**Reaction to Stereotypes: Five West Virginia writers**

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**Maggie Anderson** / poet, Mineral County.

**17** Kate: After Maggie’s mother died, she and her dad moved back to West Virginia, to Buckhannon, and then to Keyser. She was already scribbling, but she didn’t think real writers would write about small-town things or things they saw around them. She was affected by stereotypes without realizing it.

Maggie: I guess I didn’t think it was really wrong to write about the things I saw around me. But all the poems that I was reading seemed to be about things that were far away. I just thought, “Who would want to know?” I mean, even the lives of my family seemed basically, just weird to me. You know, like who would want to read about that?

Kate: Then she heard Louise MacNeill, West Virginia’s poet laureate at the time.

Maggie: I’d never heard a poet give a poetry reading. And I hadn’t read much poetry at all. And what we had read, I don’t think - except for Emily Dickinson - that any of it was by women. And so when Louise McNeill came to Potomac State College in Keyser - which is where I lived and was going to high school - to give a reading, I went to hear it. And I’d never heard anything like that.

Anybody who’s heard Louise MacNeill read can probably conjure her voice in your mind. It was an absolutely distinctive voice: a mountain accent and just a real connection to ancient rhythms of poetry. And I remember she had a hat on, and she had a blue dress. And when it came time for her to read, after she’d been introduced, she came out from behind the lectern and recited her poem, “Hill Daughter,” which starts out, “Land of my fathers, blood of my fathers, whatever is left of your hate in the rocks, of your grudge in the stone, I have brought you at last what you sternly required that I bring you. And I have brought it alone.”

And so she read that poem, and I thought about that. And I thought, “Boy, you could probably write about some things you know.”

Kate: At that point, she never would have imagined that, later in life, she would edit Louise MacNeill’s autobiography, Milkweed Ladies.

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**Tom Douglass (Breece Pancake’s biographer**): Cabell County

He saw that the ordinary things in West Virginia are really worth writing about. I think that’s what Breece showed people. I think he showed would-be writers that the things around them are worth writing about.

And that’s what he’s saying: that this place, this culture, though it’s derided through stereotype, has something vital to say to the rest of the country. Not maybe in the particular detail that he uses, but in the essence of these stories that have to do with a certain longing for beauty. A longing for love. A longing for redemption that we all have.

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**Denise Giardina** / novelist, McDowell and Kanawha Counties

Kate: Denise has painful memories of hurtful stereotypes. She often wrote them into her books.

**3** Here’s a scene many West Virginians will recognize.

Denise This is set during the 1960s, during the War on Poverty, when Appalachia was on the TV every night. This is actually based on a true story that a friend told me happened at his school.

Kate: From *The Unquiet Earth.* The speaker is a schoolgirl named Jackie.

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**3** *The television people have come to Blackberry Creek, right to my school at Felco. They’re making a news show about Christmas in Appalachia, and they have television cameras with those eyes painted on them.*

*I keep looking for Walter Cronkite, but Mom says he didn’t come with them. Mom brought them to the school because they spent the morning in their clinic. She is aggravated. I can tell by the way she holds her mouth shut tight like her teeth are stuck together with bubble gum.*

*She talks to my teacher, Miss Cox, while the television men make noise in the hallway. “What are they like?” Miss Cox asked.*

*“They make me feel like a specimen in a jar,” my mom says. She waves to me and leaves, and a television man comes in the room. He tells Miss Cox his name is Phil Vivante. He has black hair cut like someone drew around the edges with a pencil before they trimmed, and he’s wearing a turtle-neck shirt.*

*“We need a place to set up,” he says. “Where’s the cafeteria?”*

*“We don’t have a cafeteria,” Miss Cox said. “We serve the children at the kitchen door and they eat at their desks.”*

*“Then where’s the library?”*

*“There’s no library either. We keeps books in each room.” She points to the bookshelf near the window.*

*“That’s no good,” says Phil Vivante. “We need lots of space to give out the shoes. I guess we’ll have to film in the hallway.”*

*“It’s OK, Phil,” says a bald man who comes in the room. “The hall has a nice bleakness.”*

*“What shoes?” Miss Cox asks.*

*“A shoe company in Paramus, NJ heard about your problems here. They sent several boxes of their product for Christmas. We thought we’d film the distribution.”*

*He goes back in the hall and the TV men come in and out with cords and plugs and lights on tall metal poles. Miss Cox tries to teach about the planets, but we keep looking at the doors, so she gives up and says that people want to see television shows about Appalachia because they think we are stupid and backward, and they can’t figure out why. She says we are not stupid or backward and are just as good as anybody. But she says it low, and she keeps glancing at the door like she thinks somebody might come in and take her away.*

*We line up to get our lunches, corn dogs and macaroni and cheese and carrot sticks and pineapple slices. Toejam Day trips on a fat, black TV cord and spills his lunch, but Miss Cox gets him another one. Toejam usually doesn’t eat the school lunch because he can’t afford it. But the principal says everyone gets a free lunch today, a present from the Board of Education.*

*The TV men sit on the staircase and eat their lunch. They hold the corn dogs sideways and look at them before they take a bite.*

*After lunch, we carry our trays back to the kitchen. The TV men have stacked lots of big boxes on the stairway. The boxes say Parkway Shoe Company. Phil Vivante tells the bald man to turn the boxes sideways so the name won’t show. “No free advertising,” he says.*

*He makes Miss Cox sit at a table with a pile of shoes beside her. The shoes are ugly. Some are pink tennis shoes. Others are square boys’ shoes that look hard as rocks.*

*We go back to our desks, but Phil Vivante comes in and tells us to line up. Brenda Lloyd, who sits beside me whispers, “I don’t want any of them shoes.”*

*I raise my hand. Phil Vivante says “What is it?”*

*“Some of us don’t need them,” I say. “And some of us don’t want them.” He looks at me like, if he was a teacher, he would spank me. Then he glances around the room.*

*“How many of you need shoes?” he asks. No one raises their hand. Lots of them do need shoes, but they would rather have their tongues pulled out than to say so.*

*“Great,” says Phil Vivante. He looks at his watch. Then he says, “How many want to be on TV?” We all raise our hands. “Good,” he says. “Line up.”*

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**4** Denise: One of my memories burned into my childhood is seeing all these TV shows about Appalachia. On the one hand, I did live in one of the poorest parts of Appalachia. On the other hand, I didn’t recognize my place at all in a lot of ways, in terms of the attitude that people had toward us, and this sense that we were somehow defective, or we had no culture, no traditions, and no history.

It just gave me a real bad self-image about the place, or the way people thought about the place. And I think all the people I knew when I was a kid felt the same way. We were ashamed and embarrassed to see these images of us on the TV. And it had another negative outcome in that it did keep us also from looking at our problems, because there were certainly problems there. So there was almost a denial that there was anything wrong. And that’s not good either.

**5** Kate: Another scene from *The Unquiet Earth*: Jackie thinks she can’t be a writer because she lives in a coal camp. The coal company has given her camp this name: Number 13.

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Denise: And she says *- “I get a notebook and figure I would write a real story with a happy ending. But it never worked. I’m not a real writer. Real writers live in New York apartments or sit at sidewalk cafes in Paris.*

*Sometimes I study Number 13 from my front porch. The houses used to be white, but now they are faded grey with coal dust, and their paint is peeling. They sit all close together.*

*In the dusk, I can pretend it is not Number 13. It is the German village where the Grimm Brothers told their stories. And the coal camp houses are really cottages like where Hansel and Gretal lived, cottages lit with candles and lanterns instead of cheap lamps from the 5 and 10.*

*But it is still the same old Number 13. In one house, Homer Day reads the Bible while his wife Luella heats up bacon grease for the wild greens Toejam picked for supper. It is all they will have to eat. Nearby, Homer’s brother Hassel and Junior Tagget sit on a vinyl couch outside Hassel’s trailer. Across the street, Uncle Brigham Young is getting drunk. And I can hear the TV turned up loud through the open screen door.*

*Betty and the kids are watching Bonanza, and Uncle Brigham is hollering at them to turn down the damn noise. My mom is working her half acre in the camp garden, trying to finish hoeing some tomatoes before it gets dark. So there is not a thing to write about, only hillbillies. And nobody cares to hear about hillbillies. I go inside to watch TV.*

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Kate: Did you ever feel like that when you were a kid?

Denise: Yeah, that’s actually one of the most autobiographical scenes I’ve done was that scene right there. Because…

**6** I really did think it’d be fun to be a writer, but I never dreamed that I could. Because I did think you had to write about sophisticated things. I didn’t know of any writers from West Virginia. So I had no role models. And I thought nobody would want to write stories about where I was from. I mean, good grief, that was just the last thing in my mind, that somebody would actually like to read a book that was set in West Virginia. So yeah, I was in my twenties before I started getting enough confidence to start writing.

Kate: By then, she realized that she had a rich well of life experience and stories to draw from.

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**Irene McKinney /** poet, Barbour County

**23** Kate: Irene‘s family had no TV when she was growing up, so until she was a young teenager, she thought most people lived like she did. But then, she started going into town to school and began to study popular magazines.

Irene: I pored over the advertisements: people in clean and sparkling kitchens, filled with all kinds of bright, shiny appliances that we didn’t have. When I compared that in my mind, the message that came through to me was that the way I was living and the way people in my community were living was inferior.

I didn’t see anything that reflected my experience in these popular magazines. Everybody seemed so much more well-dressed, well-educated, well-adjusted, and cleaner than I was or than any of the kids I knew were. When you live on a farm, dig potatoes, carry coal, carry water, and so on, you’re dirtier than children who live in town. In order to clean ourselves, we had to carry buckets of water from the spring, heat it up on the stove, pour it into a wash pan, take it into another room, and sponge ourselves down. So this was quite an undertaking to try to keep neat and clean.

**26** Her first nationally-published book of poems, *The Girl with the Stone in Her Lap,* was very well received. People at the University of California got hold of it and invited her to teach there for a year, said she had a fresh, original voice.

It was the first time Irene McKinney had been out of the Appalachian area. To her amazement— and relief— she found that Californians not only did not look down on her mountain farm background, they envied her for it.

Irene: People who come from a rootless culture are fascinated by, and maybe envy rooted cultures. I didn’t really realize that I had a very rich kind of background and heritage until I got away from it and began to miss it. I saw how valuable to me this experience of growing up in this particular way was.

Kate: And through West Coast eyes, she looked back at West Virginia.

Irene: I think that it’s maybe necessary to step entirely out of your own culture in order to begin to fully see it. I physically felt that I was looking back to the east and seeing this little area and seeing how precious it was to me and how much it had done to form all my values and the way I felt about the world, and the way I felt about other people, and what my hopes and aspirations were, all these things which, actually, I had denied up until that time.

Kate: And she began to truly appreciate - in an unsentimental way - the rural community where she grew up, along Talbott Road in Barbour County: where families shared party lines, a community center, a church, special events like corn shuckings and bonfires, and just helped each other get by from day to day.

Irene: When I say that the people around us were our universe, I mean that very sincerely. We depended on each other in many ways.

For example, when we got ready to sell some cattle, my dad did not have to load them up by himself. He usually would call Uncle Dewey and maybe another man named Armand Riccatelli, who lived up the road from us and was a very good neighbor.

At that time, there usually wasn’t any money exchanged for these things. Instead, what would happen, a neighbor who had helped out at that time would call my dad up and say, “It’s now time to castrate the bull calves. Will you come and do it?” Because my dad had a lot of skill in that and knew how to do it safely. So he would go and do that for them.

So people exchanged abilities that they had in various areas. That is, you know who in the community knew how to do certain things. And this wasn’t something that was coldly calculated. People didn’t actually talk about those exchanges. They didn’t say, “OK, now it’s time for me to pay back a favor.” It was just a very easy-going, natural exchange that went on all the time. That was part of the definition of being a good neighbor. 27 Kate: Irene’s third book of poems, Six o’Clock Mine Report, also draws heavily from Talbott Road community. Here’s a poem that starts with two-grave plot beside her family church. Now, Irene bought it while she was still married. Her dad talked her into it. But then she was divorced, and she still had this double grave site. >>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>> 28 Visiting My Gravesite Talbott Churchyard, West Virginia Maybe because I was married and felt secure and dead at once, I listened to my father’s urgings about “the future” and bought this double plot on the hillside with a view of the bare white church, the old elms, and the creek below I plan now to use both plots, luxuriantly spreading out int he middle of a big double bed. - But no, finally, my burial has nothing to do with marriage, this lying here in these same bones will be as real as anything I can imagine for who I’ll be then, as real as anything undergone, going back and forth to “the world” out there, and here to this one spot on earth I really know. Once I came in fast and low in a little plane and when I looked down at the church, the trees I’ve felt with my hands, the neighbors houses and the family farm, and I saw how tiny what I loved or knew was, it was like my children going on with their plans and griefs at a distance and nothing I could do about it. But I wanted to reach down and pat it, while letting it know I wouldn’t interfere for the world, the world being everything this isn’t, this unknown buried in the known. >>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>> Kate: I always loved that line, “This unknown buried in the known.” Irene: Yeah. It’s very difficult to paraphrase or comment much on that, but my sense is that to be alive at all and to be on this earth at all is a very great mystery. And most of the time, we go around acting though if we know what we’re doing. We buy a plot for a house, we build a house, we buy a plot for a grave. And we know we’re going to be buried there. This all seems very known. But there’s a secret inside that, a huge secret inside that, the secret of life and death itself. And there’s no way we can penetrate that. >>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>>

Sunday Morning, 1950 Bleach in the foot-bathtub, The curling iron, the crimped, singed hair. The small red marks my mother makes across her lips. Dust in the road, and on the sumac. The tight, white sandals on my feet. In the clean sun before the doors, the flounces and flowered prints, the naked hands. We bring what we can - some coins, our faces. The narrow benches we don’t fit. The wasps at the blue hexagons. And now the rounding of the unbearable vowels of the organ, the O of release. We bring some strain, and lay it down among the vowels and the gladioli. The paper fans. The preacher paces, our eyes are drawn to the window, the elms with their easy hands. Outside, the shaven hilly graves we own. Durrett, Durrett, Durrett. The babies there that are not me. Beside me, Mrs. G. sings like a chicken flung in a pan on Sunday morning. This hymnal I hold in my hands. This high bare room, this strict accounting. This rising up.

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29 Irene: What I realize about this poem now, reading it, is that, when you go to church, you bring some sense of strain from your life outside there. And you want some relief from it, you want some release from it. And just being there, as I remember, made us all feel somewhat relaxed, you know, just being there together. I’m not talking about any larger theological issue about God or religion, I’m just talking about the people themselves, coming in there, sitting down, and being quiet for a while after their hard week or work. And everybody in that community worked hard all week. So you bring your sense of strain in there and lay it down on the altar, and then you go away relieved.

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**Cynthia Rylant** / children’s writer and poet

**33** **Cynthia:** When I went to college, I tried to blend in. I didn’t want to stick out as somebody from West Virginia who had a hillbilly accent and grew up without indoor plumbing. So I tried to get rid of my accent. I hoped that I would become cultured enough that people would accept me and not think that I was backwards in any way.

So I got the degree and saw all the right movies and read all the right books. Then, interestingly, as I have matured, as I have grown wiser, I am so proud of being different from the rest of the world.

I am so proud of being from West Virginia because it really makes me unique.

**Kate:** She says people really take in the fact that she’s from West Virginia.

**Cynthia:** They know that I’ve had a life different from the life that they had in the suburbs of Cleveland or Minneapolis or New York City or Long Island. They know that I am really different. It’s a source of real pride for me.

When I first started writing my books and West Virginia crept into them, I think it’s because I really didn’t know who else to be but who I was. And where I was raised became the setting for my stories. As I’ve grown older though, I find that I want to go back there because I know that there is such beauty and spirituality in those mountains. I’d like to find more of it and write about it. When I think about writing a novel for adults, I always return in my mind to the hills of Appalachia.

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