

More Wine Bar & Sushi than Moonshine & Okra

Every time I sit down to brainstorm a novel, I'm overwhelmed by the age-old advice provided to all writers: Write What You Know. That means a lot of things, really. Don't write about the Pacific Northwest if you've never been there. Don't write about a life of excessive wealth if you grew up in a trailer. To a Southerner like me, Writing What I Know means that I have to address one of the most formative aspects of my life—the South.

If, like me, you're Southern or Appalachian, your setting has to be an additional character in your fiction. There's no way around it. It's not like setting your work in a place like Chicago, where the city provides the parameters, or someplace like L.A., where the attitude, commitment to beauty, and pervasive nature of the entertainment industry are part of the character's lifestyle. If your character is from the South, then she either embraces it or runs from it, but she is always part of the South.

take hold at some point. Making a dulcimer is no longer a rite of passage at home. Attaining adulthood at home now means dealing with the stereotypes of "Hillbilly Methhead" or "Oxycontin Dealer" that are presented in the national media, and watching the Wal-Mart culture take over small-town commerce. It means living in a once-beautiful area that has been pillaged by decades of environmentally insensitive coal practices, and the debilitating unemployment that results when that coal runs dry. It means that every achievement is a struggle against the stereotypes of inbred, illiterate hillbillies. It means that every few years, the national media will come to some small town in eastern Kentucky and film the most pathetic sights possible while the area's educated, hard-working people are filled with impotent rage, screaming that their lives aren't that way at all. It means being one of the few stereotypes that may still be acceptably ridiculed. While I've always felt that

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Southern Voices by Heather C. Watson

As a Southern writer, I also struggle with the traditions of Southern literature. I always fear that anytime I sit down to put pen to paper (OK, turn on my Mac...), that my prose will be derivative of my beloved Conroy, who is derivative of the thorny Faulkner, who is derivative of the convoluted genius of Proust. Those are some heady cats to associate with, but it's nearly impossible to tell a serious story of the South without at least a nod to the first two. Southern writers take their home

How do I tell the story of learning about city driving, intricate social graces and non-regional diction without conveying disdain for my country roots?

I grew up in a very artsy, talented and well-educated family in eastern Kentucky. My father's family is full of ridiculously talented musicians and writers and artisans. I can point to dozens of books written by my various distant cousins about Appalachian history—Appalachian fiction or Appalachian history or even children's stories set in Appalachia. My great-uncle makes his own fiddles and his own moonshine, and more female relatives than I can count have made amazing quilts from the "old patterns." In short, I spent the first seventeen years of my life deeply immersed in old-time Appalachian culture, which is a great source of pride for my entire clan. But that experience isn't mine to write about.

I don't feel like I own that culture because I left there as soon as I could. I feel a strong connection to the dying art forms that many of my family members have fought to preserve, but the future of that area isn't the same as its past. Even if I had stayed to write a book about my own Appalachian experience, the confines of reality would have to

there is a need for a novel in The New Appalachia, I know that it isn't my story to tell, because I left there as soon as I could. To honestly Write What I Know, I have to admit that my twenties and early thirties have been more Wine Bar and Sushi than Moonshine and Okra.

I've always been a Southern City Girl. I prefer living in a neighborhood where I can walk to restaurants and coffee shops. My dog belongs in the bed with me, not in the back of a pickup truck. I value my Appalachian heritage and appreciate the unique perspective it has brought me, but I need to be in an urban area to feel alive and engaged. My daddy says that, even when I was a little girl, my eyes would light up when we would travel through big cities. Skyscrapers, pedways, and streetlights have always caught my eye. As a writer, I walk the tightrope of conveying that setting without belittling the area of my origin. So many of my fellow Appalachians are so very proud to remain in the region; how do

with them wherever they go. Even the Great Gonzo himself, Dr. Hunter Thomson, was prone to poetic, nostalgic remembrances of juleps and front porches in Louisville's Highlands, one of the places I have also called home. On the other hand, my experiences as a Sorority Girl, a Junior Leaguer and a Lawyer's Fiancée in Southern Cities sort of scream "Southern Chick Lit." Yuck. It would be easy to write a book about a spoiled, plucky southern belle, but who wants to end up with a pink cover?

So there we go—my thoughts on the difficulties I've had hammering out my own voice as a writer and making a setting work for me.

I'll keep you posted. ■

Heather C. Watson, a native of Hueysville, KY, holds degrees from Transylvania University and the University of Kentucky. She currently lives in Nashville with her fiancé, Bob, and her Black Lab, Max. She recently completed her first half-marathon.

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KENTUCKY STRAIGHT

Where's the "serve" in public servants? By Marcie Crim

This summer I have driven almost the entire length of the state of Kentucky more than once. I've put a few thousand miles on my car, averaged about \$150.00 a week in gas, and become so familiar with my home state that I feel like an adopted member of many different communities. While I have gained a new appreciation for this beautiful place I call home; I've also seen some of the ugly repercussions of greed. I've seen greed in the fresh yellow soil of strip-mined Appalachia, I've seen greed while crossing over the Green River into Muhlenberg County and I've seen it right here in the middle of my beloved Lexington.

On July 12th I was lucky enough to be invited to tour mountaintop removal sites with Congressmen Chandler and Dicks in Hazard, county seat of Perry County. Their plane never arrived—some believe it was sabotaged—and I spent the day listening to Appalachian residents tell stories of destruction, illegal activities, poisoned water, downed oak trees, dust filled lungs and anger at what the coal industry is doing to their part of the world. Not one person present said mining coal is bad; they just want to stop mountaintop removal.

As I drove out of Hazard and into a thunderstorm I angrily thought out loud, "Why don't our public servants serve the public?"

And then I drove into Lexington.

I got off the interstate at the Newtown Pike exit and came into town. I turned left onto 3rd Street, right onto Mill Street and left onto Vine Street. As I pointed my car towards Aylesford Place I passed the rubble that used to be the Triple Crown Lounge and I found myself again asking, "Why don't our public servants serve the public?"

Sunday I was running errands on the North side of the city and came down Upper on my way home. I passed the corner of Upper and Main and saw the fence around the notorious block. My nine-year-old daughter was in the car with me chattering away and I asked her, "Did you see that?" She answered that she didn't so we went around the block to get a better view. As soon as I saw the front of The Dame I lost faith in what regular people can accomplish and cursed the "leaders" of my city. Shattered windows and hanging boards heaved above a pile of concrete and trash. I pulled close to the fence and sat there in the middle of the lane with my mouth open and tears falling. A man was shooting photos with his long lens pushed against the fence.

In 1996, I was 19 turning 20 and I had a fake ID that got me into my first bar, The Millennium. I kissed my future ex-husband and father of my daughter for the first time on the dance floor that I have returned to many times as a patron of The Dame. My most recent relationship really began to feel like a relationship while seeing KRS-One at The Dame back

in 2004. In the beginning of June, my best friend Pilar moved to Eugene, Oregon and we had our last night out in Lexington at The Dame. Between that first kiss in 1996 and dancing to say goodbye this June, The Dame building has supplied me with memories to last a lifetime. I have similar lasting memories of Mia's and Buster's.

I hold much affection for the entire block that is now being torn down in order to build a tower originally designed for an entirely different city than the one it will now occupy.

Tearing down old buildings really doesn't compare with the long-term destruction of the Earth when mountains are torn down. But where there is a comparison is in the people that are elected to office.



Mitch McConnell, Ernie Fletcher, George W. Bush and others receive(d) campaign funds from coal companies that tear up the Earth without regard for the people and animals that reside there. So they do nothing to stop it.

Jim Newberry announced plans for a useless hotel long after he should have let his constituents know what was happening in the core of their city, but he didn't. He kept it from us all. Perhaps he didn't do it maliciously. Perhaps he believed it was really a good thing for the city and people would support it without argument. Or maybe he believed that the argument would come from a certain section of the population; young, creative types who haven't yet made enough money to truly matter to those in power. Regardless, our mayor kept us in the dark. Today my daughter said that she would like to go and see him in his office to tell him, "You let me down."

This past July 4th my daughter and I stood in front of The Dame and Buster's as Jim Newberry passed by in the parade. We booed, along with other members of the downtown community, as our mayor turned his face to the other side of the street. He ignored us as we expressed our discontent in the only way we knew how in that moment. Our mayor ignored us... again.

When the people who populate a place, who know it best and cherish it the most, whether that be in the mountains of Appalachia or the concrete and brick of downtown Lexington start yelling about how they don't want their mountains taken away and their buildings torn down, shouldn't our elected officials listen to those yelling?

When there are better options such as mining (safely) underground and building creatively while incorporating

historic buildings, shouldn't those options come first? Where is the disconnect between what the people want and what they are given from those paid to serve them?

I don't have the answers to these questions and I imagine I never will. However, my daughter and I are moving to Louisville in one week so I won't be around to watch the fall, again, of Lexington.

Of course I hope the city succeeds and great people stick around and fight the good fight much as the residents of Appalachia have been fighting for years.

Unfortunately, it's just not in me this time to watch the good guys lose again. ■

Marcie Crim is a founder of the Lexicon Project and the new director of Special Events for the Cystic Fibrosis Foundation in Louisville. She is also spending her summer working on a special project for the Ford Foundation.