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A Conversation with Georgann Eubanks

Author of *Literary Trails of the North Carolina Mountains: A Guidebook*

Published in association with the North Carolina Arts Council, an agency of the Department of Cultural Resources, by the University of North Carolina Press

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Q: Why do you think that cultural tourism in general, and literary tourism in particular, is gaining popularity in the United States?

A: I think that as our built environment in the United States has become increasingly homogenized by the brand name hotels and chain restaurants at every Interstate exit, tourists now have to look much harder to find what makes any destination interesting, memorable, and distinctive. It seems increasingly true that only through the arts, the indigenous crafts, and the cultural history of a place and its people can we find what makes a destination truly special, what gives it an identity that's worth visiting. Of course geography can be a powerful variable in this country, but even the vistas are diminished by so many familiar logos lighting up the sky everywhere.

In response to this situation, my family long ago adopted a rule on vacation that no matter where we go, we avoid the mall and chain, even in hotel/motel choices if we can. Instead, we drift off the Interstates, follow two-lane highways and seek out the shops, sites, and vintage restaurants that can still reveal the history, tastes, and culture of a place. This practice makes travel a much more authentic process of discovery.

In terms of literature, our North Carolina writers and those from outside the state who've spent significant time here have done a pretty amazing job over the past 200-plus years of capturing the language, dialects, syntax, quirky characters, and sensory aspects of this state. Their works are a natural companion for the tourist who is looking to go beyond the surface and learn about North Carolina, past and present.

What continues to motivate me in the Literary Trails project is the hunt for those places, authors, and quirky stories that I didn't know before. As Robert Frost said, "...no surprise for the writer, no surprise for the reader." I hope that *Literary Trails of the North Carolina Mountains* and the subsequent volumes on the Piedmont and East will surprise and delight readers in the same way that I was delighted and surprised in the research and writing.

Of course, the Trails books contain information that anyone could find if they look hard enough, but what I hope makes this project different is the aggregation of stories, anecdotes, and literary tidbits that accompany the poems and excerpts of narratives from NC writers. Lots of people take books they've

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been meaning to read on vacation with them. This project suggests books that tourists can carry on vacation that are about the places they're headed.

Q: The University of North Carolina Press is publishing this book in association with the North Carolina Arts Council, an agency of the Department of Cultural Resources. How does this guide tie in with other North Carolina Arts Council initiatives?

A: This series of books follows two other distinguished volumes. *Blue Ridge Music Trails: Finding a Place in the Circle*, written by Fred C. Fussell, is a comprehensive traveler's guide to finding old-time and bluegrass music and dance venues in the mountains. *Cherokee Heritage Trails Guidebook*, written by Barbara R. Duncan and Brett H. Riggs, traces the heritage of the Cherokee people in sacred places, historic sites and through descriptions of the community ties, storytelling, and folk arts of these indigenous people. It covers the southern mountain region of western North Carolina, eastern Tennessee and northern Georgia.

I am really proud to be a part of this innovative way to share North Carolina culture with visitors, new residents, and natives. Our Arts Council is nationally recognized for such creative projects.

Q: *Literary Trails of the North Carolina Mountains* is the first of three planned guidebooks in this series. When will the two companion volumes about the Piedmont and Coastal Plain be available?

A: Obviously, this is an enormous undertaking, but we hope to bring out the next books in 2009 and 2010.

Q: In the book's preface, you talk about your childhood experiences with literature. Did you have any early encounters with literary tourism?

A: I actually grew up in Georgia. I came to North Carolina for college, and I've been here ever since, more than 30 years.

As a child, I do remember that my family took me to visit Joel Chandler Harris's home, "The Wren's Nest" in Atlanta when I was very young and was just getting to know the Uncle Remus stories. From that and several other experiences, I'd have to say that my earliest awareness of history and the fame of certain writers was totally informed by place. I was actually born 90 years to the day after Sherman burned Atlanta, and the first movie my father ever took me to see was "Gone With the Wind" when I was five. (Of course that was a revival showing, though my mother had actually been to the premiere at the Loew's Grand Theater in 1939.) For better or worse, Margaret Mitchell was an Atlanta icon.

Later, I remember going to the public library in downtown Atlanta as a teenager and gazing into the glass case that held Mitchell's portable Remington typewriter. Today, seeing Thomas Wolfe's typewriter in

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Asheville gives me the same thrill as does walking the halls of the Grove Park Inn and trying to imagine F. Scott Fitzgerald gazing across the hills to the site of Highland Hospital where his wife Zelda was a patient.

Q: How do you envision literary tourists using your book?

A: I imagine some people reading it straight through and skipping over the driving directions, just enjoying it as armchair tourists. I also hope that travelers will grab it as they go out the door on a business trip, hoping to find something to do in addition to their work in a given locale. And of course, I hope that families and groups of friends will decide to take the actual tours—there are 18—going to the sites that interest them, and most importantly stopping to read aloud from the excerpts included from novels, short stories, and poetry collections. That's exactly what Donna Campbell (the photographer on the project) and I did. We'd climb a trail and stop and read a poem and keep going. Or when I'd find an excerpt I'd copy it down, print it out, and we'd go hunting for the spot described.

The NC Arts Council is also creating a magnificent website based on the book where travelers can access a good bit of the book and also keep up with developments in literature—new books coming along by local authors in the area. Eventually we hope to add podcasts, video and other tidbits so that curious travelers might actually hear the voices of the writers included along the Trails.

Q: Why is it important that people remember these literary landmarks? Are any of them in danger of being forgotten?

A: Well, as I learned so plainly from my colleagues at the North Carolina Humanities Council, we cannot fully know who we are today without knowing where we have come from. Again, I think the present fascination among so many folks to explore their genealogy has been amplified by the homogeneity that's overtaken certain parts of our lives. People today seem to have a deep desire not to relinquish their identities and histories in the midst of so much destruction of the cultural artifacts that once defined the small towns and family traditions of all kinds of peoples in North Carolina. These identities are being blurred. Material culture is moving so quickly toward fusion, as is our food. This blending is certainly not all bad. It can be very exciting and interesting to mix traditions and tastes, but our state's writers—past and present—remind us of who we were, where we've been, what our core values have been, and how we have lived. Books are a preservation mechanism, whether fiction or nonfiction.

As for the literary landmarks, of course they are changing and disappearing all the time. The second book of the Trails Project will make this quite plain, particularly in the literature that's come out of Charlotte—a town that has destroyed its landmarks in favor of progress. In the Piedmont we've gone from

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textiles to high tech, from shade tree mechanics to the big business of NASCAR. In fact, the Piedmont Trails really do lift up the transition from Old South to New South, from "muscle to mind work" as one sociologist put it. But contemporary North Carolina poets such as James Applewhite and Barbara Presnell remind us of our roots.

Q: How does touring these places help one both gain insight into the authors' minds and understand the personalities behind their works? Did every author actually visit the places with which they're associated?

A: The only writer I can think of who did not actually visit the place he wrote about that's included in the Trails is Jules Verne. Amazingly, he launched a whole novel based on something he read in a library in France about the Brown Mountain Lights—a mysterious visual phenomenon near Morganton in the Blue Ridge. Verne never visited North Carolina, and beyond the first few pages of the novel, it shows! Still, how could I leave that fantastical story out?

That said, my assignment from the N. C. Arts Council has been to create tours that take people to actual places written about by writers who lived and worked there. So I must confess that finding excerpts that speak first to actual places has been my priority more than trying to offer some kind of inventory of all the good works written by every NC writer or visiting author of some note. This series of books is fundamentally about seeing North Carolina places through the eyes of the writers who have documented them.

Of course the anecdotes and foibles of these writers are also irresistible fodder. I have delved into the scholarly investigations and eye-witness accounts of how some of the writers lived and did their work. For example, reading Carl Sandburg's granddaughter's memoir brings the Sandburg home in Flat Rock alive. Would-be novelist and bookstore owner Tony Buttitta's encounters with F. Scott Fitzgerald in Asheville are quite remarkable. University of Tennessee English professor Alison Ensor shared his research with me about the separate visits to Biltmore House of Gilded Age novelists and good friends Edith Wharton and Henry James. James hated the place; Wharton was charmed.

Though I have used some literary biography, criticism, and academic research to inform the book, I wouldn't want prospective readers to think this is a highly analytical or scholarly work. I have tried to be very ecumenical and down-to-earth in the selections, hoping to offer stories, anecdotes and excerpts that will appeal to all kinds of readers—of popular fiction, mysteries, literary fiction, poetry, biography, and memoir.

Q: Do you have a favorite literary landmark in the North Carolina mountains?

A: I love the North Carolina mountains, period, so that's a very hard question. I suppose the French Broad River and the New River are two landmarks that tie together many stories, peoples, and a vast swatch of real estate in the mountains. They have inspired a raft of powerful writing. Notably, the late Wilma Dykeman's lyrical history, *The French Broad*, was a key resource to me and likewise should be to

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travelers in the region. The New River has also been written about, most recently by Noah Adams of NPR fame. Both rivers are often mentioned in the same breath with the Nile as being among the oldest on the planet.

Of course when we're talking about rivers in western North Carolina, the Pigeon is also important, especially in the work of our state's literary jack-of-all-genres, Fred Chappell.

Q: How did you organize the tours, and how long did it take you to put them together?

A: I began with each county in the region by turn, trying to find references to as many writers as I could who had a connection to that county. Then I'd look at the works of the writers, searching for mentions of actual places or fictional places that bore a resemblance to the actual. Beyond the usual suspects, I searched the Internet and my hometown libraries for leads to both literature and writers. I also drew upon my 30 years of reading and getting to know the literary community in North Carolina, so I already own a lot of relevant books. But I soon found out how much I didn't know.

Once I had a list of promising excerpts, books, and anecdotes, photographer Donna Campbell and I set out to see how to connect the dots. Once we were in a county, I would spend time in at least one local library per county to double check for someone I might have missed. I also asked bookstore owners, phoned writers I knew in an area, and asked other local experts. Putting the tours together was then basically a matter of tracing out a driving route that was not too long for a day's worth of touring and that offered some interesting literature to inform the travel. It took a couple of years to get through the region since traveling some of these routes in winter was not something I wanted to try.

Q: There are several authors whom many people connect with the mountains of North Carolina—Thomas Wolfe with Asheville and Charles Frazier with Cold Mountain, for example. Who are some other notable authors with ties to the area?

Kathryn Stripling Byer is our state's current poet laureate, whose work is both brilliant and accessible, full of mountain talk and rich rural images. Likewise, Robert Morgan, born in Zirconia near Hendersonville and inspired by his grade school teacher to become a writer, is best known now for his novels about the mountains. (He's been on *Oprah* for his book *Gap Creek*.) But Morgan's poetry was invaluable to me in helping to reveal the mountain culture and history while also getting us from one place to the next. His poems offer surprising tales focusing on place, character, or landscape.

Sharyn McCrumb, whose forebears are from Mitchell County, has written a series of "ballad novels" that lift up longstanding mountain legends and tragedies. She has carved out a niche that is all her own. Jan Karon, who was born in Caldwell County and lived for a time in Blowing Rock, is of course a nationally known voice in popular Christian fiction.

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Then there are other surprises. Novelist Anne Tyler spent her early years in Celo—a Quaker community near Burnsville. Frances Hodgson Burnett, who wrote *My Secret Garden* and *Little Lord Fauntleroy*, was fond of the Chimney Rock area and spent time writing there. Tony Earley, who teaches now at Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tennessee, is, to me, one of the most insightful essayists and short story writers from the region. He is from Rutherfordton.

Q: Why has North Carolina attracted so many celebrated authors and poets? Do you think the state will continue to be a magnet for literary talent in the future?

A: The state is and continues to be a magnet for literary talent. I believe partly it is the noncompetitive and generous literary community here, where seasoned writers help beginning writers learn their craft and navigate the publishing world. The natural beauty and the variety of cultures and landscapes in the state continue to be powerful draws. The strength of higher education in North Carolina is also a significant force, as is the longstanding emphasis placed on nurturing the arts in communities at the grassroots. This is fertile literary soil! There is so much more to be written about North Carolina, and nothing would make me happier than knowing that a child on vacation tried his or her hand at a poem after being inspired by some of the excerpted works in this book.

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