

Spring 2001

## Review of House's "Clay's Quilt"

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### Recommended Citation

Previously published in *Appalachian Heritage*, 2001, 29(2), p. 66-68

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House, Silas. *Clay's Quilt*. Chapel Hill, NC: Algonquin, 2001. 304 pages Hardcover, \$22.95.

Author Silas House has chosen an appropriate metaphor to title his first novel: *Clay's Quilt* is the story of a young man trying to stitch together his personal history in a way that makes sense. Coming of age in the rural, mining culture of Eastern Kentucky, protagonist Clay Sizemore's life has more tough angles and strange strips of cloth than most of us can imagine.

Clay's mother Anneth was "the wildest woman in Crowe County Kentucky" (17), and his father was a soldier she met two days before he shipped off to die in Vietnam. Glenn, Clay's stepfather, died an equally untimely death by drowning—but only after murdering Anneth and the friends who were helping her leave him. Clay's only memory of this incident was a dream "of blood on the snow, blood so thick that it ran slow like syrup and lay in stripes across the whiteness, as if someone has dashed out a bucket of paint" (7). Orphaned at four, he was reared in the holler of Free Creek by his extended family, sleeping in the double-wide trailer of his hard-living Uncle Gabe and taking meals and maternal nurture from his mother's Pentecostal sister, Easter. As a result, the boy grew up with one foot in Christian fundamentalism and the other in a never-ending party.

Put so baldly, the situation sounds like a teaser from a television talk show. But the empathy of Silas House shows itself immediately: the disrespect often directed toward people in such situations never crosses the page. The darker facts of the characters' lives are hard, to be sure, but they are always presented in a context of realistic detail that precludes simplistic judgments. In fact, the more sordid aspects are overshadowed by the grounded values that pervade the text—values that find their foundation in the deepest veins of Appalachian culture.

In approaching such values, House employs an engaging cast of characters to portray two competing social forces: fundamentalist Christianity, as represented by Free Creek Pentecostal Church; and the consumer culture that infiltrates rural Appalachia, clearly displayed by the Hilltop Club. While church is the center of life outside the family for Easter and her kind, the bar is the social center for the non-religious

population—it's where Clay and his friends spend their weekends. In contrast to most expectations, the Hilltop is a fitting comparison to the Pentecostal church: a real if hazy kind of fellowship takes place there, as friends congregate and enjoy each other's company, drinking hard, sometimes using illegal drugs and dancing to the music of the local star, Evangeline.

It is to House's credit that he can show both forces not only in their weaknesses but also in their strengths—and in their similarities. A significant strand is that music is an equally important form of expression in the church, where the lead singer is Clay's Aunt Easter, and in the bar. Indeed, the Hilltop Club's Evangeline is the coke-snorting daughter—and the former lead singer—of the Mosley Family, Easter's favorite gospel group. Of course, the destructiveness of an alcohol-oriented consumer culture goes without saying, but the church culture, too, is far from perfect. We learn, for example, that Evangeline's sister Alma was courted by her abusive husband in just such a church, and that later her father, because of this association, encouraged her to stay with him regardless of the beatings.

Neither of these forces becomes the ultimate grounding influence in Clay's growth. Unconsciously he seems to be seeking something deeper, and he finds it through Alma, the girl who becomes his heart's desire. Though she is Evangeline's sister, she does not share the bar-singer's approach to life; but neither does she find her musical roots in the gospel music of her family. Her talent is given to the most traditional of Appalachian instruments, the fiddle, and her art suggests an older, deeper, more spiritual resource still available to contemporary Appalachians. While she does at times sit in with her sister's group—and rock the house—her passion is for traditional fiddling, especially as it gives shape to the music that comes from deep within her. As Clay states after hearing her fiddle at the Black Banks Heritage Festival, "That song back there is what the fiddle was meant to play" (99). It is this depth that attracts Clay, and the culture represented by her fiddling goes deeper for him than the Hilltop Club or the Pentecostal church. Significantly, though her music is the closest thing we hear to a purely religious voice, it is little more than a rambunctious diversion to an already rowdy crowd at the Hilltop; and in the Pentecostal Church it cannot sound at all, since some there still consider the fiddle the devil's instrument.

The older culture suggested by Alma's music is also the source of the kinship tie and the related tie to place, two elements which in this novel seem to be cut from the same cloth. In the Free Creek culture, success is not judged by getting an education and moving off to

Lexington or Cincinnati to take a high-paying job. The highest value seems instead to be a fierce loyalty. For example, when Clay graduates from high school, finds a job and moves away, "Gabe and Easter [are] both torn all to pieces, and he [is] only moving ten miles away" (15). This strikes the contemporary reader as strange, but it is consistent with the worldview the novel portrays. Indeed, Free Creek itself is the strongest force in the novel. It is Clay's family's place, the place his people are meant to be. It is even the place where Clay can feel the presence of the divine, a place where he feels "God floating all around ... burning into the trees, popping on the air" (47).

Clearly the strength of this tie takes precedence over differences in lifestyle or personal habits. For example, although Easter has no use for the barroom lifestyle Clay is leading, she never considers shunning him. Similarly, she lives a common life with her hard-partying brother, Gabe. Her religiosity and Gabe's debauchery would have been the end of many families, but here they bear only secondary importance. Ties to kin and place are the primary values of these characters, values that supplant the influence of mass culture or the dictates of a single type of religious expression.

Although the book has occasional weaknesses (I was troubled by two references to a fiddle's frets, an error which, at least for a page or two, shadows the accuracy of other details), it earns its place among contemporary Appalachian literature, and it deserves attention outside the region as well. House's empathetic depth, his deft description, and his skill in finding the perfect metaphor make each page worth reading twice—and in good company. His thematic strains suggest the almost mystical tie to place and kin that one senses in work by Gurney Norman, Wendell Berry, or even James Still. The influence of mass culture and its icons on the lives of Appalachians might be more reminiscent of Bobbie Anne Mason's work. The strong romantic element, however, along with House's use of the fantastic, settles *Clay's Quilt* more comfortably in the company of Lee Smith—not a bad place for any novel to be.

—William Jolliff