Appalachian Novels

Appalachia is a term used to describe a cultural region in the eastern United States that stretches from southern New York State to northern Alabama, Mississippi, and Georgia. Since its recognition as a distinctive region in the late 19th century, Appalachia has been a source of enduring myths and distortions regarding the isolation, temperament, and behavior of its inhabitants. Early 20th century writers focused on sensationalistic aspects of the region’s culture, such as moonshining and clan feuding, and often portrayed the region’s inhabitants as uneducated and prone to impulsive acts of violence. The name derived from early Spanish exploration of Florida. While exploring inland along the northern coast of Florida in 1528, the members of the Narvaez expedition, found a Native American village near present day Tallahassee whose name they transcribed as Apalchen or Apalachen. The name was soon altered by the Spanish to Apalachee and used as a name for the tribe and region spreading well inland to the north.

Native American hunter-gatherers first arrived in Appalachia over 12,000 years ago and European migration began in the 18th century pushing westward into the Appalachian Mountains. A relatively large proportion of the early backcountry immigrants were Irish Protestants – later known as “Scotch-Irish” (which included 90% of its early settlers).

Thomas Walker’s discovery of the Cumberland Gap in 1750 and the end of the French and Indian War in 1763 lured settlers deeper into the mountains, namely to upper East Tennessee, Northwestern North Carolina, Upstate South Carolina, and Central Kentucky. Between 1790 and 1840, a series of treaties with the Cherokee and other Native American tribes opened up lands in North Georgia, Northeast Alabama, the Tennessee Valley, the Cumberland Plateau regions, and the highlands along what is now the Tennessee-North Carolina border. The last treaty culminated in the removal of the bulk of the Cherokee population from the region via the Trail of Tears in 1838.

Appalachian frontiersmen have been romanticized for their ruggedness and self-sufficiency. A typical depiction involves a hunter wearing a coonskin cap and buckskin clothing, sporting a long rifle and shoulder-strapped powder horn. Daniel Boone (1734-1820) symbolizes these pioneers who moved into areas largely separated from “civilization” by high mountain ridges, and had to fend for themselves against the elements.

The economy traditionally rested on agriculture, mining, timber, and in the cities manufacturing. While endowed with abundant natural resources, Appalachia has long struggled with poverty. This problem was not brought to the attention of the rest of the United States until 1960, by President John F. Kennedy, who proceeded to establish the President’s Appalachian Regional Commission in 1963.

Music is a well-known manifestation of Appalachian culture derived from the English and Scottish ballad tradition and Irish and Scottish fiddle music. African-American blues musicians developed the instrumental aspects of this music, notably the introduction of the banjo in the late 18th century. Rich in culture, rich in folklore and rich in history, this well-known area will continue to be an inspiration to writers now and in the future. Information about Appalachia has been drawn from The Wikipedia Encyclopedia.


Appalachia is not just a location but a way of life. It's people formed by the land they have chosen as theirs. It is a solitary and isolated area, breathtaking and unique. Capturing the spirit of the place, Wayne Caldwell’s Cataloochee (2007) begins as the Civil War is ending. He tells the account of James (Old Jimmie) Carter's descendants, bringing to life the beauty and the hardship that is found in the mountains of North Carolina. It’s a love story both for the land and the families who populated Cataloochee. It tells of the changes time brings as the world outside intrudes and raises questions of what is justice. As 1928 comes to a close, the Cataloochee Valley can still be described by today’s National Park Service’s website as “nestled among some of the most rugged mountains in the southeastern United States. Surrounded by 6000-foot peaks, this isolated valley was the largest and most prosperous settlement in what is now the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. Once known for its farms and orchards, today Cataloochee is one of the most picturesque areas of the park.” It then goes on the say, "The challenge is getting there."


Sutter’s Cross is a town in the Appalachian mountains of Georgia. Its people exemplify the traditional virtues of hard work, religious faith, hospitality to strangers, and appreciating the land. One day a scruffy, bearded stranger who calls himself Harley turns up out of nowhere. His past is a mystery but he seems harmless enough, and he gets work helping an old woman with her farm. Harley becomes the focal point of dramas brought on by a rapacious developer, a hypocritical pastor, and a reckless child who goes missing during a flood. Will he find redemption in Sutter’s Cross before his past catches up with him? Cramer provides a good, page-turning plot and a life and faith affirming message without preachiness. Recommended for those who like Christian fiction, "gentle reads,” or novels set in Appalachia.

Walt Larimore, MD. Bryson City Tales. 2002.

With stories like those of James Herriot but from the point of view of a physician rather than a veterinarian, Walt Larimore describes his first year of practice in a small community in the Smoky Mountains of North Carolina. His experience as a Duke- university-trained doctor often collide with the rural folk medicine practiced by some of his new colleagues and patients. This leads to some challenging experiences both humorous and touching. That Larimore is now vice president of medical outreach for Focus on the Family comes as no surprise since the practice of his faith is an integral part of his stories. Fans of Philip Gulley’s Home to Harmony series will find common ground in the descriptions of small-town life and Christian perspective.

A dense, lyrical, discursive historical novel set in rural Eastern Tennessee 20 years after the Civil War. The war had bitterly divided the residents of the region, and still profoundly affects people’s views and relationships. Although the novel takes place over just two days, it describes the broader experiences, past and present, of numerous characters, with many reminiscences, memories, and interior monologues. The central character, a young man in his late teens, under the thumb of his genteel, widowed mother, learns some dark secrets about his parents and in the end decides to put off the smothering burdens of family and history by leaving home and going West. True to its time period, the novel reflects the entrenched racism and everyday violence of that world, but also its beauty, its occasional humor, and the possibility of redeeming, or at least breaking free from, the past.


This novel is set in Hamelin, a town in the hills of eastern Tennessee. Nora Bonesteel is a local seer who can sense the wandering ghost of Katie Wyler, a settler who had passed that way several hundred years earlier on an ill-fated trip. Jeremy Cobb is an ill-prepared graduate student trying to recreate her journey. "Harm" Sorley is a 63-year-old escaped convict who may be traveling back through the woods to Hamelin and his ex-wife and daughter. The problem is, he can't remember the past and thinks he is still living several decades earlier. While many of the locals consider Harm a harmless old man and something of a folk hero, due to his possible presence in the area he is also blamed for fresh crimes and the police are determined to catch him. McCrumb creates a sense of place and weaves together the stories of the people who live there.


Robert Morgan (The Truest Pleasure, The Hinterlands, etc.) is a highly hailed author of Appalachian fiction, and he continues his study of Appalachia’s people in Gap Creek, the story of Julie Harmon and the intense struggles that embody her life. From the opening of the book, when Julie’s little brother tragically dies to her marriage to the abusive Hank; from her financial missteps to her solitarily-suffered hardships brought on by man and nature, Julie Harmon, who works “hard as a man” fights back against the continued woes life piles on top of her. Told with respect and accuracy regarding native Appalachians, the book neither pities nor exalts Julie, but portrays her as a steel-spined example of what a woman with strength and determination can survive…and overcome.


The novel includes a wonderful description of the Kentucky Appalachia landscape and the original settlement of this territory in the 1790s. Sabrina Fairfax was raised in an elegant house with servants catering to her every desire. With her father's unexpected death, she finds herself impoverished and alone in London. Among his papers, however she discovers a deed to a piece of land in the colonies and seizes it as her best and perhaps only hope. A mix-up lands Sion Kenyon, an out-of-work miner, in jail. Sabrina arranges his release on the condition that he accompany her to America as an indentured servant. They soon find that nothing is easy in this new land. Adding to the hardships of pioneer life is Sabrina’s struggle with jealousy as she watches Sion’s growing attraction for her friend and neighbor.


Ann Pancake has been called Appalachia’s Steinbeck. She grew up in Romney and Summersville, WV. This first novel, features a southern West Virginia family devastated by mountaintop removal mining. The story begins in 1980 when Lace See goes to Morgantown, WV to attend WVU. A trip back home and a new boyfriend end her college career. Nearly 20 years and four children later, the story unfolds through each of the members of this family. Strip mining is ruining what is left of their mountain life. Based on interviews and real events (especially the Buffalo Creek flood in 1972), the stories of these people merge and finally explode into a harrowing, yet life-affirming conclusion.