Winter 1998

Review of Lyon's "With a Hammer for my Heart"

Bill Jolliff
George Fox University, wjolliff@georgefox.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/eng_fac

Recommended Citation
Previously published in Appalachian Heritage, Winter 1998, 26(1), 57-9
With a Hammer for My Heart is George Ella Lyon’s first adult novel. But her broad experience as a poet and as a writer of novels for young readers is apparent not only in her craft but in her consistently engaging characters and plot.

This story is set in Cardin, a small town turned commerce strip somewhere in Eastern Kentucky. It is in no way remarkable; or, better, it is far too real to be remarkable. As such, it forms the fitting backdrop for a cast of characters whom many readers will seem to recognize from high school yearbooks and summer reunions, if not from community gossip or their own family stories. At the center of the tale is a relationship between an apparently typical fifteen-year-old girl, Lawanda Ingle, and the town misfit, World War II veteran Amos Garland. Few townspeople can believe that what they share is as good—and as pure—as it is; we readers have trouble believing it ourselves. So there are many levels and kinds of tension, and there is nothing cheap in the grace that resolves it.

Determined to make the money necessary to trade life in Cardin for a chance at college, Lawanda Ingle takes up door-to-door magazine sales. Against her father’s advice, she soon calls upon the eccentric Garland. He had returned from World War II some thirty-five years before; but, more accurately, he never came home. Memories of the comrades he could not save, their sufferings and their deaths, keep returning in graphic flashbacks, visions that cause violent and irrational behaviors. Understandably, his wife and children left soon after his return, but not soon enough to escape his rage. Thirty years after their departure, Amos—like his biblical namesake—lives outside and above the town, a position from which his angry brilliance can observe and criticize. Equally suggestive, he lives not in one retired school bus, but in two. In “First Bus,” as Lawanda ecclesiastically calls it, are arranged hundreds of books and maps. In those surroundings, Amos is a philosopher and a sage; he reads and studies in that “clean, well lighted place,” and occasionally entertains the handful of townspeople wise enough themselves to sense the wisdom behind his weirdness. But in “Second Bus,” where he drinks and sleeps and dreams, he remains in the dissipation and disorder of a soldier who never came home.
The friendship of Lawanda and Garland is tested when vandals break into his bus and start a fire. Local authorities put it out quickly, but when they do they happen upon Garland’s journal, the notebook where he unloads the fear and anger carried home from the war. Unfortunately, too, he has chronicled on those pages his growing affection for Lawanda, who has replaced the children he drove away. The wild, delusional nature of his writing is interpreted by the overzealous, underqualified town policeman, Galt, as implying an illegal sexual union. By unlucky coincidence, the discovery occurs while Garland is already confined to the town jail, incarcerated for the relatively innocent misdemeanor of urinating behind a handy billboard. Because of the notebook, Galt holds him there, hoping that Lawanda’s father will be able to extract from her some sordid confession. Of course there is none to make, but Howard Ingle is sufficiently enraged to seek revenge.

Realizing her friend’s desperate situation, Lawanda, guided by her faith-healing Mamaw, makes a desperate search for Garland’s daughter, Nancy Catherine, the only person she believes may have the resources and the will to come to the old man’s aid. Lawanda discovers her running a florist shop in Lexington, then accompanies her back to Cardin. There various kinds of healing can begin, but at a price. In Lyon’s world, there are no indulgences for sale: fate has demanded the sacrifice of one “daughter” for the other.

We follow Lawanda’s suffering, her naiveté and her sophistication, closely because hers is the mind in which Lyon allows us to travel most thoroughly. Hers is not our only contact, however, because the point of view shifts: that is the technical risk that Lyon has chosen, and in the results of that choice are the strengths and weaknesses of the novel. We participate in the thoughts not only of Lawanda, but of Mamaw (her wise, faith-healing grandmother), Howard her father, Amos Garland himself, and many others. This gives us a thoroughly realistic, hence sometimes confusing, view of the “truth,” demonstrating that Lyon has paid good attention to her postmodern peers. The disadvantage of this approach is due in part to the novel’s brevity: we spend too little time in some minds for them to become believable, and as a result the technique that should allow the rounding of characters creates, at its worst, inside views of flat characters. The brevity of the novel also works against the success of the ending. The grace that comes, comes hard—that is good and true to the world we know; but technically speaking, it comes in too few pages to be fully believable.

That flaw should not overshadow, however, Lyon’s achievement. With a Hammer for My Heart is not only a compelling tale of life in Appalachia, but a weighty if quirky moral study. She reminds us that
truth is truth, wherever you find it. In this unlikely interweaving, wisdom is found in the voice of a child-beater. Spiritual growth is witnessed in the words of a bigot who has burned his neighbor's home—and his daughter's body. A moral center is discovered in an aged healer who cures her neighbors with faith and feathers, even after they have kicked her out of church. And, maybe most unlikely of all, restoration comes to a forty-year-old abused child who actually does what her therapist tells her to (she confronts her abuser)—but only because of the persistence of a fifteen-year-old girl naive enough to believe that magazine sales will pay her way through college. It is a peculiar cast, to be sure, but each character has value, and all are treated with respect.

—William Jolliff