



Reader's Guide

Author Asks

from **John Branscum**
editor of *Red Holler*

1. One of the major goals of *Red Holler* is to challenge both demonized and romanticized portrayals of Appalachia, which characterize it as necessarily rural and stuck in a mindset and culture that has changed little in the past half a century. In what ways do the works in *Red Holler* pose such a challenge?
2. In his introduction, Pinckney Benedict writes, "Appalachia: land of marvelous contradiction [...]. In Appalachia, no possibility cancels out any other." How does *Red Holler* illustrate Benedict's thinking? Consider works like Ron Rash's "Back of Beyond," Jeff Mann's "715 Willey Street," and Jessie van Eerden's "Woman with Spirits."
3. In what ways does the Appalachian literature in *Red Holler* envision nature and the relationship of human beings to it? Examine such works as Jake Adam York's "Letter to Be Wrapped Around a Bottle of Whiskey," Jane Springer's "Whiskey Pastoral," and David McCombs' "q & a."
4. Appalachia has been called a literature of the dispossessed. What forms of dispossession do you see portrayed in the works in *Red Holler*? How do the characters in these works attempt to come to terms with this dispossession? Examine such works as Ron Rash's "Back of Beyond," Bianca Spriggs' "Legend of Negro Mountain," and Jane Springer's "Pretty Polly."
5. One of the hallmarks of Appalachian literature is its fiercely individualistic and idiosyncratic approach to spirituality, a perspective that is equally informed by Celtic and Germanic paganism, Native American religion, African animism, and anti-hierarchical Christian movements. How do such pieces as Pinckney Benedict's "Orgo vs the Flatlanders," Dennis Covington's "Desire," and Jessie van Eerden's "Woman with Spirits" illustrate this?
6. The celebration of outlaw culture and the relentless interrogation and suspicion of all authoritarian systems is often highlighted as one of the characteristics of an Appalachian sensibility. How do you see this playing a role in the works in *Red Holler*, such as in Bianca Spriggs' "My Kinda Woman," Brian Barker's "In the City of Fallen Rebels," and Alex Taylor's "A Lakeside Penitence"?
7. The Affrilachian poets have critiqued the endlessly repeated representation of Appalachia as an insular, homogenous geography populated almost entirely by racist white people and have instead argued for a recognition of the vibrant minority cultures in the region and their influence, as well as the complicated relationships between different races and ethnicities in Appalachia. How do such works as Jacinda Townsend's "Lackland," Crystal Wilkinson's "Fixing Things," Ally Reeves' "Origins," and Bianca Spriggs' "My Kinda Woman" challenge and nuance stereotypical representations of Appalachia?
8. While frequently portrayed as a literature of gritty realism, Appalachian writing is also strongly influenced by the literatures of the fantastic, from European fairy tales to urban legends and genre writing, as well as by a strong cultural affinity for the occult. This interest is attested to by the large number of *Red Holler*'s authors who in their artist statements declare magical realism as one of their

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guiding aesthetics. How does such magical realism play out in some of the works in Red Holler, such as Ally Reeves' "Origin," Pinckney Benedict's "Orgo vs the Flatlanders," Jane Springer's "Salt Hill," Alex Taylor's "A Lakeside Penitence," and Karen Salyer McElmurray's "That Night"?

9. Appalachia is frequently portrayed as home to straitjacketed and old fashioned gender roles. In what ways do the male and female characters in the works in Red Holler challenge and question gender roles? Look at such works as Donald Ray Pollock's "Real Life," Jeff Mann's "715 Wiley Street," and Desirae Matherly's "Vagina Dentata."

10. Appalachian culture is home to an irreverent, earthy, and often dark, sense of humor. In such pieces as Sara Pritchard's "The Very Beautiful Elegy for Bambi's Dead Mother," Nin Andrews' "A Brief History of Melvin, My Own Personal Bull," and Donald Ray Pollock's "Real Life," what's the role of this key of humor?

11. What other characteristics might you posit as present in Appalachian literature, in terms of perspectives and values – not so much in terms of being uniquely present, but occurring with greater frequency than in other forms of literature?

Writing Exercises

1. Renaming the World

The classic understanding of the function of art, including writing, is to awaken us anew to the world. We largely lose that sense of excitement, surprise, and wonder that was so much a part of our childhood by the time that we're adults, and writing, in its humble way, is one means of returning us to this state of mind. The term for this function of art is "defamiliarization," whether that defamiliarization take the form of humor, surrealism, or portrayals of the ways that previously silenced others experience the world, such as Appalachian writing about nature, violence, or animism. Writing in this way is tied directly to perception. This has fascinated me for my entire life. When I was a teenager, a girlfriend and I went around making up words for things that people didn't generally perceive in order to make us see the world anew. "Brooling," refers to the shadows that form under furniture and "shammer" refers to how sunlight seems to get tangled in the leaves of trees. "A talkward moment" refers to that unsettling moment when two people encounter one another outside their usual context and don't know how to respond (such as when a teacher and student bump into each other in the grocery store). Later, I learned that foreign languages often have words for which there is no English equivalent. The Hawaiian word ho'oponopono means "solving a problem by talking it out." The Japanese term kyoikumama denotes a "mother who pushes her children into academic achievement," and the French give us *belle laide*, which means a person who is "ugly beautiful." That is, they're beautiful not in a conventional way but by virtue of the interesting oddness of their features.

Your Exercise

Make up at least three new words for things people don't generally perceive, thus sharpening your own perception, and, in turn, the observations you can potentially make in your writing.

2. Rethinking Environment and Atmosphere

Atmosphere is dynamic, a process rather than a state. Indeed, conflicts between the different nuances of atmosphere, as well as between external and internal atmospheres, breed much of the drama at the heart of a strong narrative. This is especially true in the case of Appalachian literature, which engages very directly with the fact the people exist not only within nature and a particular place, but in the atmosphere of tradition itself. This is an important aspect of setting to recognize because to deepen our sense of setting dramatically opens up the compositional possibilities of a piece. In the landmark *On the Technique of Acting*, Michael Chekhov writes that great actors and playwrights "instinctively look for the Atmospheres around them." By his use and Platonic capitalization of "Atmosphere," Chekhov wants to underscore that setting includes the "feel" of a place, the way in which a locale is colored by the collective emotions of those inhabiting it, recent or dramatic events, and such factors as the season, the time of day, and the weather. More significantly, he wants us to reconceptualize atmosphere to include the dynamic mutual shaping that takes place between individual atmospheres (people's "vibes") and larger, external atmospheres. A clearing in the woods where you make love feels very differently, for example, if you're told that a man died there. And characters don't react to an external atmosphere the same either. In George Saunders's "Sea Oak," for example, the characters all live in a dangerous, poverty-stricken housing project. Yet, each responds to the environment differently. The protagonist's grandmother adopts a stern fatalism. The protagonist's sisters gleefully indulge in neck-rolling smack talk, and programs such as "How My Child Died Violently." As for the earnest narrator, to create a better life he suffers humiliation at a themed restaurant by dressing up as a pilot and wearing a penile simulator. While writers are sometimes warned away from idea or mood based stories and told instead to shape narratives around character, convincing characters, dialogue, and action must develop organically from a keen sense of atmosphere. Indeed,

it's a dangerous fiction to represent human beings as isolated objects in the world, rather than as existing in emotional, cultural, and physical ecologies. This exercise seeks to inspire writers to think of setting and environment more dynamically by exploring it as "atmosphere." Chekhov's concept of Atmosphere helps us realize that atmosphere is a verb rather than a noun, a pivotal verb that can help us achieve that elusive goal of crafting characters who seem to autonomously and organically act on their own as well as creative nonfiction that "breathes."

Your Exercise

1. Journal on the atmosphere of a place you are leaving and the atmosphere of a place you are entering. Note such details as the places' emotional tones, weather, sounds, looks, textures, scents, and associational images or metaphors that occur to you in relation to this place. Think about how the history of the place impacts the way you feel and act in it. As well, observe both how they and others respond differently to the atmospheres.
2. Look at a piece you've written and revise it with the aim of portraying characters acting within the different atmosphere of different places. Go further. Change the atmosphere of a scene (for example, from dramatic to comedic or surreal) and observe how your characters speak, act, and think differently within it.

3. Treating Life as Dream

Both the Buddha and the Taoist philosopher Chuang Tzu contended that life is like a dream. More recently, a number of neuroscientists have echoed this sentiment. But while the two states of mind may indeed be more alike than we think, we treat them quite differently. Most notably, as the drama and dream theorist Bert O. States points out, it's really strange that we treat dreams as symbolic and thus ask of them their deeper meaning and, on the other hand, generally treat waking life as utterly literal. That is, we usually don't try to analyze it symbolically (the cigar is just a cigar). Instead, we see most of the events of our lives as happenstance or as the results of rational (versus subconscious and irrational) planning. This exercise asks you instead treat your waking life as a dream, and thus find a way into writing that makes full use of your symbolic mode of perception.

Your Exercise

Analyze your day symbolically: By doing this, you can pick up on patterns that you might not otherwise be aware of in the heat of the moment. Why do you like small dogs and gigantic pick-up trucks? Why do you have the job or the partner you do? What does it mean that you like to do jumping jacks in the nude or always wear your old Red Tide baseball cap? Once you get the hang of this (and it's a cheap date activity too) through free writing on the symbolic meaning of your day, do this sort of rumination in your writing too.

4. Meeting Your Parents for the First Time

Meeting a person for the first time is exhilarating. We are caught up in the dance of being constantly surprised and continually revise our understandings of them at every turn. But, sooner or later, we feel we have "read" the book or "watched" the movie and so we quit revising our understandings of them minus the occurrence of some traumatic event (Earl stole my car and robbed the liquor store!). Hence, people will sometimes make the accusation of "I never knew you" when it would be more accurate to say "I closed off my understanding of you too soon, gosh darnit." This happens commonly of course with stereotyped cultural groups like Appalachians. But, on the individual level, our parents and parental surrogates are perhaps the most significant and simplified characters in our lives. We are so busily defining them in relation to ourselves, as "good" parents or "rotten" parents, etc., that we lose almost all sense of them as individuals with their own mysterious depths. This is often evident when we first move out of our "rotten parents" homes. Usually, our relationships with them change – generally in the direction of becoming more friendly and sympathetic. We get the sense that, gasp!, our parents are not just our parents. No, these odd little characters are in fact individuals with their own flaws and virtues, dashed hopes and realized dreams, teen crushes, tiny little bits of madness, and an inner sense that they're not much past seventeen themselves.

The exercise below is meant to encourage and remind us as writers to work against our closed perceptions of our parents and to become aware that, although we tend to close down our attempts to understand people at some point (afterwards regarding them as basically static characters in the novel of our lives), we can easily arrive at startlingly new understandings of our loved ones or strangers as if meeting them for the first time. It is also meant to show the important role of informal interviewing for our writing.

Your Exercise

Think about what you know about your parents and what you don't know. Think of all the questions you've ever wanted to ask or things you wondered about them. Next, think of the questions you would need to ask a complete stranger to get a grip on who they really are. Finally, brainstorm any other questions that occur to you. If it helps, think of this activity in terms of how you would analyze a character from a movie or book. And remember to ask open-ended questions. By this, I mean questions

that don't simply elicit a yes-or-no response but rather which allow your parents to answer in their own way and to go off on whatever tangents they feel are appropriate.

Sample questions include the following:

*Have you ever had your heart broken? How did you react?

*What's the strangest or craziest thing you believe?

*What are your best memories from when you were a child?

*What sort of daydreams or fantasies did you have as a child and what sort do you have now?

*How were you different from your brothers and sisters or parents?

*What were you obsessed with as a child? What scared you? What mystified you?

*How did you meet "mom" or "dad"? What did you think of them at first? Who else were you in love with? What were they like?

*What's the best thing you've ever done? What's the worst thing?

*What are your secret regrets?

*What do you like about yourself? What do you dislike?

*What has the process of getting older been like for you?

*What big things have you changed your mind about?

*Give me a day from when you were seven and detail what happened that day.

Once you have a preliminary list of questions to ask your parents, interview them, making use of a notebook or a digital recorder, and document a few of your findings and a brief reflection on how your perception of your parent has changed. Keep in mind the results of your interview when attempting to create multi-dimensional characters in your work.

5. Rethinking Time

Most discussions of time in relation to writing assume one of two models. E.M. Forster's *Aspects of the Novel* addresses the first model – linear time. Forster explains that if we write "The king died, and the queen died," we have a narrative, but if we write, instead, "The king died, and the queen died of grief," then we have a plot because of the role of causality implied in the second example. Whether reversed as in Andrew Sean Greer's *The Confessions of Max Tivoli* or parceled out in flashbacks, linear time tends to be the default temporal structure of much creative writing. However, mythologists propose a second model, cyclical time, which concerns itself with repetitive occurrences, such as seasonal events or rituals, daily routines, and forms of return. Take Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. At the novel's end, the last descendant of an old family realizes that the mysterious parchment he is trying to decipher is, in fact, the story of himself and his family, a text that furthermore reflects the novel that the reader is reading.

These are not the only temporal models available. And it's important to pay attention to alternative models because an increased sensitivity to time and facility with rendering temporal structures enhances a writer's ability to craft the subjective world of their work.

Here are two alternative models that commonly work alongside the first two:

1. Repetitive-compulsion time. In this model, certain emblematic moments act as psychological and even physical gravity wells, causing a person to attempt to repeat pivotal events or encounters. Examples of this occur when people date variations of their fathers, and subject themselves to emotional dilemmas that echo earlier traumatic moments as if trying to fix them.

2. Rhythmic time. This Hebrew model is reflected in the two principal tenses of the Torah, which correspond to the completeness or incompleteness of events rather than past, present, and future. This is the logic behind Genesis' inclusion of two creation stories side by side and the arrangement of the New Testament. Moments are treated and arranged like beats in a rhythm. Any moment relates to all previous and coming ones like one beat of a drum is only what it is in relationship to the other beats. Thus the meaning of actions or thoughts in the past are literally changed or revealed by actions and thoughts in the present (hence the concept of redemption in which a sin is "undone" by atonement). Many collage essays and stories make use of this model by juxtaposing different experiences of death, love, being an outsider, etc.

This multi-part exercise seeks to inspire the writer to think of time more dynamically and to translate this enhanced perception into deeper and more nuanced work.

Your exercise

1. List cyclical occurrences in your life such holidays, annual trips, and routines.

2. Next, list emblematic moments and characters in your life and also later iterations of these events and characters – either in terms of repetition-compulsion or rhythmic completion (how a later event or character makes sense of an earlier one). Note such details as variations between manifestations, the underlying conflict that charges these moments, and possible future events that would either resolve the conflict at the heart of the repetition-compulsion or complete and amplify the meaning of the rhythm.

3. Finally, translate this enhanced sense of time into your work. You might, for example, write a collage piece that juxtaposes events that follow the structure of repetitive-compulsion or rhythmic time. Or you might rewrite a draft, adding or changing scenes and sections or stanzas to capture the importance of emblematic moments to characters, or the movement of cyclical or repetitive-compulsion and rhythmic time.

Suggested Reading

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