

“Making Room for Something Wonderful”: Adriana Trigiani as Classic Appalachian Author by Jennifer Brown

Adriana Trigiani grew up a “feriner” in Big Stone Gap, Virginia. Moving from Roseto, Pennsylvania, an all-Italian community, her father opened a garment factory in the area (Stander par. 1). She enjoyed many years in the Appalachians, but says, “I’m not a girl who likes to stay in the same place much. I have a real authentic wanderlust for the world, and for meeting new people. I had a good fifteen years in the Gap and loved it—but it was time to move off and experience New York City” (“Questions”). An acclaimed writer and director, Trigiani’s primary work is in television, notably *The Cosby Show*, and theatre. Her first novel, *Big Stone Gap*, began as a screenplay more than five years ago as she “started wondering what would have happened had she stayed put instead of moving to New York” (Stander par. 3). She “turned to the longing of [her] childhood in the 1970s” when writing the novel, choosing not to engage in research because she “wanted to just let it be what it was. As [she] began writing, it all came flooding back” (par. 3).

Her memory and its expression on the page capture our lives as Appalachians and show readers everywhere that “everything that matters is here” (“Praise”), in her words and in the place we call home. Trigiani’s respect and love for her Appalachian roots is clear not only in how she writes about our place and its people, but that she chose to write about us for her first attempt at a novel. Just as her characters stay with us long after reading about them, we have stayed with Trigiani, an “Eye-talian” Yankee. Her main character, Ave Maria Mulligan MacChesney’s, story “evolved” (“Questions”) into two more novels, *Big Cherry Holler* and *Milk Glass Moon*, creating a popular trilogy readers the world over have embraced. The popularity of these books, which causes lengthy waiting lists and non-renewal rules at libraries, as well as prompts to be the first to order them on Internet sites, illustrates the validity of her becoming a classic Appalachian author. Many readers are neither familiar with Appalachia nor its writers, but Trigiani brings us to the forefront of reading lists and enlightens people about an area quite foreign to them. Her gift is in showing what we are to others—people “as real as the ones who live next door,” who live in a world “well worth visiting and revisiting in her *Big Stone Gap* series” (“Praise”).

Trigiani strives to keep Ave’s story centered on place. Ave’s musings and reflec-

tions often involve life in the mountains. Her heritage, a secret her mother reveals in a letter after her death, sends Ave to Italy to find her biological father. Even though Ave was born in Big Stone Gap, she is “considered a feriner because [her] mother was one” (*Big Stone Gap* 24). Ave’s travel and personal growth extend her beyond the Appalachians, to the Italian Alps. Trigiani maintains the focus on similarity, “deftly juxtapos[ing] the culture” of the two areas (“Praise”). She reveals, “What I found similar was the mountain connection—mountain people, people who chose to make their lives and homes in the mountains are folks who like to be isolated. And who love nature” (“Questions”). Indeed, the beauty of the two regions is paramount in her writing. *Big Stone Gap* begins by telling us, “It’s pretty here. Around six o’clock at night everything turns a rich Crayola midnight blue. You will never smell greenery so pungent. The Gap definitely has its romantic qualities. Even the train whistles are musical, sweet oboes in the dark. The place can fill you with longing” (4).

Ave (and perhaps Trigiani) particularly cherishes autumn in the mountains, as it is “the most luscious season” (*BSG* 56). At the beginning of *Big Stone Gap*, it is early September, “so it’s warm during the day, but [the night] will bring a cool mist to remind us that fall is right around the corner” (3). *Big Cherry Holler*, the second book, opens in October: “How I love these mountains in October: the leaves are turning—layers of burgundy and yellow crinolines that change color in the light—the apples are in, the air smells like sweet smoke, and I get to build big fires [. . .]” (3). August is “sweet with honeysuckle” at the beginning of the third book in the series, *Milk Glass Moon*, and as Ave and her friends and family “ascend the mountains in twilight [on their way to the Wise County Fair, they] pass Coeburn nestled in the valley below, where the cluster of lights twinkles like a scoop of emeralds” (3).

Trigiani has a way of enveloping readers in the mountains’ atmosphere, welcoming us to notice their nestled beauty and nurturing gifts. For Ave and friends, the Gap is the only true home. When she talks to her best friend Theodore on the phone once, she hopes he has “finally come to his senses” and plans to move back (*MGM* 30). Ave’s isolated environment is ideal for living and creating a contemplative life. She is the self-declared town spinster at thirty-five, and shares her questions about life and its uncertain turns—such as a marriage proposal—with readers. The mountains influence her musings, and she often embraces their mystery in trying to unravel the mystery of herself and an emerging romantic love and family she never thought she would know.

She lives alone in her late mother and stepfather’s house in the first novel, used to independence as “something about these old hills reassures [her]” and gives her comfort (*BCH* 43). Nevertheless, over the course of the trilogy, as she marries and has children, one who dies very young, she re-envision the permanence of place:

This field that used to overwhelm me looks like a small patch of grass. The mountains shrink back into small mounds of dirt that disappear into the wet earth. And the sky, tacked up like a pale blue sheet, looks temporary. The only eternal things are what we choose. The things we would die for. What would I die for? My children, yes. But would I die for Jack MacChesney? (233)

Ave confronts the strength of her love for Jack in the latter two novels. They are an attraction of opposites. Some people in the town question her, college-educated and a pharmacist, marrying a coal miner. Inexplicably drawn to one another, theirs is a marriage that can withstand the death of a child, the temptations of adultery, the struggle of raising a daughter through often different tactics, and the simple day-to-

day drudgery of sameness. They question each other's words, actions, and silences, eventually discuss them, and continuously maintain and renew their devotion. Like characters in any work, they struggle; life happens in the mountains as in any other place. Ave comments on their temptations of romantic prospects: "These trials didn't sink us—in fact, they helped our marriage. We looked hard at our relationship and began to resolve our differences. If Karen Bell and Pete Rutledge hadn't come along, I don't think Jack and I would still be together" (*MGM* 39). Like readers, like characters, Ave learns to let go. For Trigiani, *Big Cherry Holler* is about "letting go of the past, of expectations we have about our mates, letting go of old hurts and making room for something wonderful to happen" ("Fleeta" par. 37). Ave crosses emotional terrain as often as mountain terrain. Both become endearingly familiar.

Trigiani makes the region known to any reader unfamiliar with it—"Southwest [Virginia]. In the Blue Ridge Mountains. Where they meet the Appalachians. Near the Cumberland Gap. [On the Appalachian trail]" (*BCH* 174). Her explanation through Ave's words mirrors a person's inability to truly explain her place—"you just have to know it." "It" is a place like no other, yet like all other places. Trigiani weaves in real-life events and places in her series to educate readers about what Appalachian people know and experience. For those of us who already know what she explains, it is thrilling to see real town names and buildings in print—for the world to see. For example, Trigiani devotes many pages to the excitement of Elizabeth Taylor's infamous trip to the Gap with campaigning husband, Senator John Warner, in October 1978, where she choked on a chicken bone. She also refers to Barter Theatre in Abingdon, Virginia; its fame comes from being the oldest regional theater in the United States (*MGM* 94). Her inclusions are a clever validation of what some readers need—to know if a place is important.

Trigiani reveals that "[t]here is a long history here," subtly washing away the mystery of stereotyped, "poverty-stricken" Appalachia as a forgotten no-man's-land. She gives the region voice as a place and a people, modern and as real as the Midwest, the South, New England, etc. Appalachia still suffers economic threats; Trigiani is truthful about the highs and the lows of living here. Pearl, owner of the Mutual Pharmacy where Ave works, considers closing down one store because "there isn't enough of a population to justify two pharmacies" (92). Appalachia was once lauded as the "Pittsburgh of the South" and parts of it as the "Coal Mining Capital" (*BSG* 4). After that dream fell through, little was known and few cared about our area. There are classic Appalachian authors, but few readers know them. Trigiani, perhaps from the access New York City affords her, has become one of the most mainstream authors today. She no longer lives in Appalachia, but gained fame as someone writing about it. She knows our place just as well as her Appalachian contemporaries know it. Trigiani also knows what it is to be stereotyped. She "love[s] the people of Appalachia, so it's not hard to avoid stereotypes [in her writing]" ("Questions"). She reveals, "I've spent more than a few moments in my life dispelling stereotypes—and yet, sometimes I turn on the TV and am aghast—at things like tomato sauce commercials where a bunch of raven haired Italian types are doing cartwheels in fields like a pack of fools—so I understand the frustrations of those who fight stereotypes. Ain't easy" ("Questions").

Like other classic Appalachian characters, Wilma Dykeman, Harriette Arnow, and Jim Wayne Miller's creations among them, Trigiani's character finds her center in living an Appalachian life. If Trigiani is a classic Appalachian author, it is because she uses place to define a character, a way of life, the beats of a heart, the circle of life

and death. What makes a great story is seeing the familiar through someone else’s eyes. Another way of seeing the same thing. That Trigiani writes about Appalachian people makes them no less familiar to a reader. Ave is real. She is us; we are her, just as we feel we are like other characters in other novels. Trigiani contends, “The book[s] [are] really about the interior life and feelings of that woman you know; perhaps she even reminds you of yourself” (“Iva” par. 10). Ave’s physicality merits comparison to us as well. She has “a mountain girl’s body, strong legs, and a flat behind” (*BSG* 4), and is both self-sufficient and selfless.

Self-sufficiency allows Ave and other residents of Big Stone Gap exclusive knowledge: “The Gap, or ‘down in town’ as the holler folks call it, is in the valley. The hollers are little communities nestled in the sides of the Blue Ridge Mountains. I couldn’t give you directions to places up in the mountains, but I could take you there. There are no signs anywhere; you have to know your way” (9). Ave’s father’s community in Schilpario is much the same. To think, a place as famous as Italy is like us. Yet “[t]he Italian Alps are pointed and snowcapped. They seem three times as high as the Blue Ridge Mountains, and more dangerous, not as soft and maternal” (76)—not like home. It is telling that Trigiani creates greater world awareness for her main characters by setting them in the same environment as their home. They need look no further than their front door for the answers. The importance of place permeates her work, both the physical and emotional place where a character lives. Her characters do not always have signs to show them how to navigate their emotional life, but they learn the way, and show us the way. Their way, as Appalachians, is no different from any other regional character or person’s way of dealing with life’s joys and sorrows. However, Ave says, “Where people settle tells a lot about them” (9-10). Thus, Big Stone Gap and the Appalachians uniquely shape people and form the emotional nexus of their lives. Although Trigiani reveals that she was not entirely true to the geography of the region and “moved things around in [her] imagination, [. . .] it’s a mix of the real and the true and the Big Stone Gap of [her] heart, which is a kind of Brigadoon to [her]” (“Iva” par. 6).

A changing emotional place is a reality not unknown to people in the Gap. Ave adjusts to sharing her life with Jack, deals with her mother’s and son’s deaths, watches close friends get sick and some die, and confronts her daughter’s young marriage. Ave often wants to slow down to think about what happens while trying to accept that “growth and change are good” (“Fleeta” par. 37). She tells us, “How easy it is to get lost in the noise of this world, to find yourself leading a life of acceptance and resignation. When will I find the time to question my life again? Is there anything new ahead of me, or is this it? Being a wife, a mother, a pharmacist?” (*MGM* 12). She is a searcher, having lived a life of “quiet desperation,” struggling to fully move beyond seeing herself as the eternal town spinster and someone who does not belong. In the first novel, part of her emotional journey toward fulfillment is her visit to Italy to find her father and enter a parallel life among mountains—the Italian Alps. Ave tells us

[w]hen I was a girl, I spent a lot of time thinking about why I’d been born in Big Stone Gap, of all the places in the world. I would look up at the sky and wonder where it ended. I had such longing to explore that I couldn’t make the connection that my fate was somehow tied to a mountain town in the hills of southwest Virginia. [. . .] These mountains may protect us from the outside world, but they won’t hold us. We can see our way through them and over them [. . .]. (*MGM* 29-30)

Yet her second home in Schilpario closely resembles her first; even the townspeople she meets there are the same. Her daughter, Etta, tells her,

There are mountains here too. They just have a different name. These folks are just like the people of Big Stone Gap. They have their own music and their own cooking and their own ways. They don't like outsiders to come in and change their way of life. They like that they're remote and that visitors get lost trying to find them. (238-39)

Ave's mother never travels back to Italy, despite claiming she wanted to. Ave says, "I wish I would have made my mama go to Italy. She never went home, you know. That bothers me" (*BCH* 62). Ave goes and finds restored love for her Appalachian mountain home, discovering the life she wants was already hers. She can see it in her mother's retaining and passing on Italian culture, in her seeking her father while fulfilling a fate that ties her to mountains, in raising a daughter who loves the values of mountain life and sustains them in the Alps. Ave can say she went home again, and it was to a coal miner in the Appalachian mountains, and to a simple life full of wonderful complexities. A lot like you and me.

Ave parallels some readers in feeling like a "feriner" to Appalachian life. She feels she knows the Gap from having lived there, but must see herself as a part of its community. Trigiani may have felt like a foreigner as well, moving into an area with people who are often friendly but sometimes cautious when welcoming outsiders into their hollows. Trigiani also imbues Ave with revelatory similarities to Appalachian people that melds into the hearts of her neighbors and makes her real to us. Famous Appalachian musician Rosanne Cash contends, "Ave Maria MacChesney is so real, she is almost a miracle. The story is poignant without being sentimental, and funny without being mean. The people and the place of *Big Stone Gap* have stayed with me long after reading this book" ("Praise"). As if such a review were not enough, Whoopi Goldberg calls *Big Stone Gap* "one of my all-time favorite novels . . . unforgettable" ("Praise"). Trigiani has secured a place in the hearts of readers.

Trigiani says of her Big Stone Gap friends: "They miss me and I miss them" ("Questions"). Her wanderlust for the world did not stop her from drawing on her Appalachian home as a muse. Ave is a reader's muse for moving back to the place within herself she knows as home. When Trigiani closes her writing on Appalachia in a final, future novel, we will miss Ave and her Gap family. Classic novels create classic characters and places we want to visit. Her Appalachia welcomes us.

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