to prominence while she's still a teen. Favorable reviews appeared in publications such as *VOYA* and *School Library Journal*, where it was listed as a young adult novel. Apparently, I had written a young adult novel without meaning to do so! This experience planted a seed in my brain...what if I wrote a lesbian young adult novel *on purpose*?

By this time, I had read the early classics of the lesbian YA genre, Nancy Garden's *Annie on My Mind* and Sandra Scoppettone's *Happy Endings Are All Alike*. My search for more lesbian teen fiction also turned up a couple more titles, Alyson Press's reprint of Jane Fitch's 1981 *The Crush* and Hilary Mullins' *The Cat Came Back*, both of which focused on girl-girl attraction at exclusive private boarding schools in New England. The girls in all these books were urban or suburban. All of them, except for Annie in *Annie on My Mind*, were from families that were either financially comfortable or filthy rich. I imagined if I had read these books when I was a teen, I would have related to the girls' feelings for each other but little else. Where were the books about the country girls who fell in love with other girls? The poor girls whose families

could barely afford school clothes, let alone private school tuition? Surely same-sex attraction wasn't only the purview of preppies.

The idea of writing the kind of young adult novel that I would have wanted to read as a kid started to marinate in my mind. It was all very vague until, over breakfast during a visit with my parents, I found myself reading my hometown newspaper's birth announcements. Under a black-and-white photo of a sleeping newborn was the name "Heavenly Faith." At first I laughed at how over the top the name was, but then something about it awakened the tiny muse who rents a spot in the back of my brain. It would be hard to live up to such a pious name, I thought. And then came the phrase that so much fiction is born from: *What if?* What if a Southeastern Kentucky girl named Heavenly Faith turned out to be someone for whom that name wasn't appropriate at all? What if she was an extremely pragmatic and areligious person despite her religious upbringing? What if she was queer?

And just like Baby Heavenly Faith, my first young adult novel *Finding H.F.* was conceived.

Once the seed was planted, the novel poured out of me. With H.F.'s voice whispering in my ear so that it felt more like transcription than writing, I finished the novel in less than a year. It was 2000 when I started shopping it around, and a lot of publishers, even those who published exclusively LGBTQ+ books, were afraid to publish a book for teens with a queer protagonist. Several of them cited the controversy surrounding Leslea Newman's picture book *Heather Has Two Mommies* as reason for rejecting the manuscript, which I found strange, both because Newman's book was over a decade old and because my novel was aimed at much older kids. Finally, I approached Alyson Publications, which had published *Heather Has Two Mommies* along with Michael Wilhoite's picture book *Daddy's Roommate* and Ann Heron's

groundbreaking *One Teenager in 10: Writings by Gay and Lesbian Youth*. The folks at Alyson loved the novel, seemed to find my Appalachian-ness charming and exotic, and agreed to publish it. *Finding H.F.* went on to win the 2002 Lambda Literary Award in the Children's and Young Adult category and is credited as one of the first LGBTQ+ young adult novels, along with Alex Sanchez's *Rainbow Boys* which came out the same year, to cross over into the mainstream (Jenkins & Cart, 2018).

Since *Finding H.F.*, I have written four other young adult novels in addition to a middle-grade trilogy and several novels for adults. All my young adult novels are set in small-town and rural Appalachia and feature LGBTQ+ teens, most of them from working-class backgrounds.

In an interview with Ernest J. Gaines about his novel *A Lesson Before Dying* for the NEA's Big Read program (Bridges, 2010), Gaines recalled, "I remember once I had an interview with someone from the *Reader's Digest*. And he asked me, 'What one book influenced you most in that library in Vallejo, California [where Gaines moved after he left his childhood home in segregated Louisiana]?' And I thought and thought and thought, and he said, 'Maybe it was the one that was not there, and you had to put it on the shelf.' And I said, 'Hey, maybe that was *the* book!" (6:32-6:34). All the books he read in his youth were by white writers. It was up to him to write the book(s) that reflected his own culture and experiences.

I would never compare my writing to that of the great Ernest J. Gaines, and I certainly would never compare my relatively privileged upbringing as a white Appalachian in the 1970's and '80's to his upbringing as the son of sharecroppers in Jim Crow-era Louisiana. However, when I first screened this interview in an English composition class I was teaching, I found myself relating to the idea of writing to fill a void, to create a presence to obliterate the absence of

representation I felt in the books I read. I also created some books to put on the shelf, not only to represent the lives of LGBTQ+ youth, but the lives of rural Appalachian LGBTQ+ youth.

I am in my early fifties now, and the only context in which I fit the young adult category is my fiction. To imagine myself into the life of a LGBTQ+ teenager today is mind-blowing. LGBTQ+ titles for teens, middle schoolers, and younger kids have flooded the market. Refreshingly, many of these books don't treat their protagonist's sexual orientation or gender identity as a plot point but rather as just one aspect of the character's personality. Add these books to the internet and the better representation of LGBTQ+ characters and celebrities in media, and there are a lot fewer kids who, unlike me at their age, are staring into a void where a mirror should be.

However, while the existence of these resources should be celebrated, it's also important not to become complacent. Many politicians and parents would like to see LGBTQ+-themed books stripped from classroom and library bookshelves and are working tirelessly—and often successfully—to do so. As I have observed before, if a young person doesn't have access to the book they need, then for them, that book might as well not exist.

Over the course of my life so far, things have changed in ways I could never have imagined. LGBTQ+ literature, which used to be published mainly by specialty houses and shelved in bookstores' usually tiny "Gay Studies" section, is much less ghettoized. Many high schools, including some rural ones, now have Gay-Straight Alliances or other LGBTQ+ student organizations. Same-sex marriages come with all the federally recognized rights and privileges that straight marriages do. Things have changed for the better, but there are always those who want things to change back to how they were in some nebulous "better" time when things were

really better only for cisgender heterosexual white men. Which is why we need to keep reading.

Keep writing. Keep fighting for the right to do both.

REFLECTION

In the Afterword of her novel *A Garden of Earthly Delights* (2009), Joyce Carol Oates compared the creation of fiction to the way a bird builds a nest: “Of course, a literary work is a kind of nest: an elaborately and painstakingly woven nest of words incorporating chunks and fragments of the writer's life in an imagined structure, as a bird's nest incorporates all manner of items from the world outside our windows, ingeniously woven together in an original design” (p. 399). The bird flies from one place to another, looking for things that catch its eye—a particularly flexible twig here, a colorful strand of yarn there. The bird gathers these materials, returns to its home tree, and then, through some inexplicable creative instinct, weaves these little dibs and dabs of things into something new.

Oates' metaphor comes the closest to describing my experience of writing fiction. I go through life collecting little dibs and dabs of things—memories, new experiences, overheard snippets of conversation—and then, through a creative process I don't claim to fully understand myself, I weave these bits together, along with other ideas that have been floating around in my head, into a story. This process of gathering, imagination, and transformation is the activity in life that brings me unadulterated joy; it is in this process that I feel most myself, most at home. In the words of Kay Thompson's classic children's book character Eloise, “Here's what I like to do. Make stuff up” (Thompson, 1969, p. 4).

And so it was with some trepidation that I approached using autoethnography in writing my dissertation. Autoethnography also involves weaving together disparate elements of one's life, experience, and observations but without the magical secret sauce that transforms these elements into fiction. Instead, I would be writing about who I really am, where I really came from, what

people in my life were really like. That's a lot of "really's" for a fiction writer. Writing autoethnographically pushed me into some uncomfortable places, making me discover truths about my culture and myself. "Discovery" might be the key word to use in describing the experience, though as is often the case with so-called "discoveries," there was nothing truly new to find. Like Dorothy and the Scarecrow and company, what I discovered was there all along, but autoethnography gave me the tools I needed to find it, like an archaeologist unearthing a long-buried relic. Now that I have finished my collection of autoethnographic essays, it feels worthwhile to look back at what I learned from the experience of writing them and to evaluate whether my efforts were successful.

The first thing I learned is that I feel much more vulnerable writing autoethnography than I do writing fiction. Stripped of the ability to create fictional characters and situations, I felt not just naked but publicly naked. I longed to drape myself in the artifice of fiction, but I knew it was my duty to write the truth, both about myself and the culture that formed me. The essay that was hardest for me to write in terms of feeling exposed was "Apologetics." It took me a couple of decades to shake off the baggage of my Southern Baptist upbringing, and unearthing it was difficult enough to tell me that I still have more baggage than I thought I did. "Apologetics" also chronicles my early adolescent romantic relationship with a teen Baptist preacher, a relationship which was not abusive but was certainly coercive and which serves as an example of how fundamentalist religion shrouds desire in shame. Reading back through the essay, I find myself surprised at how funny it is because it was so painful to write.

Another aspect of vulnerability is what I'll call the "so what?" factor. On days when I was feeling particularly uncertain, I feared that what I was writing did not transcend what Fitzgerald

(2004) called “the merely personal” (p. 170). Was I just gabbling on about myself like a drunk in a bar who has cornered some poor stranger and proceeds to tell them their life story? Were my musings nothing more than literary navel-gazing, a nonfiction version of *The Bathtub Story* warned against in Jerome Stern’s *Making Shapely Fiction* (2000) in which the character does nothing more than lie in the bathtub and think about Life? Whenever one of these fits of insecurity struck, I would remind myself of the “ethno” aspect of autoethnography. I wasn’t just writing about myself. I was writing about cultural context. I was writing about rural Appalachia and the experience of growing up queer in a place where queerness was largely invisible. Other people had this experience as well, and perhaps reading about my experiences would help provide a context in which to better understand their own experiences. I wasn’t just writing about me.

Ultimately, writing about the cultural contexts in which I grew up is what taught me the most. When I look back at the essays, I see two cultural contexts that shaped me as a writer: the culture of reading in my immediate family and the rural/small-town Appalachian culture in my extended family and community.

I was lucky to grow up in a house full of books and people who read them voraciously. I was encouraged to read anything that interested me, and little attention was paid to whether a text was “appropriate” for my age or not. However, as a baby queer, I didn’t find much of anything in my house or the tiny public library which spoke to my growing feelings of difference from my peers. For this reason, one of the most interesting parts of this autoethnographic collection was writing the “Character Development” essays which look back at favorite books from my childhood through a queer lens. It was both fascinating and troubling to revisit these titles, none

of them with explicitly queer content, and find the mirror shards in which baby queer me could just make out tiny pieces of myself.

In terms of small-town/rural Appalachian cultural context, one thing I learned was how much my maternal grandparents shaped my views of what it means to be Appalachian. Both of them grew up in coal camps, and many of Papaw's working years were spent as a coal miner. Neither of them had a high school education. Nana dipped snuff, sang murder ballads, and sewed quilts. Papaw chewed tobacco and addressed everyone he knew as "buddy." Both of them loved beans and cornbread and country music. But as deep as their Appalachian street cred (or "holler cred?") might be, both Nana and Papaw defied stereotype. Nana had played basketball as a schoolgirl and still loved shooting hoops. Papaw had no problem with doing work around the house that would be labeled "women's work." Every night, Nana cooked supper, but Papaw always washed the dishes and wiped down the kitchen. Both Nana and Papaw have been dead for a long time, but revisiting them in writing felt like a real visit, and I discovered how much their voices and their stories live in me and have shaped my own stories.

To evaluate my performance as an autoethnographer, it seems useful to take another look at Adams' and Jones' list of qualities of an autoethnography, which was discussed in the critical introduction:

- Uses a researcher's personal experiences to describe and critique cultural beliefs, practices and experiences.
- Acknowledges and values a researcher's relationships with others.

- Uses deep and careful self-reflection—typically referred to as “reflexivity”—to name and interrogate the intersections between the self and society, the particular and general, the personal and the political.
- Shows “people in the process of figuring out what to do, how to live, and the meaning of their struggles.”
- Balances intellectual and methodological rigor, emotion, and creativity.
- Strives for social justice and to make life better (Adams and Jones, 2014, pp. 1–2).

Using Adams and Jones’ list as criteria for a successful autoethnography, how well did I do?

I feel I did very well in attaining the qualities discussed in the first three items on the list. I put my own experiences growing up as a queer rural Appalachian writer in the context of the larger rural Appalachian culture, showing both the ways I fit into the culture and the ways I strained against its confines. Most of the essays focused on the value of my relationships with others, and I feel that I used reflexivity to take my analysis into some interesting and sometimes uncomfortable places. In terms of the fourth item on the list, I think I showed myself in the process of “figuring out what to do and how to live” (Adams & Jones, 2014, pp. 1–2). My hope is that I did so in such a way that it might help others on a similar journey.

The last two items on Adams’ and Jones’ list make me feel a little less confident. I think my “intellectual and methodological rigor” were mostly balanced with my “emotion and creativity” (Adams & Jones, 2014, pp. 1–2); however, I struggle with feeling that my level of rigor is insignificant compared to that of more traditionally academic dissertations. As to whether my dissertation “strives for social justice and to make life better” (Adams & Jones, 2014, pp. 1–2), it

certainly strives in that direction. However, making life “better” is a tall order, and as much as I strive for social justice in my life and writing, I generally feel that what I am doing isn’t enough.

Perhaps Joyce Carol Oates’ metaphor for writing fiction works in some ways for autoethnography as well. The autoethnographer also “gathers chunks and fragments of the writer’s life” (p. 399), weaving them together in a way that shows small truths but larger ones as well. But unlike in Oates’ fiction metaphor, the autoethnographer is both bird and ornithologist, subject and researcher, seeing a life from the inside but also from the outside, able to analyze but also to take flight.

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VITA

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