

EVERY RIVER ON EARTH

writing from appalachian ohio

Edited by Neil Carpathios

Foreword by Donald Ray Pollock

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FOREWORD

I was raised in Knockemstiff in southern Ohio, and have never lived more than a few miles from that “holler” my entire life. As a teenager, I spent a major portion of my time fantasizing about being someone else somewhere else. I was unhappy for various reasons and wanted desperately to leave this place. After dropping out of high school, I hired on at the paper mill in Chillicothe where my father and grandfather worked. I had many reservations about doing that, but I was broke and told myself I’d work there just long enough to save some money, then move on to some other state, maybe Florida or California or New York. Anywhere but here in the sticks.

However, that never happened. After I started working at the factory, my life quickly became complicated and messy and I married a couple of times and lived from paycheck to paycheck. When I wasn’t punching the clock, I was either drinking in a bar or driving around the hills getting high in whatever old junker I could afford. I saw a lot of things during those years that would later influence my fiction, but at the time I was just trying to survive one more day without getting fired or hurting myself. Like most drunks, I needed something to blame all my troubles on, and I often blamed southern Ohio. If I could just get away from here, I thought, everything would be better.

Though things often don’t turn out the way you think they will, I now like to believe they usually turn out the way they’re supposed to if you hang in there long enough. In my case, I ended up in an alcohol and drug rehab in Portsmouth, down by the Ohio River. After my head cleared up a little, I started to see that all my problems were of my own making, that blaming the place where I was born or other people for my troubles was ridiculous, to say the least. I stayed sober and slowly began to carve out a new life for myself; and a few years later, I decided to try to learn how to write. For a long time, I filled my stories with doctors and lawyers and professors, people I knew nothing about, in places like Boston and Los Angeles, mainly because I didn’t think anyone would be interested in reading about the rural Midwest and its inhabitants. Everything I wrote fell flat and lifeless on the page until I finally began to set my fiction in southern Ohio. As I

kept writing about it, I began to see the place in a new light, which is, I think, one of the chief things that art is supposed to do. True, there is a lot of ugliness and despair and heartbreak in these hills, but there is also much goodness and mystery and beauty. The stunning poetry and prose chosen by Neil Carpathios for this anthology is ample proof of that.

Now that I've published a couple of books, people ask me from time to time if I'll ever leave southern Ohio. I suppose many of them figure, as I once did, that a writer would be better off in a big city or a picturesque village in New England or a secluded cabin in the Rockies. But I mean it with all my heart when I say, "No, I can't think of anywhere I'd rather live." Some of them understand and some don't; and, of course, a few years ago that answer would have certainly surprised me. Not anymore though. Last week I was at a gas station near my house buying a cup of coffee when I heard a store clerk practically begging a customer, an old, befuddled-looking man wearing dirty tennis shoes and clutching a ten-dollar bill, not to spend any more money on lottery tickets. There's a story there, and I hope to hell I can write it someday.

—*Donald Ray Pollock*

INTRODUCTION

The singer and songwriter Tom Waits says in one of his songs: “I never saw my hometown until I stayed away too long.” So much about a place—its essence and personal impact—is a matter of perspective. Maybe only after a period of absence can one return to see a landscape and people with true clarity. But what about the experience of someone who moves to a new place and for the first time witnesses its unique qualities, its beauties, its scars, its quirky and fascinating traits? Doesn’t this newcomer, at the very least, crave some understanding of his new home?

Six years ago I moved to southern Ohio to teach creative writing at Shawnee State University in Portsmouth. I had never been south of Columbus. As hard as that might be to believe, it is true. I had driven through southern Ohio to get somewhere else, but never stayed in the region for more than a few hours. I have lived most of my life in northeastern Ohio in the Akron-Canton area. It did not take long for southern Ohio’s rolling hills, Ohio River, Appalachian culture, southern twang dialect, warm weather, copious deer, outdoor markets, down-home friendliness, and sturdy moral backbone—as well as a lacerating economic and substance-abuse scenario—to begin imprinting me with a profound sense of place. Sure, northern Ohio has its own special features as part of the Rust Belt, but I felt and still feel that southern Ohio swirls with a more primal, haunting beauty that I struggle to define. I cannot claim, as a newer southern Ohio resident, to offer original insights, and I would never presume to insult those who have long lived here and understand better than anyone the hidden bones of this land through generations. Yet I have felt a desire to better appreciate this region, and its place in the overall scheme of Appalachia. Which brings up Appalachia itself.

I’ve heard it said that you can’t understand America until you understand Appalachia. Any textbook will provide a place to start—the surface facts.

The region, as defined by the Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC), which was established in 1965 by President Lyndon B. Johnson, is a 205,000-square-mile area that follows the spine of the Appalachian Mountains from southern New York to northern Mississippi. It includes

all of West Virginia and parts of twelve other states: Alabama, Georgia, Kentucky, Maryland, Mississippi, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Virginia. Various Native American hunter-gatherer tribes covered the area 16,000 years ago. The majority of the region now comprises mostly Anglo-Scottish descendants, along with many Irish and German who migrated from Europe in the eighteenth century. Twenty-five million people (42 percent of Appalachians) live in rural areas, in contrast with 20 percent of the national population. This, of course, is critical to Appalachia's history. The region's economy mainly distinguished itself through mining, forestry, and agriculture, but obsolete farming methods and unemployment due to mechanized mining techniques left much of Appalachia impoverished. In the 1950s and 1960s many unemployed residents of Appalachia migrated to places like Akron and Cleveland and other urban locales in search of jobs. So, although Appalachia is recognized as a distinctive region, its citizens have branched out, extending bloodlines to other areas. When I lived in northeastern Ohio, many of my neighbors had grandparents and great-grandparents living in rural southern Ohio, West Virginia, Kentucky, and other areas of Appalachia.

Like many people outside Appalachia, I was familiar with some of the common stereotypes of Appalachians perpetuated in the media. I pictured Jed Clampett from the television show *The Beverly Hillbillies*, or a Daniel Boone-type character wearing a coonskin cap and buckskin clothing and toting a long rifle. I had heard of the infamous feuding Kentucky and West Virginia clans known as the Hatfields and the McCoys and envisioned Appalachians as tough customers not to be messed with. The James Dickey novel *Deliverance* and the movie of the same name tickled my overactive imagination into conjuring a bunch of baccar-spittin', barefooted mountain folk hovering around a homemade metal vat under the cover of night, creating the untaxed backwoods brew known as "moonshine," secretly stirring by the light of the moon. I imagined snake-handling ceremonies, people speaking in tongues, faith healing, and natural cures. I pictured hardship-toughened geezers rocking on dilapidated porches, spitting and cursing at the way the world keeps changing. I knew that, surely, these were inaccurate exaggerations, but the power of the imagery's effect on the psyche could not be denied.

I also had heard some of the Appalachian lore, so often displaying the Appalachian connection to the land: Plowing on Good Friday will cause the ground to bleed. The number of seeds in an apple will be your lucky number. Redheaded gardeners grow hotter peppers. Eating sugar before planting fruit trees makes for sweeter fruit. Of course, like most lore, such beliefs vary by region and are often long removed from contemporary life. But again, a cumulative and deficient sense of what an Appalachian was may have been taking root.

Many Appalachian pioneers who moved into areas isolated by mountain ridges had to fend for themselves in grueling conditions, and this in some ways may have contributed to their self-sufficient ruggedness and often fierce sense of independence; nonetheless, media-driven misrepresentations distort the truth and cheat many Appalachians of their true essence. Yes, Appalachia is greatly rural. Yes, more people in the region hunt and fish and live off the land than in many other places. Yes, there is poverty. But it is a lazy and unfair oversimplification to encapsulate a whole domain and its citizens in such narrow terms.

Appalachian life thrums with paradox. This is apparent on a daily basis. Some residents of the area adapt to and even embrace the isolation that results from geography and economic limitations, while others despise it. Strong family ties and loyalty to a sense of place persist alongside a growing youth population's dreams of escape. A resistance to change and a desire to retain traditional Appalachian ways are offset by accelerated modernization and outmigration by a younger generation hungry for the new. In my handful of years as an educator in Appalachian Ohio, I have worked with many individuals who were first-generation college students. The families of these young people, according to the students themselves, have been proud yet sometimes resentful. Parents often feel acceptance and admiration but also abandonment. The land is no different, chock-full of a tension of opposites. The beauty of lush hills and forests is checked by the ugliness of buildings and homes allowed to crumble due to poverty; and the indigenous wealth of coal is countered by the exploitation of human and natural resources exercised by a volatile coal economy. I've seen people living in cardboard boxes down by the river as well as a local university and hospital blossoming, gaining recognition on a national level for excellence. More often than in any other place I've lived, I have stood in checkout lines

fumbling with coins, coming up a penny or two short, and had the person behind me step forward to give the cashier the needed change. More often than in any other place, I have seen despondent men and women in electric wheelchairs on sidewalks and in parks drinking out of paper sacks. It is this very contradiction that intrigues and haunts.

With the creation of the Appalachian Regional Commission, there have been significant improvements in transportation, education, health care, and other social infrastructure. Despite the continuing challenge of improving a region whose size and diversity complicate easy solutions, the number of economically distressed Appalachian counties decreased from 223 in 1965 to 98 in 2013. Behind these changes is the evidence of a more genuine commitment to the region's reality, as opposed to its mythology, by politicians and funding organizations. This has led to improved awareness as well as tangible results. Such a naturally beautiful land, full of spirited, vibrant, and proud citizens, deserves this and more.

Appalachian Ohio is considered part of Central Appalachia (southeastern Ohio, eastern Kentucky, and most of West Virginia) and is marked by its location at the foothills of the Appalachian Mountains. The Ohio River also is a powerful and distinguishing feature, like a long liquid muscle constantly flexing—muddy, majestic. The landscape, the warmer weather, and the slower pace of life give this part of the state a southern flavor. Thirty-two of Ohio's eighty-eight counties make up the region, which contains one-third of the state's land and 12.9 percent of all Ohioans. No county has more than 63,000 people, which encourages a strong sense of community. In general, the people share many of the cultural traits of greater Appalachia, with prominent northwestern European roots, unlike northern Ohio's and the Rust Belt's more ethnically and racially diverse population. This relative homogeneity contributes to a certain tight-knittedness and aura of pride. Farmers markets, quilting and crafts, and Appalachian folk music are ever-present as well.

However, the region is more than just hills and hollows. World-class manufacturing exists in the form of chemical, plastic, metal, automotive, ceramic, and wood products. Power plants benefit from cheap water transport, and although most of the region's mines have closed, Monroe County remains one of the most productive mining territories in the nation. Education is another strong point. Higher education thrives with Ohio

University in Athens and its five branch campuses. This is a major training and education resource, complemented by other fine public institutions such as Miami University in Oxford, Rio Grande University, and Ohio's newest public university, established in 1986, Shawnee State. Various private colleges also exist, and no county is more than an hour's drive from a vocational education source.

As with all places, new challenges continue to present themselves. One of these has been the recent drug problem. In southeastern Ohio, marijuana and meth production stubbornly persist, and in Scioto County, my new home, a painkiller called OxyContin and its distribution by a handful of licensed doctors running "pill mills" have drawn national attention. Although other areas of Appalachia and the nation in general have similar problems, Ohio's southernmost counties have been identified, sadly, as ground zero. Portsmouth sits at the juncture of three states—Ohio, Kentucky, and West Virginia—and has a major north-south artery, U.S. 23, that runs through on its path from Michigan to Florida. The overlapping of jurisdictions, the freeway pipeline, and continued struggles with poverty create a perfect storm for the drug trade. But even the effort to combat illegal drugs has made gains in recent years. Crooked doctors have been arrested. Pill mills have been shut down. The fight continues.

Despite economic struggles typical of other Appalachian areas, especially those with a scarred mining past, the region boasts some of America's most breathtaking land, from the Hocking Hills in Hocking County to Ross County's tree-lined cliffs, to the Shawnee State Forest in Scioto County and Vesuvius Lake in Lawrence County. Ecotourism continues to provide a welcome influx of commerce. State parks and forests offer some of the nation's finest campgrounds, hiking trails, and fishing spots. But more than this, there seems to be an almost dreamy sense of time. I have watched the morning haze slowly rise into the hills and the Ohio River lapping, luring me out of my selfish concerns toward something beyond the physical. I consider myself lucky to be able to step outside on any given day to explore, experience, and learn. I happily admit to being smitten by the trees, hills, rivers, and streams that flourish beyond the scope of statistics or data.

Indeed, surface facts can supply only so much information. Appalachian Ohio's essence, its sometimes mysterious and paradoxical nature, cannot be so easily or neatly packaged, labeled, and shelved. In the spirit of further

exploration, I have turned to the poetry and stories I not only love but believe can convey truth more deeply and humanly than other pedagogical modes of transmission. I, myself, am a poet, and it is fellow poets and creative writers that I have long relied upon to get closer to the heart of a subject.

So, in truth, this anthology started with a personal, maybe even somewhat selfish desire, to better grasp my new home. I sent out a call for submissions locally and nationally through various media. I asked for poetry, fiction, and nonfiction that in some way reflected, or connected to, Appalachian Ohio life. I received more than four hundred submissions from writers who have at some point lived here or still live here. It quickly became clear that there are many passionate and gifted people who have been influenced by the bottom half of our state. Many of the writers are accomplished authors, and many are less known. Regardless, they continue the tradition of Appalachian writing that connects all Appalachians to each other and has long been cherished by the whole nation—writers such as James Agee, James Still, Jesse Stuart, Wendell Berry, Jo Carson, Ron Rash, Dorothy Allison, Rachel Carson, Jim Wayne Miller, Gurney Norman, and the recent Affrilachian poets led by Frank X. Walker and Nikky Finney—just to name a few. I am grateful for all who provided their works, their encouragement, their willing participation. Because of them, this book is a reality.

Aside from a personal desire to gather a group of voices, I also envisioned a book to provide valuable information for others, not only in Appalachia but beyond. What better way to know a place than through personal and artistic outpourings marked by a concrete sensory specificity that is the lifeblood of creative writing? No historical text, despite its facts, can capture the subtle nuances and shades of color that exist in the palpable realm we call real life. A book like this is magical, in this sense. It bears a collective psychic fingerprint of Appalachia—in this case, the Ohio “finger” of Appalachia’s “hand.” It is my hope that in the pages to follow the reader will not merely get an aerial view of Appalachian Ohio’s legacy and landscape—which is more what a history book offers—but also an intense close-up of the people, their hopes and dreams and impressions. As you read, feel the rich dark soil underfoot, smell a pie baking in the other room, hear the Ohio River rolling and the voice of a farmer’s wife calling to her children.

In making selections for this collection, my primary criterion was quality. I also wanted to include a variety of styles, subjects, and voices. Beyond

this, I did not have any preconceived vision of what I would end up with or how I would arrange the book. Only after I had chosen individual pieces did I step back and try to identify overarching themes. This anthology seemed to take on a life of its own, organically falling into four sections. In hindsight, the sections do logically cover what one might envision for life in Appalachian Ohio, touching on many of the characteristic traits of the region already mentioned in this introduction (family, people, nature, hardship, a sense of home as well as displacement). Many of the works within a particular section include elements typical of other sections. For instance, a poem or story in the “Family and Folks” section may include nature references that could suggest placement with other nature-oriented pieces in “The Land.” Similarly, a piece in the section titled “The Grind” might include family situations that could possibly point to the “Family and Folks” section. In the section that I call “Home and Away,” there are many pieces that feature themes concerning people, nature, and elements of daily living. The reader will notice, then, an interweaving and overlapping, and I am pleased by this result, as it more realistically captures true life, time, and memory, which can be complex. The real world is not broken into categories and labeled for us. However, the sections at least allow for a certain order and framework, and a place for the reader to start exploring.

In addition, I had to loosely define what I considered Appalachian Ohio. While nearly all of the pieces reflect the state below Columbus, which is often viewed as the center boundary line of Ohio, there is mention, here and there, of a landmark or experience that in part references something a bit north of that line.

THE FIRST SECTION, “Family and Folks,” includes works that are most strongly marked by a sense of character. A significant trait of Appalachian life is the connection to family and community. The people in these pieces display the uniqueness of personality typical of the region’s family and folks. Roy Bentley, David Lee Garrison, and Beverly Zeimer lovingly recall their grandmothers, the maternal figureheads that loom so large in Appalachian family structures. In “Stubborn Roots,” Preston Martin shares how an exotic plant comes to embody a grandfather’s deeply rooted love. In his novel chapter, “The Offer,” Ed Davis takes us inside the home of his character, Cloyd, whose family is dealing with a sense of loss, as a special visitor helps highlight

many of the tastes and traditions of Appalachian hospitality and ignites unexpected passions. Idiosyncratic neighbors appear, such as Bertha, who welcomes poet Jeanne Bryner to the neighborhood, and Stevie, who actually lives in a silo in David Baker's poem "Outside." The section closes with two poems, by Diane Kendig and Michael Waterson, that reference perhaps Appalachian Ohio's favorite poetic son: James Wright. Wright captured so much about this part of our state, and the writers here pay homage.

The second section, "The Land," contains writings that reveal aspects of the landscape and wildlife, so much a part of this rural terrain. From hills to creeks, from sycamores to cardinals, from horses to even a theater of cows—the pieces here remind us that when vividly rendered, the natural world can almost be tasted through the senses. Indeed, in Christopher Citro's poem "Wine Tasting, Nine A.M.," the speaker samples "traces of thin clouds filtering / the universe as it comes to us in this town, / leaving discernible flavors." In "Beside Spring Creek," Cathryn Essinger describes the mysterious sense of presence that can occur in nature, when she sees "in the watery shadows, the hand on my shoulder, / warm and familiar, that causes me to look up, / even when there is no one there." Richard Hague's fine essay "Sycamore Country" is a sort of love song to one of the region's most identifiable and beautiful trees, and despite his more urban trappings, he realizes that some things like trees and birds provide "news more important than is covered on most of TV." Julie Moore even humorously relates how a poet, often rejected by editors, can find a kinder and more appreciative audience in an open-air theater of cows that "watch you like spectators, like fans."

The third section, titled "The Grind," recognizes some of the hardships inherent to life for certain individuals in Appalachian Ohio. A struggle—to survive, to thrive, to find peace in the face of economic, familial, and national stress—surfaces through characters and voices grinding to overcome circumstances. The speaker in Laura Madeline Wiseman's poem "In Line for the Cashier" can't help noticing a man with a shopping cart full of cat food cans, which leads her to wonder about the man's hunger as she sees his "threadbare corduroys, the knobby wrists / jutting from the second-hand sweater." In his powerful short fiction "Coming Home," Michael Henson tells the story of opiate-addicted Maggie Boylan, who returns home after being released from a treatment facility for drug rehab and encounters old and new demons to joust with. In her short story "The

Last Shot,” Christina Jones paints a portrait of how job loss can lead one to desperate acts: a life of crime, or even worse. In “Destroying New Boston,” Brooks Rexroat’s fictional characters reveal how people in a town whose industry has decayed might act in surprising and destructive ways. Donald Ray Pollock’s story “The Jesus Lights” vibrates with loss and suffering, as a man and his wife grapple with the weight of each other’s pain against the backdrop of a town called Knockemstiff. And yet, in his poem “Psalm 96,” Joel Peckham reminds us of that certain Appalachian perseverance against the odds that one sees, and how there can be a sort of singing “to the Lord because the Lord is hope that maybe a new song / can rise.”

The last and largest section, “Home and Away,” is characterized by a deep sense of place. Contributors address what it is like to live in Appalachian Ohio, to move away and look back, and to pass through. In Cathy Cultice Lentes’s poem, the speaker sympathizes with a young man who misses the hills of Appalachia. Similarly, in the short story “The Stars in Shawnee,” Dallas Woodburn’s character Eleanor, who lives in Los Angeles, cannot forget the sunsets and sky of her childhood Ohio home. Nostalgic childhood memories of 1950s southern Ohio are shared by Ronald Giles in his nonfiction piece “The Friday Night Dance.” Myrna Stone follows with poems about childhood experiences in southern Ohio in “The Girls Play Dress-Up” and “Pyrotechnicalities.” In her nonfiction “Painting Portsmouth,” Tonya Bomsta provides a portrait of Portsmouth, Ohio, some of its history and landmarks. One can even sense an undercurrent of mountain music and an emotional directness typical of Appalachia’s rich oral tradition of ballads and folk songs in Jennifer Kanke’s “caution: do not use with mono devices” and Rebecca Lachman’s “Tourist Brochure of Athens, Ohio”—both poems anthems of pride about Appalachian Ohio.

I asked each contributor to include a brief statement to introduce his or her work, and its Appalachian Ohio connection. I felt this would serve almost as a frame to the writer’s “pictures” or “portraits” on display. These conversational entryways convey a personal touch, a warm feel, as if the writer is saying hello, shaking your hand, opening up to you. The contributors’ statements are located with the authors’ biographical sketches at book’s end.

I WANT TO recognize several people, without whom this project would not have been possible. First, I am grateful to Gillian Berchowitz, Director

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The title of this anthology comes from the poem of the same name by David Lee Garrison. The speaker in that poem describes what at first seems a typical midwestern experience: looking at snow. But then something happens. He is bonded with a sort of universal, planetary essence, and he states that suddenly he sees “every river on earth.” A moment in time in a certain place can be at the same time simple and natural as well as complex and mysterious. It can provide a gateway to a larger world. Maybe we can better understand Appalachia as a whole by sampling the voices gathered here. Maybe we can better comprehend our interconnectedness as a nation, whatever patch of earth we occupy. I hope that this anthology, or certain individual works within, might allow you, the reader, to experience this part of Appalachia and even reach through and past it to a wider, more profound sense of wonder.

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