

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. ■

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