

“Nothing Gold Can Stay”
The Curse of Coal in Joe Anthony’s
Pickering’s Mountain
 by James B. Goode

Joe Anthony’s new novel *Pickering’s Mountain* (Old Seventy Creek Press, 2012) is set in Appalachian Eastern Kentucky one year after 9/11, during a time of national unrest. The novel is an age old exploration into cultural and familial relations in a country founded on the premise that the “. . . huddled masses yearning to breathe free . . .” could all come to Eastern Kentucky and co-exist in some symbiotic fashion (Lazarus 11). Therein is the rub or, if you will, one of the central conflicts of this fiction. Only this conflict is played out in the mountains of Eastern Kentucky and is not only fueled by family revenge and dysfunction but also by the kind misinformation and ignorance that emerges from fear of the unknown by those who have failed to educate themselves as to the truths about the mysterious and often misunderstood Appalachians.

Much of this conflict is borne by the New York/New Jersey couple Sam and Margery who come to Eastern Kentucky seeking a simpler life only to discover one that is infinitely more complicated than they ever imagined. But it is also borne by the Pickering family whose matriarch is Alma, a strong, stalwart mountain woman whose relationship with her philandering husband Reverend Joshua Pickering has disintegrated, and three adult children Jimmy, Mason, and Jody who have been caught in the crossfire between the two battling warriors.

Margery and Sam, who have come to Appalachian Kentucky so Sam can take a job on the staff of a local newspaper, are straight away taken into Alma’s home upon their arrival and readily admit that “The only thing either of us had known about Kentucky was the Derby. But that was in Louisville” (7). When preparing for their journey, Margery sardonically tells Sam: “But do me a favor and get some maps. If we’re headed for the middle of nowhere, I’d rather we didn’t get lost on the way. Goddammit” (8). But Goddammit, they do get lost and so do the Pickerings, and it takes every page of this 403 page novel for them to find themselves as they maneuver through the minefields of this complex place, often stepping squarely on the explosives.

Anthony’s novel, on one hand, purports to be about strip mining and mountaintop removal—the destruction of a delicate ecosystem and ultimately its impact upon the people and their culture—but its center is more about religion, politics, economics,

personal vendettas and revenge, and the struggles dysfunctional families face in a culture that has always been torn apart by exploitive forces—both from within and without.

The novel often waxes poetic about the physical destruction of the ancient Appalachian Mountains and the inevitable price one pays for the presence of energy extraction and its accompanying greed. In one scene, Margery recalls the Robert Frost poem “Nothing Gold Can Stay”:

Nature’s first green is gold,
Her hardest hue to hold.
Her early leaf’s a flower;
But only so an hour.
Then leaf subsides to leaf.
So Eden sank to grief,
So dawn goes down to day.
Nothing gold can stay. (1-8)

The critic Mordecai Marcus suggests that “The fall of humanity in Eden came by such a process. Starting from a height, it plunged the race into knowledge of natural decay. Frost’s view resembles Emerson’s idea that being born into this world is the fall implying that the suffering and decay brought by natural processes are what we know of evil” (par 1). The core of this novel also elicits Emerson’s essay “Nature,” wherein he explores all the possibilities of how nature serves humanity: Commodity, Beauty, Language, Discipline, Idealism, Spirit, and Prospects. For these to co-exist, conflict and debate must necessarily emerge.

The reader soon discovers that mountain people may sell their birthright for many reasons other than greed or ignorance. Such is the case with Reverend Pickering who sells his ancestral mountain and the site of the former home he built with Alma and their children to be strip mined. He knows that Alma cherishes the mountain as a kind of paradise full with lush flora and abundant fauna. Because of his vitriolic separation from Alma, he wants to hurt her so badly that he is willing to leverage part of his birthright to make her feel his pain and therefore inflict it upon her. He says in one of his prayers: “My child wanted me to spare the mountain you have given us. But I didn’t want to. I wanted to blast it so this woman would hurt. I did not care who I blasted with it. I did not care for anything but that this woman, my child’s mother, would feel the pain.” He prays for the Lord to soften his heart and promises, “If you do this, Lord, I will spare the mountain” (297).

When their drunken son Mason perishes after plunging his truck over a mountain, Reverend Pickering is true to his word and declares: “I will build you a church. I will build you a church with two walls and no roof. Half a church for half a promise. I will save your mountain from the claws of the machines, but only half of it” (327). And so he sells half his mountain to Emmet Bowling, the local banker and coal operator who then proceeds to slice the mountain in half—with explosives and bulldozers.

Anthony creates a compelling symbol of a kind of paradise overlooking the pit of hell—a graphic and alarming sight for some of the warriors in this futile battle who survey it from the highwall. The feeling is unmistakably similar to what one feels when one reads the biblical story of the fall of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden.

Alma’s anger and revenge turns to abject bitterness when she declares that “Every stick of dynamite that eats a hole in the mountain will be another hole in him [Pickering]. Till there won’t be nothing left” (340). And by the end, there is almost nothing

left. Alma is steadfast in her convictions that destroying the mountain is sinful and she exerts a powerful influence on her family, albeit that they have slipped into a time-honored fatalism supposedly endemic in the culture. When she demands that her son Jimmy is not going to be a part of tearing down the mountain, he relents, although he says, "Though I don't see it makes much difference. Me tearing it down or somebody else doing it." Alma replies, "It makes a whole lot of difference. You might not be able to keep evil from happening, but that don't mean you got to do the evil" (338).

One commonplace in this novel is the idea that Appalachians have major responsibility for their own fate—most often in the role "outsiders" ultimately play in the Appalachians' demise. After Alma has declared that Reverend Pickering and their sons Jimmy and Mason have decided to ". . . do the devil's work of tearing God's mountain down" and that God is ever-present in those mountains and not trapped in some cement church like Pickering's, Jody, their daughter, responds by declaring that their two versions of God ". . . ought to get together soon or there won't be any mountains left" (247). Because strip mining is ". . . the only game in town," (79) their sons defend their mountains being blasted away as if they were the coal operators themselves. Mason says, "It's a crooked game. It's a losing game. But it's the only one around" (272).

Alma, in a moment of self realization and clarity, assumes ownership of her role in destroying the mountain when she describes to her family the last moments she spent with Pickering who had just consumed a tea made from deadly poisonous Cowbane: "And I wept, my whole body shaking, and I could feel Joshua shaking, too, though I didn't look up, and I knew we were finally crying for our boy and maybe for everything else, too, the mountain we had torn down cause it wasn't just Joshua's doing—it was me, too, trying to get back at your daddy and not caring what got leveled in-between . . ." (393-394).

After Reverend Pickering succumbs to the poison, Alma drags him to the precipice of the highwall and pushes him into the pit of hell—a place where she is convinced he now belongs. Edith Ison, a quirky, gossip columnist for the newspaper for which Sam works, writes about her and her husband Gabby's journey to Pickering's funeral and his burial on the remaining, undisturbed side of the mountain:

Folks kept coming in late, forgetting you couldn't get there from 27 anymore—that side's gone. And what a sight it is. I made Gabby walk with me complaining all the way over to where the mountain just stops and you're looking into the depths of something that just makes you want to cry. One moment you're in the glory of the Lord's creation and the next you're looking at the ruin of the world. (399)

As a result of his reporting on this Pickering drama and the subsequent fallout from the community power base, Sam and nearly all the staff of the newspaper are fired, leaving him and Margery in a dilemma. Even at the end, the reader is not sure of where Margery and Sam will land. Are they off to Louisville in hopes of getting on at a big city newspaper or will they return to Eastern Kentucky after Sam goes back to school and gets his teaching certificate? Sam knows that the politics of the culture may not allow the latter. "Ends up with me promising to go back to school to get a teacher's certificate although the way I've pissed off the powers that be I don't see how I'd ever get a job teaching around here" (403).

Edith Ison, the local newspaper columnist, may be on to something, too, when she realizes that her people have mishandled what the Lord has provided and that coal, ultimately, may be a curse on the region. I don't know. I ain't about to begin blaming

the Lord. He made the mountains. He put the coal under it. What we do to get it ain’t the Lord’s fault. I know there has to be a better way than what we’re doing. The Lord made us a Garden of Eden. It’s us who’ve invited the serpent in.” She tells Sam at a protest rally: “Sometimes I think the Lord sent us coal to plague us. Like he sent the mountains so we can’t get nowhere in a straight line” (346).

Maybe the reader will conclude as Gerard Manley Hopkins did in his iconic poem “God’s Grandeur”:

And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;
And wears man’s smudge and shares man’s smell: the soil
Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod. (6-8)

Anthony’s novel has a powerful arc and is certainly worthy of reading. His characters are well wrought and memorable. His shifts in point-of-view allow the reader to understand the complexities of the various dimensions of characters and their interactions within the culture—outsiders, newspaper people (reporters, typesetters, editors, columnists, publishers, etc.), school teachers, ACLU attorneys, protesters, preachers, bankers, stalwart mountain females, desperate unemployed natives, and gossipy newspaper columnists are all employed to accomplish this. Maybe Alma is on target when she tells Margery, “If you were a Bible reading woman, you’d know that the Bible has more questions than answers” (293). Maybe if we were better students of the Appalachian culture, we’d know that there are infinitely more questions than answers.

The subject matter of this novel is difficult and delicate, dealing with a complex culture that has borne the brunt of exploitation from various directions, not the least of which was from the local color writers of the late 1800s and into the early 1900s who exported the stereotypes of the region to a national audience. Like the local color writers, Mr. Anthony is lured into exploring almost every stereotype that has ever been generated about the Appalachian culture: a violent culture where everyone packs pistols, the propensity for natives to fight at the drop of a hat (but who are plagued with an inherent, contradictory, almost condescending, persuasive “politeness”), a people who have an endemic over-sensitivity to criticism, a place resplendent with pervasive intermarriage, an overabundance of morbidly obese people, a culture composed of “. . . poor benighted freaks . . .” (110), people who are living on the frontier in isolated communities that seem an “. . . outpost of about fifty survivors . . .” (148) and mountaineers who are, more often than not, evasive and incapable of being direct, and many more. This type of easy characterization seems to be too much seasoning in the soup bean pot—way too much salt and pork belly. A conservative sampling of the kind of stereotypes Appalachian people face would have been enough to make the point regarding the battle they face from ignorant outsiders or from cynical, burned-out insiders like Billy the newspaper editor. Simply put, in Appalachian terms: Ain’t no use to beat a dog after it’s dead!

Writing about the highly technical strip mining industry without conducting comprehensive research is challenging. Anthony should have realized that this industry is much more than just bulldozers and explosives. For a non-miner/non-native to write this novel requires much more exacting research into the language and mechanics of mining. Rich coal seams do not lie under less than 12 feet of clay; strip mines do not blast continuously all day (it takes a lot of time to drill all those holes and load them and lots of strip operations may only blast once per day, if that); mining engineers are highly trained surveyors who would know in advance where the boundary of a strip

operation is—especially in a time in which this information is set into concrete legal documents; bond is not based on the quality of the coal, but the amount of dollars it would take to reclaim the disturbance of the land. The Surface Mining Control and Reclamation Act of 1977 provides that, as a prerequisite for obtaining a coal mining permit, a person must post a reclamation bond to ensure that the regulatory authority will have sufficient funds to reclaim the site if the permittee fails to complete the reclamation plan approved in the permit.

Hopefully, these flaws will not deter the reader from deriving the strong arc of this story and discovering Anthony’s lyrical passages and indelible symbolism which will prompt him or her to consider the complexities in this culture. Perhaps, the reader will have faith that Anthony’s novel, at its core, does have the best interest of the Appalachian people in mind.

Optimistically, Anthony’s novel might serve as the exception to what the cynical newspaper editor Billy believes: “I figured out a long time ago they [foreigners] don’t have our best interests at heart. Foreigners have always taken what we have to give and given back nothing—or slag heaps of rubble and told us clean up wasn’t in the bill” (379).

Works Cited

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