

KNUCKLES & TALES

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NANCY A. COLLINS



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FIRST EDITION

Dedicated To My Folks: Great, Grand Or Otherwise

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INTRODUCTION

GONNA SEND YOU BACK TO ARKANSAW

It took me the better part of my life to finally stop being ashamed of my heritage. I don't mean my genetic background, which is largely Anglo-Scots-Irish with the occasional dollop of French and American Indian for flavor. I'm talking about where I'm from, not who I am; although, on a certain level, the two are inextricably intertwined. No, my secret shame lay in geography, not genetics.

I am a third generation Arkansan, or, if you prefer the antique spelling, Arkansawyer. I grew up in the part of the state known as the Ark-La-Miss; those counties located in the far southeastern corner, in the very heart of the Mississippi delta, near the borders of Louisiana and Mississippi.

I remember the day in third grade when the teacher announced to the class that the "official" spelling of our home state was now 'Arkansas'. Up to that point, 'Arkansaw' was a legitimate alternative. Either way you spell it, I am an Arkie, born and bred. And for most of my conscious life, I felt like I had to beg pardon for that fact. This shame did not originate within me, but was instilled from without.

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I grew up in a couple of small rural communities where the local economy revolved around what was referred to as ‘agri-business’ and the railroad switching yard. Like my parents before me, my only connection to the culture at large was through the mass media. However, where my mama and daddy only had radio and the movies, I had the television.

To my young mind there was little to differentiate the news and the TV shows from one another; both occurred in foreign places far removed from the world I knew and involved people I did not personally know. I was in the second grade before it occurred to me that the war the newscasters were talking about was going on in Vietnam, not the Germany of *Combat* and *Twelve O’Clock High*.

Like all children, television showed me worlds and lifestyles I could never have known in a small, relatively isolated farming community. But like Hispanic, African-American and Asian-American children, I hungered to see something of the world I was familiar with, people and things I could relate to. When I looked to the magic mirror of television, hoping to glimpse a reflection of myself and my family and the lives we lead, all I saw was programs like *The Andy Griffith Show*, *The Real McCoys*, *The Beverly Hillbillies*, *Green Acres*, *Petit Coat Junction*, and *Hee-Haw*.

While there was a recognizable likeness of my world in the fictitious Mayberry and, to a lesser extent, the eccentric farm-folk of Hooterville, for the most part Southerners, and Arkansans in particular, were represented as figure of burlesque: ignorant, raw-boned hillbillies who ate road kill. Jethro Bodine, a flesh-and-blood Li’l Abner minus the social commentary, was as much a symbol of the state in the eyes of others as the University of Arkansas Razorback.

The Southerners of the silver screen weren’t much better, either, although there was far more variation, from the realistic milieus of *To*

Kill A Mockingbird and *Thunder Road*, the Southern Gothic opera of *A Streetcar Named Desire* and Grand Guignol of *Hush, Hush Sweet Charlotte*, to such exploitation/action movies as *Deliverance* and *Southern Comfort*.

According to the popular culture, Southerners were either slack-jawed hicks, murderous rednecks, corrupt sheriffs, faint-hearted Southern belles, effete alcoholic gentry, or indolent hillbillies snoozing on their ramshackle front porches with a jug tucked in one arm and a pig under the other. It was also a foregone conclusion that none of us wore shoes, had indoor plumbing, and that we all held a grudge about the Civil War.

If being a Southerner wasn't embarrassing enough, being from Arkansas was adding insult to injury. Although Arkansas was a part of the Confederacy, it wasn't home to any noteworthy battles, save for Pea Ridge, which couldn't hold a candle to Manassas or Gettysburg. And Missouri claimed the Ozark skirmishes between Union forces and rebel guerilla bands such as Quantrill's Raiders and Bloody Bill Anderson.

As tenuous a source of pride the state's past may have provided, its present was nothing to crow about, what with Arkansas perennially hovering in the second-or-third-to-last spots for public education, literacy, and high school graduations. (The standard, half-joking, response of native Arkansans when faced with such depressing statistics has traditionally been: 'Thank God for Mississippi!') The statistics for teen-aged pregnancies and alcoholism in the state during my youth were as high as the illiteracy rates, and in the late 1970s Arkansas had the dubious distinction of being the Unmarried Teenage Mother Capital of the United States.

While I was growing up, Arkansas' favorite sons were Buddy Ebsen, Johnny Cash, Conway Twitty, Charlie Rich, Glen Campbell, Dizzy &

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Daffy Dean, Lou Brock, and Meadowlark Lemmon. Save for The Man In Black, there wasn't a thimble full of cool to be found.

There wasn't much a young girl, yearning to someday become a writer, could look to for inspiration. It wasn't until I was much older, and had moved away, that I learned that Levon Helm hailed from my home state, as well as such literary and publishing mavens as Charles Portis (*True Grit*), Helen Gurley Brown (*Cosmopolitan*), Maya Angelou (*I Know Why The Sweet Bird Sings*), James Bridges (*The Paper Chase*, *The China Syndrome*, and *Urban Cowboy*), Ellen Gilchrist, John H. Johnson (publisher of *Jet & Ebony*) and Dee Alexander Brown (*Bury My Heart At Wounded Knee*). I guess literary achievements weren't considered as important to state pride as playing the Grand Ole Opry or making the Baseball Hall of Fame (not that there's anything wrong with either of those).

Both my parents and grandparents were proud of their Southern heritage, even though the only reason my mother's family ended up in Arkansas was because my Great-Grandfather Willoughby got drunk on a trip from Illinois to New Orleans and threw all the deck chairs off the river boat and was put out at the first port of call. They tried their best to instill a sense of history in my siblings and I, and to a great extent they succeeded.

But the Mass Media is in constant competition for a child's mind and attention, which was as true then as it is now, and for every lesson in regional pride I received there were numerous movies and television shows telling me that being from the South was either laughably square or something approaching Original Sin.

As I grew up and ventured outside the humble environs of my birth, I found myself experiencing a strange form of discrimination. In this day and age of Political Correctness, where the celebration of Mothers

Day can be banned from a private day school for fear of insulting those children who might not have a traditional mother, apparently the only ethnic group it's still okay to ridicule and make fun of is the Southerner, and White Southerners in particular.

Many of those hailing from the Northern states were surprised to learn that someone as educated and well spoken as myself was not only from the South, but a product of Arkansas in particular. I cannot begin to count the number of times some 'Yankee' (as my Grandma would put it), upon learning where I was from, would smirk and say something along the line of: "So, they wear shoes where *you-all* live?" Or, even better: "That means you're white trash, huh?"

Such was my pre-programmed shame of being an Arkansan, it took the better part of a decade for me to stop apologizing for where my parents had chosen to birth me and start getting uppity. Sometimes you have to run away from home in order to appreciate it. After I graduated from high school, I was desperate to shake the dust of my hometown off my heels and get out into the big, wide world I had glimpsed inside the TV set.

However, once I did some traveling, I discovered that the South did not have a monopoly on hicks, rednecks, racists, crackers, good ole boys, hillbillies, peckerwoods and trailer trash. And the more I get to see of the rest of America, with its suburban sprawl and food court culture, the more I have come to appreciate my upbringing in a small rural community. Unfortunately, another of Arkansas' favorite sons proved to be the evil genius who unleashed Wal-Mart, first on his home state, then on the rest of the country, where it effectively gutted and killed small towns like the ones I grew up in.

It was about that time I began writing the first of my Southern Gothic stories. In my own way I am trying to record memories of a way of life

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that was disappearing even as I lived it. The world of my childhood, with both its good points and bad, has all but vanished, and what little still remains is dwindling with each passing day. I feel an urgency to try and place on paper a time and a place that, in many ways, seems as ancient and removed from the reality of modern-day America as the flickering images seen in Depression-era newsreels.

There is a kernel of reality lodged in the heart of most of the stories you will find in this collection. *The Sunday-Go-To-Meeting Jaw* was inspired by my Great-Grandfather Collins, who served in the First Alabama Volunteer Militia and had most of his lower jaw blown off during the Civil War, which forced him to wear a wooden prosthetic. *How It Was With The Kraits* was based on an actual mother-and-son team who lived in our town. *Raymond* was sparked by my memories of an old classmate of mine who was, indeed, lobotomized and then dumped back into the hell of junior high school. *The Pumpkin Child* took seed from fond memories of my Grandfather Willoughby's annual ritual of taking the family out to select jack o'lanterns from the huge pumpkin patch behind the shack of an ancient African-American man who claimed to have been born a slave, and the old Caddo burial mound that was located on our family farm. *Junior Teeter And The Bad Shine* is based on a horrific moonshine party gone wrong my father had to deal with during his stint as a Deputy Sheriff. *Catfish Gal Blues* was born from the countless Sunday afternoons my father drove us out to the levee to look at the Mississippi. *Billy Fearless* is set in the Kentucky of my Grandmother Willoughby's ancestry. And the McQuiston Sisters who appear in various guises throughout these stories were real women—a trio of spinster schoolteachers who lived next door to my family for several years and whose collective age was greater than that of the United States at its Bicentennial.

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It's taken me a long time, but I'm no longer ashamed of being from Arkansas, even though the Clinton administration put my resolve to the test more than once. But you are what you are, and part of what makes you who you are is where you've been. I haven't lived in the state since 1980, and I've resided in numerous places throughout the country for the last 21 years. But Arkansas has placed its mark on me. You can hear it in my voice, my vocabulary, even my sense of humor. Arkansas is in my blood.

But it will always be Arkansaw in my heart.

Nancy A. Collins

May 13, 2001

Atlanta, GA.

