

Interview with Rebecca Foster of Foreword Reviews

1. *The Watersmith* has a strong sense of place, no doubt thanks to your familiarity with its Tennessee valley setting. What specific locations captivated your imagination when you were creating this fictional world?

One thing I love about Southern lit is that the setting is as alive as any character. It lives and breathes and has its own emotional arc. Over the course of my book, the fictional town of Show Low transforms from wild frontier to arid suburb to lakefront tourist destination, and that in turn changes its inhabitants. Not unlike a composite character formed from bits and pieces of those an author knows, Show Low is a cocktail of several places that are special to me.

I was born and raised on the outskirts of Nashville before the suburban sprawl, so I spent long summer days exploring the woods behind my childhood home, where I found all kind of artifacts. Confederate musketballs. Cherokee arrowheads. Here was this substratum of human history right under my feet, this literal *understory*, which may be my favorite word in the glossary of a forest. Imagining all the lives that had been compressed into that soil left an indelible impression on me. It made me realize that history is always happening, and that we're a part of it. We're the next stratum to be dug up by some scientist or plucky kid.

After high school graduation, I moved to Pickwick Lake for the summer to work as a marina attendant. There I heard the story of the TVA damming up the Tennessee River to make the lake and generate hydroelectric power. All kinds of lore surrounded that event, as it drove some people out of the Tennessee Valley while others hunkered down, come hell or high water. Legend has it that one such stalwart, Old Man Pickwick, still haunts the lake, pulling tourists under if they dare to swim on a moonless night. This lent itself to plenty of juvenile pranks, like when I'd invite friends down from Nashville, spin that yarn, then suggest a round of Who Can Stay Under the Longest...only to surface between our boat's pontoons so that my friends couldn't find me. And for a few tense seconds, their bodies would believe in Old Man Pickwick even if their brains wouldn't. In hindsight, *their* suspension of disbelief might've been *my* first attempt at fiction. Even though I was in on the prank, I too would get the willies, unable to shake the image of the whole drowned town underfoot, of swamped haylofts and ancient catfish coasting through barn windows. A civilization underwater. Another kind of understory.

Then there's Bunker Hill. To get there from Nashville, you drive south on I-65 until reaching an exit with a sign that points left for the Jack Daniels distillery, right for the Davy Crocket State Park. I guess I was bound to write about whiskey and history by the time I arrived at the cabin my aunt

built for her ailing mother, who quit dialysis and gave up the ghost years before I became the writer in residence. Yet the place had gone untouched since then, all that cast iron and wickerware like fossils trapped in amber. On the day I moved in, before putting down the first word, my aunt and I sat on the porch that was to become my office and gazed out at the crumbling family cemetery in the foreground. “They’re the best neighbors you could ask for,” she said. “You won’t hear a peep out of ’em.” I made my peace with the deceased just as I had with Old Man Pickwick. What choice did I have, given that I would be writing about ‘spirits’ (in both senses of the word)? Without my aunt’s hospitality, the book wouldn’t feel nearly as authentic, for I’d stepped right into its setting like Mary Poppins into chalk art. Had I written it from afar, a wasp would have simply flown down from a wasp nest, not “hang-glided down from a papier-mâché colony I’d have to knock down later with a broom.” Which I did. And which I don’t recommend.

2. In *Life in Five Senses*, Gretchen Rubin writes, “Typically, in the West, people have tended to underrate the sense of smell and to consider it an insignificant sense.” But in your novel, “smell triggers memory,” allowing people to commemorate what is lost. How did your interest in scents come about?

My interest in the sense of smell is likely due to a lack thereof. I’m borderline smell-blind and sometimes wonder what I’m missing, especially because my wife and son are bloodhounds. But occasionally I’ll catch a whiff of something that takes me back. We’ve all been there, minding our own business when waylaid by a scent that strikes a chord or a nerve. For some, it’s the aroma of comfort food. For me, it’s honeysuckle. If I get close enough to the stuff, I’m right back to trekking through the woods as a kid on a long summer day. Perhaps smell sneaks up on us more than other senses precisely because it’s the subtlest. When you’re at a concert, you know you’re forming a memory around sound. When you’re watching a sunset, you know you’re forming a memory through sight. But smell has a way of catching us off guard. It doesn’t reveal itself in murky contrails the way it did in old cartoons.

That got me to thinking: what if this sense that seems inessential was the primary one by which we navigated the world? The deaf have eyes and the blind have ears, but what if both gave way? What was life like for Hellen Keller, whose memoir I’ve read more times than I can count, and who is an integral allusion in my book? It occurred to me that by depriving a character of certain senses, I could heighten the others, granting me license to saturate those descriptions and luxuriate in those scenes. But I wouldn’t have skewed the five senses in favor of one if it weren’t true to form. On a recent episode of the podcast *Diary of a CEO*, a neuroscientist posited a convincing theory for why we humans dream; it may be our visual cortex’s way of defending its territory against the encroachment of other senses while our eyes aren’t receiving input. Scientifically speaking, this is way above my pay grade. But literarily, I can use it to craft inner-worlds that are interesting and inherently neurodivergent, something that’s important to me as an autistic author.

Needless to say, I’m not the first writer to prioritize smell over other senses. There’s Patrick Süskind’s *Perfume* and Marcel Proust’s masterpiece *In Search of lost Time*, whereby the narrator dunks a madeleine cookie in a cup of tea, and *voilà*, the scent unleashes 3,000 pages of childhood memories. But don’t worry, dear reader; *The Watersmith* is less than a tenth of that.

3. The limitation on a couple of other senses becomes an opportunity for a new means of communication for your central characters. What made tactile contact the right approach?

It felt right for a couple of reasons: because those without sight and hearing sometimes need to be physically guided, and because touch is arguably the most intimate sense. To invite someone's touch, to permit them entry into your personal space, requires trust. I wanted to examine intimacy on that level and to tinker with the idea of pressure conveying tone. A tender touch might be the equivalent of a whisper—and a squeeze, a shout. When my characters are communicating by tracing each other's hands, it conjures palm-reading and all the associated fortune and misfortune. Omens dovetail nicely with a story set in the South, where religion and superstition are still rampant. My narrator renounces his family's orthodoxy before embarking on a quest to form his own bespoke religion of hydrotheism, having noticed that the pages of all sacred texts are "practically sopping with allusions to lifegiving wells amid droughts, to rains that saved or drowned civilizations, to rivers that couldn't be crossed and seas that somehow parted."

4. The history and teachings of the "Chimsaw" people recur. What did you hope that Indigenous wisdom would add to the story you were telling?

You can't tell the story of the Tennessee Valley without acknowledging those who were there first and know the land best. In fact, Tennessee comes from the Cherokee *Tanasi*, meaning "little river"—the very river my characters dredge before merging with the mighty Mississippi, a word of Choctaw origins. My hope is that Indigenous wisdom will bring us back to the basic elements (land, wind, fire, water) that were worshipped before protestants, being prone to protest, fractured religion into competing denominations. My narrator wouldn't come to any of these realizations on his own, let alone find a higher power that allows him to complete the twelve steps of AA.

For this, he relies on the tutelage of the Chimsaw, a fabricated tribe. I do have some Cherokee blood, but not enough for a scholarship. In other words, I don't identify as a Cherokee. Rather than misrepresent the customs of a real people, I created my own.

5. Jack's struggle with alcoholism is a poignant subplot. Alcoholics Anonymous employs the language of a "higher power," which Jack initially resists before expanding his idea of what a deity might be. How did you develop the book's spiritual themes, and what do they offer in contrast to the earthly realities of the plot?

Yes, "contrast" is the operative term. Since Southern lit is so tied to the earth (i.e., full of rust and dust), it seemed a fitting genre to *ground* the abstract philosophy my narrator is developing throughout. Philosophy was always going to be the engine; I just needed the right vehicle.

Being that it makes up 65% of our body, I really do believe water is what bonds us across space and time, that when buried we seep into the earth and when burned we vaporize into the sky, returning to the water cycle and ultimately the Seven Seas, which are really just One. This is what Chimsaw elders refer to as the great Reservoir.

When people call for unity, they like to say that race is only skin deep, and that we all bleed the same. But technically there are different blood types just as there are different strains of DNA. Water is the one thing we all have in common. If it's unity we're after, why not focus on that?

6. What authors have influenced your Southern Gothic-inflected style?

I cut my teeth on the usual suspects: Faulkner, Welty, Hurston, O'Connor. Of those, I'd say Flannery hit me the hardest. Her writing was somehow righteous and irreverent at the same time. An inscrutable magic trick. Smoke and mirrors at its best. Or as my narrator puts it, "the impossible coexistence of fire and water that always and only produces smoke." I suppose that's part of what drew me to literature: the challenge of entertaining two opposing ideas.

Years later, in college, I got turned onto absurdists like Tom Robbins and Albert Camus. Camus' *The Myth of Sisyphus* features prominently in my book, as the narrator and his son struggle to assign meaning to a tragedy when they can't assign fault—because they were in cahoots when it happened. One reviewer called *The Watersmith* "a midnight meeting between Faulkner and Robbins," yet another kind of contrast. Hopefully it's one that mixes better than oil and water, the two main substances in the book, and the central metaphor for father and son.

While I return to the canon from time to time, I try to keep up with contemporary Southern authors, among them Charles Frazier, Barbara Kingsolver, and Silas House, who was generous enough to blurb my book. These are the folks who are shepherding the genre into the 21st century, writing about what some call the New South, though that term doesn't sit well with me. Old South/New South smacks of Old Testament/New Testament, as if some savior came along and absolved us Southerners of our antebellum sins. To bring it back to Faulkner: "The past isn't dead. It isn't even the past." Come to think of it, that would have been a fitting epigraph for *The Watersmith*.

7. What are you working on next?

I'm excited to announce that I have received a South Arts grant for an illustrated novella, forthcoming from Appalachia Book Company. Set amidst the national statue-removal debate, *Camp* follows the crew of an antique roadshow who gets more than they bargained for while searching a retirement community for felled Confederate statues. It's a cross between *American Pickers* and *Get Out*.

After that, I'm taking a much-needed vacation. To the lake, of course.
