Mary Lee Settle
In Their Own Country transcript

1 *And there I was a-setting in that tree, no more than 18 years old, and already married three years to that devil, and I looked down through the branches, and there was Chris Morris, mean, drunk and lurching around down there looking for me...*

Kate Long: There she is. That's the unmistakable voice of Mary Lee Settle, telling a story about her grandmother, Addie. I'm Kate Long. And you're listening to In Their Own Country, a radio series that lets you visit, each week, with one of the best fiction writers or poets West Virginia has produced.

This is the last show in the series, so it's a good time to recognize the fact that West Virginia has produced more fine poets and fiction writers than we could fit into this series. And it's fitting to end this series with Mary Lee Settle. She's West Virginia's National Book Award winner. And she began publishing her novels in the 1950s while most writers in this series were still kids.

2 KL: Did you realize that you are an inspiration to a lot of younger WV writers who see themselves as following in your footsteps?

Mary Lee Settle: Well, that's wonderful. Just tell them to work very hard. And tell them it's mighty hard work for mighty low pay. And I'm proud of them. (laughing)

3 KL: Like her grandmother, this woman has always made up her own mind and spoken her mind. She grew up in Kanawha County, West Virginia - partly in Charleston, partly in Cedar Grove. In the 1940s, she quit Sweetbrier College - where she felt like a misfit. Before the United States got into World War II, she joined the British Navy, to fight Hitler and fascism.

She never <u>did</u> graduate from college, but 5 colleges have given her honorary doctorates.

MLS: I never went back to college. I just started learning instead. There wasn't any reason to go - I went to war instead of going to college.

KL: Later, after stints as a journalist and an actress, she became an internationally known writer, author of 18 books, novels and non-fiction. In her eighties, she's still outspoken.

MLS: Beware of anybody who thinks they're absolutely right. Because they're damn dangerous. I sometimes think the greatest gift of God is doubt and questioning.

KL: And every year, she falls more deeply in love.

4 MLS: I have, as a result of all this work, literally fallen in love with democracy. But democracy is not me against you. Democracy is the balance between us. And there's another way of saying it: Voltaire: "I disagree with you, sir, but I defend to the death your right to say it."

KL: She was born into a Kanawha County family of considerable social position and means. But in her writing and life, she has always spoken up for equality and resented exclusion and privilege.

MLS: The choice is completely individual and always has been.

5 KL: Mary Lee is best known for her historical fiction. And when she talks about her writing, the subject of freedom of speech - the freedom to disagree - comes up quickly.

MLS: You know, why can we sit here and talk now without somebody looking over our shoulder? I've lived in countries where people are talking to me, and suddenly they want to tell me something, and they glance over their shoulder to see if there's a policeman or a listener. We don't have that. We *have* had it.

6 KL: She fears people are forgetting their own history, and so forgetting what it's like to live without that freedom. She began a New York Times article with the question: "What is it that provokes us into attempting to write fiction set deep in the past?"

MLS: I think we're trying to find out about the present, mostly.

KL: That same thought - stated another way - turns up in the first line of her autobiography, Addie.

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she passed by or broke the switch off her favorite tree, swished it to test it, and said, "If you won't listen, you'll have to feel."

KL: So here comes Addie.
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me, from some kind of darkness that she lit with words. So much of it was legend, legend that now she believed and stated as facts.

KL: She starts talking about her first husband.

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Addie seized the letter and crushed it in her fist. She ran out if Mr. Tompkins' office and knelt among the flowing sheets. She raised her arms, the letter still clutched in her hand. "Lord!" she called out to the sky. "You promised me you would make my enemies my footstool! When?"
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KL: It's totally captured me that way. I'd read them out of order before. But reading them from start to finish, my gosh, I see what you're doing here.

In the first novel, the characters risk their lives to rebel against the King, who could - and did - throw anyone in jail - or kill them - for saying the wrong thing, refusing to follow the official religion, whatever. The families leave England and make their way to the Kanawha Valley, which Mary Lee calls Beulah. Their children and great-grandchildren go through frontier times, the Civil War, the mine wars, and the last novel is set in the Vietnam War.

17 The Beulah Quintet started with a single image that popped into Mary Lee's mind in 1954.

MLS: It certainly did. I had a vision. Of course, vision sounds so spooky like angels and stuff. But I tend to get a visual sense which is sensuous and which will start me actually writing. And I saw, in my mind's eye, two men in a drunk tank on a Saturday night. And one man hits the other.

KL: The two men didn't know each other. The punch surprised them both. And the original image was so vivid in Mary Lee's mind that, as a writer, she just kept thinking and thinking about it.

MLS: It was going to be another modern novel. But then I kept wondering why the man hit that man instead of that man. It was Saturday night, and the drunk tank was full. What was behind the fist? What were the prejudices, what was the training in hatred? And in distrust?

You know, it's always called a West Virginia novel, but that's what I realized was wrong. I hadn't done my detective work about who we were. These people have a past, whoever they are. And I kept going back and back and back and back.

MLS: It was like following a river upriver, and into a creek, and into a rill, and where it starts.

KL: The guy who punched the other turns out to be an unemployed coal miner who'd gotten drunk in despair. The guy he punched was a grandson of a US Senator who'd gotten drunk at the country club.

Neither man knew it, but their ancestors had fought together in England to overthrow the King before they came to America.

MLS: That's right. And they were blood kin to each other

KL: But - once they got to America, their kinship gradually got lost, in more than one way.

MLS: Because the land that had once been frontier, and where there was this seed of equality in the frontier settlement, grew into who had money and who didn't, what farm became master, what farm became servant. And the social split had happened in the valley.

18 KL: Mary Lee found a letter in the Kanawha County library that pointed her back into the English past. The letter was written by two English soldiers in Oliver Cromwell's army, which had defeated the King. They were writing for their regiment.

MLS: A regiment of soldiers had revolted against Cromwell and had written a wonderful letter...It was a letter to Cromwell. And it said, "What have we to do in Ireland, to fight and murder a people who have done us no harm. We have waded too deeply in human blood."

KL: Cromwell had ordered these guys to attack Ireland. They didn't want to. They had signed up to help overthrow the King and tyranny, and they felt it was tyranny to attack Ireland.

MLS: And that set me off, and I thought, well, maybe, maybe, maybe I'll begin to find my answer here.

KL: She was finding clues, solving a mystery. Mary Lee saw that letter and thought: Yep. Ancestors of those two guys in the drunk tank. She started researching.

19 In England, she stumbled onto the actual place where the two men who wrote that letter were shot by Cromwell's firing squad. She found it when she wasn't looking for it.

MLS: I went to Burford just for the weekend. And I walked into the churchyard. And literally, I turned left, away from the church and toward the wall of Coxwall stone. And there, on the wall, I saw a line of shots.There was a high line of shots and a low line of shots.

And I climbed up and put my fingers in the holes. And it just at that point, I heard a voice behind me saying, "What the devil are you doing up there?" And I turned around, and it was the lovely old Christian vicar. And I still had my fingers in the bullet holes. And I said, "Who got shot here?" And he said, "Damn rebels! Damn rebels should have been shot!"

It had been three hundred years ago. I had found Johnny Church and Thankful, the two people shot by Cromwell for being the agitators of the regiment, Waley's regiment, that refused to fight in Ireland.

KL: Did they begin to form in your mind? To take shape?

MLS: Yeah, they jumped into my mind. They didn't begin to form. They just were there.

20 KL: Was it really just luck you found that cemetery?

MLS: I was living in England, and I was on my way back to this country to teach a fall term and decided that I would have a little time in the country and picked a place called Burford. You know, which seemed a nice, I don't know Burford, and it seemed a nice place in the cosmos.

I would say, over and over, during the years of The Beulah Quintet and I, Roger Williams, I have been led like this. And literally, I can't call it anything else. Because I picked Burford instead of another place. I really think sometimes it's looking for me.

KL: Mary Lee decided young Jonathan Church would be the ancestor of the guy who punched the other in the drunk tank.

21 At the beginning of the first book of the Beulah Quintet - called *Prisons* - Johnny Church and Thankful are on their horses, carrying the letter to Cromwell. Johnny Church is speaking here.

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He looks fourteen and lost in this great flat valley of the Thames. Who would know, watching him ride along there with his mouth fell ajar, that he is as fine a soldier as I have ever known. And so compassionate and loving a friend.

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I still flinch from the striking of my father's hand across my face.
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The moment was over, and the hymns and psalms began, and here and there shouted Amen and Amen again in the distance. And I began to ride down among them, hoping I'd be took for a soldier and not a raw recruit. I clicked at Nell then and whispered, "Come then, my old heart, let's go to war."
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MLS: I don't think we realize in this country how truly rare the history of our democracy truly is. It started in the frontier, but it started with ideas that were brought over here. And those ideas, over and over, we have tried to squash. We have fought against them. We have tried to form autocracies, as was formed in every state in the South, before the Civil War.

KL: Autocracy, where a few people decide what happens to everyone.

We survived it. We survived the twenties, when there were attempts to blot out opposition. We survived the early fifties, when the McCarthy hearings were attempting to blot out opposition.

KL: In that case, they called people Communist.

MLS: Watch anybody who is calling something they don't agree with by the wrong name. Because you find all the way through American history that those who are autocrats tend to use the wrong name for those who disagree.

29 KL: The New York Times said Mary Lee's historical novels are "head and shoulders" above others in authentic detail. She works at it. When she was writing Oh Beulah Land, set in the mountain frontier, for instance, she spent months reading only things written before or during frontier times, to fill her mind with the language, the details of daily life.

MLS: I wanted to find out what had actually happened. And also, I wanted to find out what people at the time thought was happening. We know the results, because we are in their future. But at the time, they didn't know their future.

KL: She found plenty of writing by ordinary people in the British Museum in London.

MLS: Because we were them in those days. And there were many contemporary books - not novels - contemporary histories - written by people who came back to England ...

30 I read for ten months. And then one night, I had a dream. I dreamed that I was a man, and that I was in dirty buckskins, that I was building a hut, and I had some land, and I had girdled some trees. He was doing it because the law said that you had to have a dwelling that was at least four feet high in order to vote as a landowner.

And the next morning, I realized I was ready to write the book.

KL: You had read so much that this language and this time had crept into your dreams.

MLS: I was waiting for it, and it happened.

31 KL: Another Mary Lee research tale: She convinced a British Museum curator to let her forage around in the basement archives, full of relics and strange items from the American frontier.

MLS: And he just let me wander around.

KL: She opened a big chest.

MLS: And it was full of these rather beautiful - um, Indian leather, stretched on a circle of twigs. And the leather was stretched on it and dried. And then there were these Indian signs on it, which were very beautiful. And I just thought, well, these are some little things they hung on the wall, you know.

I picked the first one up. And a hank of yellow hair fell all the way to the floor. That tea chest was full of scalps. And this taught me more than anything else about what was happening in the frontier.

KL: The British had cut deals with the Indians to fight the settlers in the War of 1812. Those scalps came from the Kentucky frontier.

MLS: So I didn't know if it was one of my own ancestors I was holding up with that yellow hair. Although we're all redheads and brown hair in the family.

But it was just full of scalps, and this letter I found from a British officer, sending the scalps to England because they were a present from the Indians to the Great White Father, blah blah blah in London, saying exactly what they were. And in good military fashion, so many women, so-and-so many babies,-so-and-so many children, so-and-so many men, killed with ax, burned, so on.

32 K: Here's a reading from Oh Beulah Land. It's the early 1800s, in *Oh Beulah Land*. Mary Lee's character, Hannah Bridewell - ancestor of a character in Prisons - was captured by Indians. She escapes. As she thrashes through the underbrush, trying to get home, she's caught in a big thunderstorm.

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33 KL: Mary Lee didn't have much firsthand experience with mountain lions. So she went to the London Zoo and positioned herself in front of the puma cage.

MLS: And I sat there, and the puma and I communicated with each other for hour after hour. Then I knew about the puma.

KL: She also had to write a sequence in which a starving Hannah cuts meat from a dead bear.

MLS: I knew all about bears intellectually at this point. But frankly, I had never felt a bear like Hannah did.

KL: So she asked the bearkeeper if she could feel a bear.

MLS: And he said, "come up on Saturday morning, and I will let you in with the American brown bears," he said. "They're very nice. They're young. Wear several layers of heavy clothing. And get yourself two cans - of golden syrup. "And go in with them open, and the bears will play with you and put their long tongues into the syrup, and you'll have a fine time."

Well, all right, anything for research. So I went up there. And fortunately, there was nobody at that end of the zoo. So I went in, and sure enough, the bears were delighted with me. They thought I was another bear. So I held out the syrup, and their tongues are incredibly long, and they went aaaah, and we all had a good time. And they'd punch at me, and I'd punch at them, and we all punched at each other. We just played. Because I needed to feel that sort of toilet brush bear skin.

And suddenly I heard a noise. And I looked up, and there must have been a hundred people watching this performance from the top. So I got out of there. That was the end of that. The bear keeper was just delighted. And he said, "You know, I'm so sorry. I would have put you in with the Kodiac. She's fifteen feet high. Her name is Daisy. But she's in heat, and this morning, she killed another bear. But by next week, she won't be in heat, and if you'll come back, I'll let you in the cage with Daisy. (laughing) I haven't been back since. That's been forty years ago.

KL: Did you go home straightway and write that scene then?

MLS: No, I just let it happen in my head, became Hannah.

34 KL: Mary Lee set her third book of the Beulah Quintet, Know Nothing, during the Civil War years.

MLS: And what I was concerned with, in Know Nothing, was what caused people who had been frontier people, maybe one or two generations before, to turn into reactive, slave-owning southerners. What caused their reaction, their vigilante-mindedness?

KL: And so it went. She traced changes in values and behavior of these Kanawha Valley families through the years, to the night when the descendent of one family punches the descendent of another in that drunk tank.

35 One more behind-the-scenes research story. Mary Lee Settle's novel Scapegoat is set during the mine wars. Mother Jones, the union organizer, is a character. Mary Lee remembered that, thirty years before, when she was digging around for something else, she'd come across some of Mother Jones speeches...

MLS: For years everyone said there are no speeches of Mother Jones, and there they were. There were 5 speeches of Mother Jones, and they were taken down by a legal stenographer, who had been sent there by Brown, Johnson and Knight to get some evidence to have her arrested for sedition.

I was just delighted with it because it had real language in it. It didn't have cleaned-up, genteel, governess, English class language. It was taken down verbatim and published verbatim.

KL So Mary Lee transcribed those speeches from microfilm. She was living and teaching at the University of Charleston for a term.

MLS: There were four faculty apartments in this one small building. And fortunately, everybody was away for the weekend. Because I could then record it on tape instead of writing it down. Because recording it on tape would have disturbed the other people. Recording it on tape, I could do it so much faster.

I was having a fine time. I was being Mother Jones. I was out there doing it.

KL: You were walking up and down in your apartment, reading Mother Jones' speeches into your tape recorder?

MLS: I certainly was. And another thing! You know, it was about six o-clock in the morning, and there was a knock on the door. And I thought, Oh my God. So I went to the door, and I opened it. One of the people had come back early. And he was standing there in his pajamas. And he said, "Mary Lee, for God's sake, start that revolution or shut up!" (laughs)

KL: So here's Mother Jones - about to make a speech in a barn to the wives of the strikers.

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One woman said AMEN, like she was in church, and somebody else said, "Hush up, there."

"I feel inspiration in me. I feel inspiration like I never felt before, from you women tonight." It was time to ring the chimes. Mother let go. Her voice pounded the barn walls. "The womanhood of this valley shall not be beaten, robbed and violated like you was tonight by a bunch of company bloodhounds. Never more!" She paused for the Amens, the Yes, yeses she knew would come. Always did come from the Baptists and the Holy Rollers. They caught the Amens from each other. Nobody said Hush.

"Nevermore will you be married by a company preacher, owned by a company store put in a company house ain't fit for nothing but a hog, ready to fall in on your head. buried on company land. Your loved ones can't even put flowers on your grave if there's a strike. And your men are on a yellow dog contract, says they get set out if they stand up for their rights.

"Never more will the operators steal your men's labor by docking their load by thousands of tons of coal a year." She heard one of the Italian women translate to some others. "And the church." She let them have their little stir at that. "Now, I don't say nothing about your church as such. But it ain't your church. It's company church. Why, you can't even use it to get buried from when there's a strike. It don't belong to God. Why, it belongs to the company with a company Jesus.

"I set in one of those churches and I seen $1,600 of your money sent out to teach Chinese heathens about Jesus. Well that company Jesus don't know no more about you than a dog does its father. Jesus never saw a penny of it and never will. You don't need no company Jesus up this holler. You've got the United Mine Workers!
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KL: He was kicked out because he refused to participate in the official religion.

MLS: And his deep, deep belief, which he believed came from God, his deep belief was that your religion's your own business. And the state, when it meddles in it, it's bad for the church and bad for the state.

KL: You said there was another reason.

MLS: He told them that they ought to pay the Indians for the land they were grabbing. This was shocking! It's like Casablanca. They were shocked, shocked! There was land-stealing going on here!

KL: After Roger Williams was kicked out in the snow he did manage to establish Rhode Island colony.

39 MLS: And Massachusetts and Connecticut tried to destroy that colony over and over and over again. He finally got a charter, which was the first one, he thought, in the world where a man could not be arrested or persecuted for his conscience. Where state and church were separate.

KL: Like West Virginia, Rhode Island was poorer in material things than its neighbors. But they had something worth more than the material wealth of the other states, Roger Williams said. A golden treasure, he called it. Here he is as an old man, reflecting.

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MLS: *(sings a capella)* Oh Beulah Land, sweet Beulah land. As on the highest mount I stand, I look away across the sea where mansions are prepared for me and view the shining glory shore, my heaven, my home, forevermore. *(sighs)*

KL: It means a lot to you, doesn't it?

MLS: It's the Beulah Quintet. That hope, that constant hope.

KL: We've been talking with National Book Award winner Mary Lee Settle. I'm Kate Long. And this is the last program of *In Their Own Country,* a series featuring the work and thoughts of West Virginia's many fine writers. Thanks for listening.

(Mary Lee sings again, with a choir joining in) The angels come and walk with me. And sweet communion here have we. The angels take me by the hand and show me heaven's tableland.

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