

Carolina Picks:

Recent North Carolina Books for Children and Young Adults

by Lisa Mitchell Blouch and Michael Frye

"My teacher told me to read a book about North Carolina."

"I need a story set in North Carolina."

"Where are your books by North Carolina authors?"

Children's and young adult librarians in North Carolina are familiar with this request in all of its variations. The assignment to "read a book about North Carolina" may come at any time during the school year, and from students in almost every grade. North Carolina is, and has been, home to many fine writers, and teachers are eager to impress this fact upon students whose only previous connection between their home state and books about it may be a state history textbook. Fortunately, many of the trade books about North Carolina discussed below are purchased by our state schools and public libraries not only because they are local but also because they have been critically reviewed and approved.

The books presented in this essay are meant to suggest a selective resource list of current North Carolina titles for children and young adults. "Current" here refers to titles published since 1987. Although there are some noteworthy books with older copyrights that otherwise fit the criteria for this discussion, this essay will not examine them. Obviously, the designation "North Carolina title" needs to be defined in more detail. For our purposes, the designation refers to titles in which either 1) North Carolina is the primary setting or 2) a North Carolina background plays an important role in a character's thoughts, actions, or the events which occur around him or her or 3) a prominent personality, either a native or a longtime resident of North Carolina, figures. Many of the authors of such titles as the ones below are

North Carolina personalities themselves. This does not ensure inclusion in this suggested list, however. Many other worthwhile titles by North Carolina authors exist in addition to the ones noted here, but this essay only focuses on those where location, rather than authorship, places a book firmly in this state. All are valuable books that make North Carolina more interesting than a study of its geography and textbook history can ever do.

Legend Has It

North Carolina has a rich heritage of oral literature, and Caldecott award winning author Gail Haley has added to that body of local folklore by gathering and retelling ten escapades of the adventurer extraordinaire, Jack. In *Mountain Jack Tales*, Haley takes us along with the hero as he tackles the likes of witches, snakes, and other unsavory creatures. At the same time she is providing readers with a rousing good adventure, Haley instills an appreciation for the unique dialect and character that are prevalent in the foothills of North Carolina. Not only is the volume of tales a collection that retains the flavor of a quickly vanishing mountain culture, but it is also enhanced by wood engravings that make it a beautiful as well as useful resource.

The Green Gourd — A North Carolina Folktale, by C.W. Hunter also combines the dialect of local mountain regions with illustrations. In his tale, an unfortunate little old woman loses her dipper while trying to scoop up some river water. To remedy her situation, she casually plucks a

green gourd from the vine even though she has been warned not to do so because it will bring bad luck. And bad luck quickly ensues. The result is a chase (made more hilarious by the bright and funny pictures) that involves the old woman, a fox, a panther, and a little boy — a little boy who ultimately catches a runaway, mischievous gourd.

If a walk on the darker side of North Carolina legend and folklore sounds appealing, children and adults alike will appreciate the ghost stories of Winston-Salem, Greensboro, High Point and their surrounding areas as collected in *Triad Hauntings* by Burt Calloway and Jennifer FitzSimons. Readers may enjoy discovering which apparition haunts the auditorium at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, or they may tremble in terror at the thought of facing the same fate as did young Jennifer and Mary when they travelled to Greensboro several years ago.

Sentimental Journeys

Picturebooks appear in fairly substantial numbers in the overall body of North Carolina literature for children. Most of these titles, however, belong to the folklore category rather than to that of picturebook fiction. Indeed, even the three outstanding offerings described below contain more biographical elements than does true fiction. Both authors, Gloria Houston and Gloria Jean Pinkney, are North Carolina natives, and both obviously remember their home state with a great deal of affection. Moreover, both share with readers a view of a North Carolina past that is,

though often sentimental, evocative of a gentle and profound dignity.

Houston's *My Great-Aunt Arizona* features a beloved aunt who, like the author, is a native of North Carolina's Appalachian mountains and a teacher. Illustrations by Susan Condie Lamb portray the beauty and splendor of Appalachia at the turn of the century when Arizona is young. As a child, she loves to read and dream of all the faraway places she will visit when she is an adult. Her life doesn't work out quite as she has planned, however. Arizona is born, marries, and dies in the same mountain town. In between, however, she spends fifty-seven years as a teacher who shares her gift of splendid imagination with her students. What emerges from this story is a warm and engaging portrait of the author's own relative and teacher, a teacher who can answer, when asked by children if she has ever visited any of the wondrous places she describes, that she has only seen them in her mind...but she hopes someday that they will be able to go.

The Year of the Perfect Christmas Tree, another selection by Houston, also includes memories from the author's childhood. The story is based on an Appalachian tradition in which a different family each year is responsible for providing the community with a Christmas tree. Young Ruthie's family has the honor of finding the perfect tree the winter of 1918; but, with a father off fighting in World War I, the honor threatens to become a burden.

Filled with lyrical prose and a dialogue rich with mountain dialect, the story unfolds. Although Ruthie's father's return is imminent, Christmas Eve is coming even more quickly. Furthermore, her perfect tree this year is a balsam tree growing on the rocky mountain crags where only the most adventurous climb. Ruthie and her mother have had a year of hardship, but a promise is a promise, so alone they climb the mountain and bring back the tree. The Christmas is made perfect for Ruthie not only because of the special tree and a Christmas pageant in which she is a principal player, but also, and most importantly, because of her father's Christmas Eve homecoming. Barbara Cooney's warm and inviting illustrations help make this offering a special one for Christmas and any time of the year.

Gloria Jean Pinkney's *Back Home* describes another sort of homecoming. Eight-year-old Ernestine lives with her family up North. Home, though, is Lumberton, North Carolina, where her mother grew up and where she herself was born. Her visit with Uncle June, Aunt Beulah, and teasing Cousin Jack on their small farm strengthens the link between her immediate and extended

families. Ernestine sleeps in the room that was her mother's childhood bedroom; she wears faded overalls that her mother once wore for play; and she places flowers at the grave of the grandmother who died before she was born. Her African American family is a warm and a close one, and its ties to the land, strong. Pinkney, herself, was born in Lumberton and grew up in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Her illustrator, husband Jerry Pinkney, has conveyed in his vibrant paintings the nostalgia that she and Ernestine both must feel for that rural North Carolina of forty years ago.

Looking At It Realistically...

Young adult literature has undergone quite a metamorphosis over the last few years and North Carolina authors have kept pace with the ever changing needs and concerns of young adults. Theodore Taylor, author of *The Weirdo*, tackles familiar young adult concerns such as social acceptance and relationships in his latest novel. However, he also explores the timely and universal themes of living with physical disabilities and of fighting to restore the fragile and precious state of our environment. Chip Clewt is already little more than a "weirdo" in the eyes of the townspeople of Powhatan, but when he joins forces with environmentalists to continue the ban against bear hunting in his county, he soon learns he's in for the fight of his life. Samantha Sanders, daughter of the leader of the local hunters, also joins forces with Chip to help protect the ban on hunting. They soon discover that they are treading on very dangerous ground by challenging the enraged hunters. During their shared struggle, the two discover each other as well as self-acceptance.

In her first novel, *The Fledgling*, Sandra Markle also focuses on environmental concerns for her story of fourteen-year-old Kate, who, following the death of her parents, goes to live with her aging grandfather Tsan. Tsan, a Cherokee Indian living in the Snowbird Mountains, teaches Kate much about Indian customs and the beauty and value of taking care of nature. Together Kate and Tsan fight against the poachers, who want to hunt and destroy what is left of the mountains and of an already vanishing Cherokee heritage.

Wilmington, North Carolina is the setting for another novel of conflict and resolution, *The Moves Make the Man*, by Bruce Brooks, reprinted in 1988. Jerome Worthy is smart, talented, and an outstanding basketball player. He is also accustomed to being a leader, and he has never had any problems making friends. Suddenly African American Jerome finds himself transferred to a predominantly

white high school. He has to make new friends and to prove himself academically as well as athletically. In addition to adjusting to his new school, Jerome also must take on additional responsibilities after his mother suffers a near fatal gunshot wound. Brooks explores gender, as well as racial, roles: Jerome learns to cook thorough the aid of a Home Economics class, and he also begins to take care of his little brother. Finally, while watching a baseball game, Jerome meets Bix, a loner whose personality appears to be quite the opposite of his own. Jerome teaches him the fundamentals of basketball and, at the same time, the two boys form an unusual, but sustaining, bond.

Author Suzanne Newton addresses another common issue facing teenagers in her novel *Where Are You When I Need You?* Her heroine's dilemma is what to do and where to go after high school is over. Missy Cord is a bright student who becomes a finalist in a scholarship contest sponsored by a selective all female college. Missy is torn: she knows she wants to further her education, but her close-knit family would rather she stay home and settle down in Tucker, North Carolina. Missy's decision is complicated by the presence of a boyfriend who has already decided not to leave the area. She spends agonizing months debating, realizing that going away to college will provide undreamed of opportunities, but will also distance her from her family physically and emotionally. If she decides to leave, she knows that coming home will never be the same.

Finally, Belinda Hurmence spins a realistic tale of suspense and intrigue in *Nightwalker*. Set in coastal North Carolina, this story focuses on a string of serious crimes that are quickly destroying the livelihoods of local fishermen. Twelve year old Savannah is instantly curious about the fires that are consuming fishing shacks all along the shore. Her curiosity slowly turns to alarm, however, as she begins to wonder secretly if the arsonist could be one of the people whom she loves best — her younger brother, a victim of sleepwalking. As she struggles with her suspicions and her desire to protect her brother at all costs, she comes closer and closer to the truth, the knowledge that will solve the terrible mystery.

A View To The Past

North Carolina's past is a rich and varied, though also a painful, one; recent juvenile novels of historical fiction set in North Carolina do justice to this past by providing readers with a glimpse of history as it happened and of people as they might have been affected by it. The first of four

such novels to be discussed here, however, is a historical fantasy more steeped in folklore than in the depiction of a realistic situation and period. *The Legend of the White Doe*, by William H. Hooks, offers a tragic and romantic explanation for the mysterious disappearance of the Lost Colony at Roanoke Island over four hundred years ago.

More specifically, it is the story of young Virginia Dare, the first English child born in the colonies, and of her adoption and growth into young womanhood with the family of Chief Manteo. Hooks tells us that the story is one still told by Native Americans today, and, indeed, the voice that speaks to us from the pages is that of one of Chief Manteo's tribe.

Ulaalee, the Native American name for young Virginia, grows into a beautiful and spirited young woman on the island of Croatoan, where the inhabitants of Roanoke have fled after an attack by a hostile tribe. She falls in love with a handsome young brave named Okisko and pledges herself to him forever. Tragedy, however, awaits them both in the form of a powerful medicine man who has chosen Ulaalee for his own. Ulaalee is transformed into an eerie white doe with violet eyes whom Okisko ultimately cannot save even with the knowledge of how to reverse the spell. Ulaalee is a phantom doe hereafter in this sad, but beautiful tale — a ghost who roams North Carolina's Great Dismal Swamp, the site of both her untimely death and her last rendezvous with her beloved Okisko.

Another fictionalized account of a famous North Carolina figure is that of Harriet Jacobs in Mary E. Lyons's *Letters from a Slave Girl*. Although this title is considered a work of fiction, it is based on Jacobs's nineteenth century autobiography, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself*. Lyons has chosen the form of epistolary novel to tell the tale of an educated woman who endured slavery, sexual harassment, and many more cruelties to emerge a leading figure in the abolitionist movement.

Harriet's imaginary letters are written in the language of former North Carolina slaves and addressed to her grandmother, her aunt, her brother — letters that she never sends, but through which she shares her personal and tragic story. Edenton, North Carolina, is not a safe home for this woman, and most of its inhabitants offer no kindnesses to her. Yet Harriet's plight does not break her: the hatred of her own-

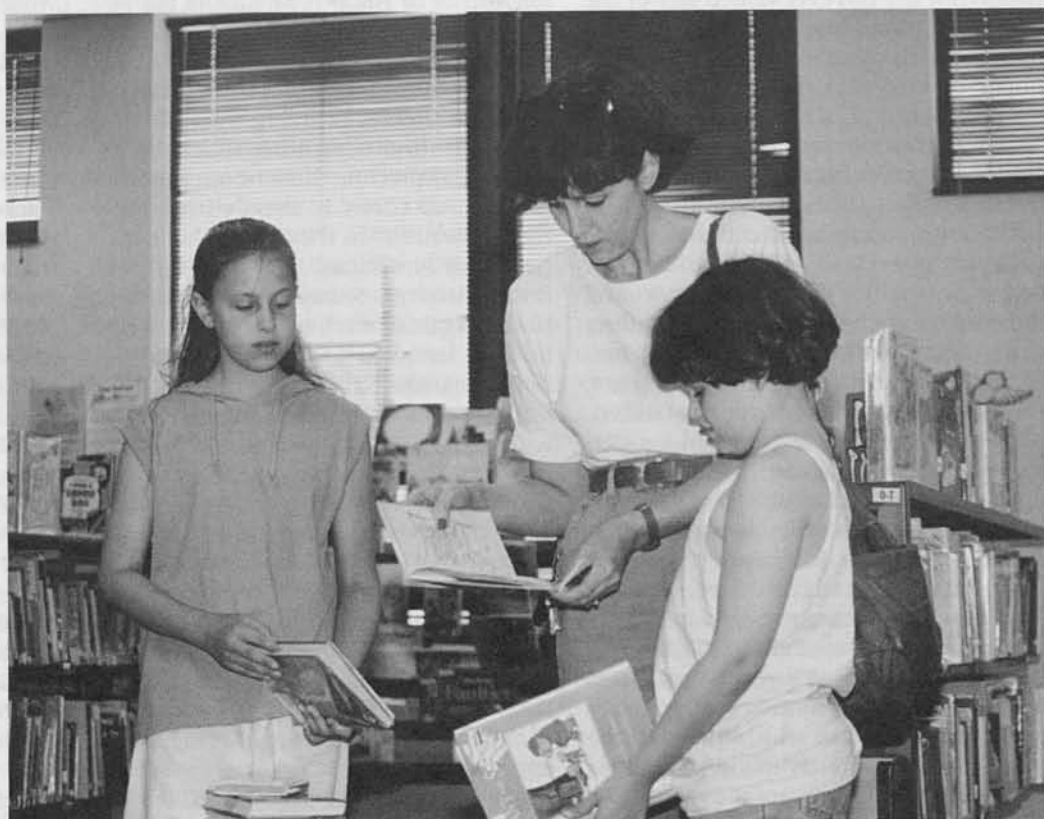
ers and their determination to keep her at all costs, the abuse towards her family, her seduction by a white man, the separation between herself and her two half-white children, her seven years of hiding in a cramped storage room. None of these obstacles keep Harriet from eventually fleeing to the North and to freedom.

The research that author Mary E. Lyons did for this story is evidenced by the photographs, technical drawings, glossary, genealogy chart, and bibliography included at the end of the book. And when Harriet's letters end, Lyons' last chapter fills in the details of the rest of Harriet's and her family's stories. The book is stark and realistic and a welcome addition to any bibliography of American historical fiction.

Patricia Beatty's *Who Comes with Cannons?* is set in Civil War era North Carolina

until later that they operate a station on the Underground Railroad for runaway slaves. She joins the efforts of the brave Quaker men and women, but it is not until she must travel the Railroad herself, as a slave might, that she realizes the significance of the abolitionist movement and her role in it.

The Civil War era was not a popular period for the Quakers. Religious beliefs forbade them to fight in the war, and, although illegal to press them into service, it was often done by both armies. When Truth's cousin Robert is forced into the Confederate Army, is captured, and languishes in a Union prison, it is she who must rescue him. Interviews with such historical figures as Frederick Douglass and Mary Todd Lincoln give her the means to do so. Not only does Truth prove herself to her adoptive family, but she gains the



and takes up at the point in American history at which Lyons's narrative ends. A sixteen-year-old Quaker girl named Truth is the heroine of this tale about courage and strength. The story that Truth relates describes some of the many dangers that conductors on the Underground Railroad daily and bravely faced during this period.

Truth is an orphan from Indiana, who, at age twelve, comes to live with her uncle's family in North Carolina when her own father dies. She knows that her relatives, like the majority of the Society of Friends, oppose slavery, but she does not know

respect of her courageous and dedicated Quaker community.

Another title in which strong community ties prevail is *Littlejim*, by Gloria Houston. Littlejim's story takes place in North Carolina's mountains during World War I. He is an intelligent and sensitive twelve-year-old who, above all else, wants to gain his father's respect. Unfortunately for him, however, Bigjim values physical strength and "masculine" pursuits above educational and intellectual ones. Bigjim does, however, read the newspaper laboriously each night and is proud of the fact that he is

knowledgeable about current events. In fact, it is the store that Bigjim places by the *Star* newspaper that will ultimately gain Littlejim his father's respect.

For when Littlejim is offered the chance to participate in an essay contest on what it is to be an American, he knows that it could mean his father's admiration at last: the winner of the essay contest will have his paper printed on the front page of the *Star*. So Littlejim goes against his father's wishes and pursues his writing.

This coming of age story is a gentle one. Littlejim does win the contest and proves himself to be a worthwhile son to a demanding father, and his father is proud of him. But it is his family and the mountain community as a whole that show Littlejim that his talents have been recognized and admired all along. *Littlejim* is a tender book, steeped in the traditions of Appalachian dialect and culture.

Who's Who

Though a gap exists in the number of available juvenile biographies of North Carolinians, there are some titles that do merit a second glance. From the early days of the frontier to the power dunk of the National Basketball Association, North Carolina holds claim to some of America's most notable figures in history.

Seamus Caven explores the life and times of one of North Carolina's most famous explorers in *Daniel Boone and the Opening of the Ohio Country*. Caven details Boone's adventures in a simple direct text. The book includes a bibliography, illustrations, and an index. Although Caven's work can be used with young readers, a more accessible biography for beginning readers is Carol Greene's *Daniel Boone: Man of the Forest*.

The life of Andrew Jackson, the seventh president of the United States, is chronicled in Alice Osinski's *Andrew Jackson*. This biography explores Jackson's life from his childhood through his distin-

guished career as lawyer, military officer, and eventually president. Osinski's text includes an index and a brief chronology of American history.

Another political figure is profiled in *Andrew Johnson: 17th President of the United States* by Rita Stevens. Andrew Johnson became our seventeenth president following the assassination of President Abraham Lincoln. This resource traces his life before, during, and after his term as president, noting the betrayal and hardships that accompanied his presidency. It includes a bibliography, black-and-white photos, and an index.

In addition to political legends, North Carolina can boast a number of sports legends from the past twenty years. *Althea Gibson* by Tom Biracree details the struggles faced by the African American athlete as she climbed to the top in tennis and went on to win tennis's highest award, the Wimbledon trophy. Biracree includes black-and-white photos, a chronology, index, and bibliography. *A Farewell to the King* by Frank Vehorn traces the personal and professional life of race car racer Richard Petty. It contains a full set of Petty's statistics. It lacks an index or bibliography, albeit a true racing enthusiast will know his or her way around this book. Perhaps one of North Carolina's most famous sons, Michael Jordan of the Chicago Bull's basketball team, is featured in several biographies for young people. His career, beginning with the Tarheels of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill through his tenure with the Chicago Bulls, is chronicled in an oversized book entitled *Michael Jordan* by Jack Clary. Bright, colorful photographs make this a browser's delight, and its index makes it handy as a research tool as well.

For a good collective biography of women, note Jennifer Ravi's *Notable Women of North Carolina*. It includes over 30 brief biographies of some of the most accomplished women of North Carolina. Included are such women as Virginia Dare,

Maya Angelou, and Elizabeth "Liddy" Dole.

Adult Reflections

Young adult readers who have progressed past the juvenile or even teenage novel have a number of excellent books to choose from should they want to read North Carolina fiction. The four adult novels and short story collections described below are just a sample of the wealth of titles by talented local writers, many of whom teach and lecture at our state universities. Not only do many of the novels set in North Carolina successfully deliver the flavor of its small town life, but they also offer an adult perspective on a Southern coming of age.

Teen Angel and Other Stories of Young Love by Marianne Gingher reveals both the exuberance and the heartache of first love. The stories come from different times and from different voices, but each presents a situation that spares nothing of the bittersweet, and sometimes brutal, quality of love. From "Camouflage," where a sixteen year old unwed mother struggles for an emotional recovery, to "My Mother's Confession," in which an adult woman finally hears the story of what really happened to sever the relationship between her mother and her closest friend, the stories give readers a personal glimpse into the painful world of romance and of happily ever after.

Jill McCorkle's short story collection *Crash Diet* also contains reflections on love in many of its infinite stages. These characters come in every size, shape, and color (literally), but they come in just one sex: the female. These are eleven insightful and very funny stories about women — and highly independent women at that. Ranging in age from high school to retirement, McCorkle's characters think and talk about family, men, and the loneliness that often comes even when both are present. Titles such as "Manwatcher" and "Migration of the Love Bugs" are sure to find favor with a teenage audience, and



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the author's skill at characterization and her deftness at creating sparkling dialogue will captivate further.

McCorkle's skills are again apparent in *Ferris Beach*, her novel about a young girl growing up in the 1970s near the Carolina coast. Teenage Kate is unable to find her niche in a family tug of war between a conventional, stern mother and a carefree cousin whose unorthodox lifestyle appears wildly romantic to her young relative. But as Kate experiences her own first romance, brought about both by fearful longing and terrible secrets, she realizes that few things are what they appear to be, and few people as well. This is a story in which the most basic of human experiences is revealed through a continuous combination of the ordinary and the extraordinary. Strange and wonderful events accompany the daily lives of these characters as they move from conflict to understanding and, ultimately, to acceptance.

The folks in Clyde Edgerton's *Killer Diller* undergo a few changes, too. The fictional locale of Listre, North Carolina, is home to a Baptist College that takes a keen interest in current social phenomena, especially those of overweight Christians and juvenile delinquents, who could be taught decent Baptist values. Featuring two characters from one of Edgerton's previous novels, this story is a humorous and paradoxical reflection on both human interdependence and the desperate need for independence. Twenty-four-year-old Wesley, living in a halfway house for minor criminals, struggles with many conflicting pursuits: promoting his Christian rock band, "Noble Defenders of the World"; falling in love with one of the new patients at the Nutrition House (where one can lose weight and gain religion); working with educationally disabled Vernon; and quitting his annoying habit of "borrowing" other people's cars. How he copes with these and other dilemmas makes for a funny and remarkable

novel about a unique community. Each of the above books explores situations and territories that are often distinctly Southern while remaining universal in overall appeal. Each is also a valuable addition to an already substantial and still growing body of North Carolina literature for children and young adults. Young readers will enjoy these stories and novels about places they may already know or people they have heard about and will be most impressed that these tales are homegrown ones!

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