

Interview with Wiley Cash, August 2017

By Brianna Maguire and Sylvia Bailey Shurbutt

BM & SS: We know that “place” is one of the most defining aspects of your writing. As we have explored those places that may have shaped you, we’ve been struck by the importance of Gastonia, NC, where you grew up. Can you share information about your boyhood in the Piedmont area of North Carolina. What was your family connection with Gastonia, and what was the importance of the colorful history of that place that shaped you as a writer?

WC: My family is from the area in and around Gaston County, North Carolina, which is in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains. Gaston County is an interesting place because it was settled by Native Americans and later overrun by whites who first used the countless streams and branches of the Catawba River to run whiskey stills. Where there was whiskey, there was commerce and due to a few other natural resources people began to set up farms and homesteads and small communities. By the mid-nineteenth century the same running water that was used to power whiskey stills was harnessed to power cotton mills. People who had grown up on the farms began to believe in the easy life promised by millwork. Mountaineers were being made the same promises just west of Gastonia in the Blue Ridge Mountains of East Tennessee and Western North Carolina. So in the second decade of the twentieth century there was an incredible confluence of farmers from the North Carolina piedmont and the South Carolina upstate and mountaineers from Appalachia. All of these people were marked by hardscrabble living, rugged determination, and fierce individualism. But their cultures merged, their musical styles borrowed from one another, and a shared language was born. Together they faced the realities of life in the mill village, which in many instances was harder, more oppressive, and more dire than anything they had faced back in the hollers and hills and on the farms from which they had come. My grandparents were of the generation that left the mountains and the farms for the mills. Both of my parents were born in mill villages. By the time I was born, many of the mills had closed and the life that my parents knew was gone, but, nonetheless, I grew up with an acute awareness of this life and my writing about it is an attempt to reclaim it.

BM & SS: We know that Flannery O’Connor influenced your writing, and she has a strong religious flavor to her fiction. We also notice that you portray the River Road Church of Christ in Signs Following with care and respect. What was your experience and what are your thoughts about this kind of radical religious sect?

WC: I was raised Sothern Baptist and some of the language and practices that I grew up with are the same as what you would find in a Holiness church. While we didn’t handle snakes, I grew up in a community of believer that laid hands on people in prayer and sometimes spoke in tongues and, as Clem says in *A Land More Kind Than Home* (ALMKTH), talked about the devil like he lives next door. While I’m no longer practicing this particular branch of faith, I can’t help but marvel at its incredible power. I’ve always

believed that in any religion we seek a way to make sense of the world, and here I use religion loosely because for some people it may be academic, intellectual, artistic, physical, while for others it's a spiritual exercise. But so often these are attempts to get at some form of understanding of the world and our place in it. In *ALMKTH* I write about religion/holiness belief with respect because I believe that our attempts to genuinely understand ourselves and our world should be respected.

BM & SS: Can you talk a little about the motivation behind presenting multiple perspectives in each of your novels? What do you find to be valuable about presenting the reader with different characters, rather than delving more deeply into one character? Writing in this way seems to help readers understand many angles of one issue, while also complicating the individual narratives (for example, in *A Land More Kind than Home*, Clem's depiction of Jimmy Hall is complicated by Jess's own interactions with his grandfather, which seem to be largely caring and remorseful). What do you find most useful about this narrative move?

WC: I always write about characters that are members of larger communities. Regardless of how close-knit a community is, no single community member knows the full story. In *ALMKTH*, I relied on three distinct voices/characters to give the full story. Jess, the younger brother of a boy who suffers a terrible fate during healing service, represents the family, and he can speak to the family's experience of struggling with faith and love and history. Adelaide is the church matriarch, which makes her the cultural conscience of this community of believers. She knows the history of the church and she knows that its members have fallen under the sway of the mysterious preacher Chambliss. Clem Barfield, the local sheriff, is tasked with making sense of this tragedy. And he is able to discover the history of CC, but he has no idea what's going on inside the church, and the only knowledge he has of Jess's family is the knowledge of an outsider looking in. I wanted the reader to be able to know all of these people in a way these people could never know one another.

BM & SS: We really enjoyed the contemporary evocations in *A Land More Kind Than Home*—the reference to autism and the story about corrupted power and leadership set within an almost Shakespearean tragic finale where irony and carnage litter the closing pages. How do you structure theme, image, and the finer literary aspects of your stories within the narrative? What takes precedence for you—narrative or these important thematic evocations?

WC: Honestly, neither. What takes precedence for me is the characters. I feel that if I can create interesting characters that I believe in and want to spend time with, then eventually they will do interesting things. And all interesting things are based on conflict and these conflicts are Shakespearean not because Shakespeare created them but because Shakespeare was a wonderful observer and chronicler of human nature. Shakespeare is telling the same stories found in the bible: love, betrayal, and greed. And the bible is telling stories that pre-date its own existent as a written text. My characters fall into the same patterns that we all fall into. The job of the writer is to notice these patterns and record them accurately in ways that feel both familiar and instructive.

BM & SS: In *A Land More Kind than Home*, aside from the children, there doesn't seem to be many clearly "good" characters, but also (aside from Chambliss), many clearly "bad" characters—even Adelaide Lyle and Clem Barefield make decisions with arguably fatal consequences. However, the Biblical presence within the novel seems to evoke a traditional good versus evil struggle. In what ways do you feel that your characters complicate the images of good and evil?

WC: There's an old saying that even the villain believes that he is the hero of his own life. If you have characters that are wholly good or wholly bad, you have stereotypes and melodrama, and if you rely on stereotypes and melodrama then your writing won't feel realistic. I wanted to create characters that felt a full range of emotions. Adelaide bares some responsibility for allowing Christopher to go inside the church. Clem bares some responsibility for not speaking out about Carson Chambliss sooner. Even Jess, who as you pointed out, is the most innocent character in the novel, bares incredible guilt due to the secrets he keeps, the things he's seen, and the knowledge he has.

BM & SS: We've been particularly struck by how well you can put your consciousness into the perceptions of characters that are children or women. Can you talk about the kinds of challenges and the satisfaction that you encountered in creating the voice of Jess in *A Land More Kind Than Home* and Easter in *This Dark Road to Mercy*.

WC: I had a creative writing teacher once who told us that every emotion we would ever need to write about we've experienced before we used language and that every emotion we will ever need to write about can be conjured by appealing to our childhood memories. This is what I was thinking about while writing about Jess and Easter: What scared me as a child? What made me feel brave? Where did I feel safest? Where did I feel most alone? As far as writing about female characters, I have a lot of personal and literary models from which to draw. I relied on them. I also find it's less intimidating to write about characters who are nothing like me. For example, Adelaide Lyle is an 81-year-old woman. I was in my early 30s when I was writing about her. Nothing of my personal self went into creating her, but I spent a lot of time thinking about my grandmother, Lucille Adeline Cash, who lived, spoke, and acted just like Adelaide. In writing about Adelaide I got to remember my grandmother. I'd rather spend time with a character that reminds me of my grandmother than I would a character that reminds me of me. I find my grandmother much more interesting.

BM & SS: The voices of the women in your latest book *The Last Ballad* are remarkable: Ella May, Claire McAdams, Katherine McAdams, and others. Writers such as F. Scott Fitzgerald and D. H. Lawrence cultivated some particular tricks for capturing the female voices in their books. Your female voices appear wholly genuine, in the same way that Robert Morgan's female voices are genuine. How do you accomplish this quality in your fiction?

WC: I just try to create character I believe in. And as I mentioned before, I rely on literary models and people I knew/know.

BM & SS: Your works consistently address complex family dynamics and seem to analyze the structure of the family on the whole. At the same time, these relationships seem timeless—fathers whose own mistakes affect their children, brothers and sisters who find comfort in one another, and so on. Where does the inspiration come from as you construct the families in your stories?

WC: Families are our earliest sources of tension. If we have siblings, we have to get along with them; if we have parents, we have to follow rules. At a very early age we are trying to discover how to live in the world of other people. And these relationships become more complicated over time, and if you throw in challenges like social class or addiction or regional isolation these challenges become greater still. Conflict is the basis of story and these relationships are often grounded in conflict, and we carry those conflicts with us the rest of our lives.

BM & SS: You write so poignantly and touching about fathers, particularly the relationship between fathers and daughters. How did becoming a father impact your writing?

WC: I'm not quite ready to answer a question like this.

BM & SS: Can you share a bit about what it was like growing up in Gastonia? What did your parents do and what kind of family experiences stand out in your mind, and what do you remember about being a boy that you think may have impacted your fiction?

WC: I grew up in a solidly middle-class household. My mother was a nurse and my dad was a pharmacist. The neighborhood I lived in was close to my elementary school and there were woods and fields outside our backyard so my brother, sister, and I grew up playing outdoors. I thought Gastonia was a great place to grow up, but as an adult I look back and realize that I was relatively sheltered. For example, my brother, sister, and I played in basketball leagues at the YMCA throughout our childhoods. The YMCA sat next door to an enormous mill that I knew as the Firestone plant. I had no idea that Firestone had not always owned the building. In fact, back in 1929, the building that was then the Loray Mill had been the epicenter of one of the most violent labor movements in American history. I never heard a word about this growing up in Gastonia.

BM & SS: How much did this past national election over the past two years affect your composing of *The Last Ballad*? We cannot help but notice such phrases as “We need to take our city back” and the like sprinkled throughout the book. Likewise, North Carolina has been in the news a good bit of late because of legislative racism and bigotry. On the other hand, these references in your books are both subtle and muted, and they are not likely to be off-putting or even noticed by the casual reader. Your stories are usually set in a specific time in the past or in an isolated, rarified environment, so what is your rule of thumb concerning contemporary social comment in your stories?

WC: While fiction is not written about all times it can be read and applied to any specific time. *The Last Ballad*, which is set in 1929, can be read in light of contemporary events. The

novel is about the tragic storm when issues of race, class, gender, and economics came together in a violent conflict. These same things were happening leading up to the 2016 general election. Ella May Wiggins was a strong independent woman with her own ideas. Hillary Clinton was the same. Ella May stood up to the forces of economic greed and many people would argue that the name Donald Trump is synonymous with economic greed. As a matter of fact, I don't think Trump would have any problem making that argument himself. As Gordon Gecko said in Wall Street: "Greed is Good." In *The Last Ballad*, Ella and her children are literally staving to death because, despite her struggles, she can't make a living wage to feed her family. Ella and her children would not agree that greed is good. In our current political climate working families living at or below the poverty level who are having their social safety nets pulled out from beneath them would not agree that greed is good. So while *The Last Ballad* may be written about 1929, I suppose you could say that it can be read for our contemporary moment.

BM & SS: Concerning your social media presence and beyond, you are clearly passionate about the social and political issues in our society today. Do you feel that writing has given you a voice in the social sphere, both indirectly, within your works, and directly? How do you find your footing and the balance between writing powerful works and addressing contemporary issues—or, are the two efforts one and the same?

WC: I believe the two efforts are one and the same. Fiction is not created in a vacuum. It's a product of everything the writer is living, seeing, hearing, and experiencing. I can't help but respond to our current political environment as a writer. And I certainly can't help but respond to it as a citizen. The only difference is that now that I have a few books out people who may not know me as a person with political opinions may know me as a writer with political opinions.

BM & SS: We love the wonderful road-trip that *This Dark Road to Mercy* portrays. The story is certainly an exciting page-turner, but you have added an element of profundity by evoking Joseph Campbell's classic "journey of the hero," particularly as the journey is cast within the framework of the quest for one's father. Another interesting aspect about the journey in your book is the fact that it is a little girl's journey as well. What made you select the road-trip structure for *This Dark Road to Mercy*?

WC: The road trip is synonymous with American culture and so is baseball. What's also synonymous with American culture is westward expansion: the search for one's future by trying to deal with one's past, either by understanding it or running from it. In terms of the novel, I thought there would be nothing more wholesome than a father and his children literally following the 1998 homerun race, but Wade is also running from something in his past, and Easter is trying to move toward something in her future. That's why the scene of them at Mount Pisgah was so important to me. There are literally crossing a continental divide and they are doing it in a place where the earliest American settlers tried to imagine their futures with the vantage point of being able to look upon the road they had traveled.

This feels distinctly American to me. As far as those other tropes—heroes, journey, search for father—those are so engrained in the American psyche that you can't help but borrow from them in your writing, and as a reader you can't help but locate them in a text.

BM & SS: Your stories have created some memorable characters, with names that strike one: Wade Chesterfield, Clem Barefield, Easter and Ruby Quilby, Christopher “Stump” Hall, and others. How much thought do you give to your characters' names, do the characters ever evolve and surpass their names, or do you settle on naming at the very beginning of composing a tale?

WC: Characters kind of name themselves. In my mind I start with who these people are. Maybe they remind me of someone I've known, and I borrow from that person's name. Maybe I'm looking for something that feels distinctly American like Wade Chesterfield. Or maybe I'm looking for a nickname like Stump that speaks to a disposition or a physical description. The good thing about being a writer is that you can name characters after they reveal themselves to you.

BM & SS: *The Last Ballad* is a bit of a departure for you—it is a larger story with a national and historic context and has a far larger cast of characters and narrators than any of your past books. What was the impetus to tackle such an interesting, complex, and in many ways contemporary topic?

WC: The story behind *The Last Balled*—the story of the 1929 Loray Mill Strike—was something I learned about years before I began either *ALMKTH* or *TDRTM*. While the story unfolds the summer of 1929, the events leading up to the strike and the cultural, social, and political implications of the strike are much larger than the actual moments of the strike itself. The summer of 1929 is a snapshot of social, racial, political, and cultural conflicts that were centuries in the making, and I would argue that we are still coming to terms with the repercussions of these kinds of societal upheavals. This is my third book because I finally feel ready to tackle a story of this complexity. I understand this country, especially the American south, and its history and culture in a way that I did not fully understand it in 2003 when I first learned of the Loray Mill strike. I wasn't ready to write this book then. It's my largest and most complicated book because it's the largest and most complicated thing I've ever written about.

BM & SS: What interested you specifically about Ella May Wiggins' story—do you have any family connections with the labor or mill wars of the early Twentieth Century?

WC: What interested me about Ella May was the story of a 28-year-old single mother who'd given birth to nine children and watched four of them die from poverty-related illnesses. This is a woman who had been abandoned by her husband and worked 72 hours a week in a textile mill for \$9, and she was murdered for standing up for her rights just seven miles from the place I was raised, and I never heard a word about her. So her story was what made me want to write about her. What made me want to write about mill life is the fact that both of my parents were born in mill villages to parents who were part of the generation that left the farms for the “good life” offered by the mills. By the time I was born, the mill culture had

passed. Many of the mills had closed and many of those jobs had either disappeared due to technology or had moved overseas. My grandparents were born on farms. My parents were born in mill villages. I was born in the suburbs. This novel is a backward looking attempt at understanding that migration and trying to reclaim something of a past that's gone forever.

BM & SS: We like the way you brought together a story with both a class/economic context and a racial context in *The Last Ballad*. What was your purpose in connecting those two causes?

WC: My only purpose was to actively reflect the historical moment. So much of American history is dominated by the stories of contentiousness between races and social classes, but there is a history that too often goes untaught and therefore unknown, and that is a history of whites and blacks working together for class stratification and political enfranchisement. No state has a stronger history of this than North Carolina. In the years after Reconstruction, poor whites and African Americans joined political forces to form the Fusionist Party, and it rocked the political foundations anchored by old money in the state. So what the insiders did was go to great lengths to drive wedges between African Americans and poor whites. This is what happens in *The Last Ballad*. Ella May realizes that black mill workers and white mill workers have poverty and desperation in common. And mill owners went to great lengths to keep these groups separated.

BM & SS: Each of your stories portrays strong women: Adelaide in *A Land More Kind Than Home*, Easter in *This Dark Road to Mercy*, and Katherine, Sophia, and Ella in *The Last Ballad*. What are your thoughts about strong women, and have there been any in your life that have made particular impressions on you?

WC: I live my life surrounded by strong women, my wife and my daughters especially. There's the old maxim that says, "Write what you know." Well, this is what I know. In order for the novels I'm writing to work, the women at the center of them have to be strong because they are either elderly like Adelaide, young like Easter, poor like Ella, or socially disenfranchised like Katherine, who although wealthy is locked in a life of domesticity. These women have to be strong to overcome the limitations that are placed on them by society and the people in their lives.

BM & SS: What do you have in store for your readers next as a storyteller and observer of the human experience?

WC: I've learned the hard way not to talk about a project until it's done. I'm under contract to write one more novel for my publisher and, at this point, all I can tell you is that it will be set in North Carolina. The next one will be too.