

2008 Virginia Women in History

EXCERPTS FROM

“Keepers of the Legend:

An Essay on the Influences of Family Legends and Folklore on Fiction”

By Sharyn McCrumb

Paragraph 1: Making a Literary Quilt

I have said that my books are like Appalachian quilts. I take brightly colored scraps of legends, ballads, fragments of rural life, and local tragedy, and I piece them together into a complex whole that tells not only a story, but also a deeper truth about the culture of the mountain South. It is from the family stories, the traditional music, and from my own careful research of the history, folklore, and geography of the region that I gather the squares for these literary quilts. . . .

Paragraph 2: The Power of Purposeful Writing

My role model of a successful, important writer became Charles Dickens, not for his style, but for his philosophy. Charles Dickens wrote best sellers in order to change the world. Here’s one example: In the mid-nineteenth century child labor laws in Britain were virtually non-existent. Children worked twelve-hour days in factories, were maimed in coalmines, and died of lung disease in their teens from work as chimney sweeps. No one seemed to care. For decades ministers and social reformers wrote earnest pamphlets reeling off the statistics of child mortality, and calling for child-protection laws. These pamphlets were mostly read by people who already agreed with the author; other ministers and social reformers who were working on pamphlets of their own. And nobody did anything to help the children. Then Charles Dickens wrote a book. It was a novel, about a little boy who suffered terribly in the workhouse: *David Copperfield*. Then came *Oliver Twist*, with its grim picture of a child’s life on the street in the slums of London. Those books became best-sellers in Great Britain, and within two years of their publication the child labor laws of England were changed. The general public, who had never bothered to read the informative pamphlets, wept for a little boy who existed only in a novel, and as an echo of the author’s childhood. People became so outraged at the fate of these fictional children, that they demanded laws protecting child workers. First Dickens had to make people care; then he could persuade them to act. This is what John Gardner later called “moral fiction,” and I knew early on that I wanted my words to make a difference. Writing should do more than entertain. . . .

Paragraph 3: The Power of Place and Identity

“Appalachia is still trying to live down the stereotypical “backwoods” view of the region presented in the media. I think one of the best ways to combat this negative portrayal is to educate the general reader about the real character of the region, and particularly about the history and origins of Appalachia and its people, both culturally and environmentally. Like Charles Dickens, I think that in order to win hearts and minds, one must reach the greatest possible number of people, and so I am pleased when my novels make the *New York Times* best seller list, because that means that millions of people have been exposed to my point of view. Millions of people watched the *Dukes of Hazzard*: surely the opposite opinion deserves equal time. I am passing along the songs, the stories, and the love of the land to people who did not have a chance to acquire such things from heritage or residence. Perhaps my own theme song ought to be the one Joan Baez recorded on an early album called *One Day at A Time*: “Carry It On.”

Carry it on.

Source: Kimberley M. Holloway, ed., *From a Race of Storytellers: The Ballad Novels of Sharyn McCrumb*. Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 2003.