

ESSAY

Hindman's Appeal

Jane Hicks

Talking about Hindman and the Appalachian Writers Workshop feels a bit like being a museum docent or tour guide. It is impossible to make the experience real with mere words on a page. The considerable body of writing about the appeal of the workshop touches on the egalitarian nature of the workshop, the noteworthy staff, the fellowship (both academic and after hours) and the near-mystical feel and setting of the workshop. The workshop has it all. However, seeing a magnificent lion in a museum diorama and seeing one on the prowl are two entirely different things. Writing about Hindman and being there presents the same difficulty.

I first encountered Hindman over twenty years ago when a friend and I drove up to check out the workshop. Jack Higgs, the legendary English Professor at East Tennessee State, had told us about it. If it was good enough for Jack, we thought it worth checking out. I remember the God-awful drive from East Tennessee. Pound Mountain presented a formidable obstacle on a curvy, two-lane road. The Hindman Settlement School was originally established at the Forks of Troublesome Creek in Knott County at the beginning of the 20th Century precisely because it was one of the most remote, and thus needy, locations in Eastern Kentucky. Now it is easily accessible not far from a four-lane highway. I also remember the small number of participants compared to current workshops and that there was no air-conditioning. We nearly melted. However, seeing and hearing Harriet Arnow and Jim Wayne Miller made me swear to return. Small children and finances prevented me from attending until the late 1980s. Except for one year, I have returned every year since.

One reason I can't resist Hindman is that, like most writers, I am an inveterate reader who cherishes my favorite authors. Like other newcomers to Hindman, at first I would often stand, looking like the proverbial deer in the headlights, at meal time. The food is laid out buffet style. Participants can dine with a favorite (even revered) author. My first sight of Lee Smith, Jim Wayne Miller, and James Still munching away with empty seats beside them, was nearly

overwhelming. I've seen that same look on other faces. The staff mingles freely, never locked away and inaccessible.

I'm sure there must be a downside for staff in this arrangement. They have writing prompts to prepare and manuscripts to critique in individual sessions. Some have to give interviews to local radio stations and reporters or people doing scholarly research—not to mention overzealous fans/workshop participants. I've never heard one complain, though I'm sure it is an exhausting week for them.

Everyone works at Hindman. The longstanding tradition of participants and staff washing dishes still remains. My first year, we were in the old kitchen. Talk about Hell's Kitchen! In temperatures of over a hundred degrees, we hand-washed dishes in deep sinks of very hot water and bleach. That year, Jim Wayne Miller swung a dish cloth and held forth on Sut Lovingood, the anti-establishment East Tennessee country character created before the Civil War. Miller didn't wash many dishes, but he was extremely entertaining. Lee Smith had the job of picking up dishes from diners. People often linger, making it difficult for the dish washers to get done in time for the next session. Lee charmed the dishes right off the table, with not one person objecting. I've been on cleanup with most of the luminaries of the Appalachian genre. I find it comforting and encouraging seeing Sharyn McCrumb, Robert Morgan, and Silas House working just like me.

No modern endeavor can succeed without networking. The staff is always generous in support of promising writers. I owe personal debts of gratitude to Kathryn Stripling Byer, Ron Rash, and Sharyn McCrumb. In 2000, Silas House was nominated by Lee Smith as one of the South's "Ten Emerging Writers" by the Millennial Gathering of Vanderbilt University. It contributed enormously to his "big break." Many, many of the participants have gone on to become notable writers. Some, like Silas, Rita Quillen, Leatha Kendrick, and others have returned as staff.

After the evening readings by workshop staff, we gather for music. In earlier years, the music was informally organized. Renowned ballad singer Betty Smith led evening singing for several years in the 1990s until knee surgery sidelined her. Rita Quillen sometimes leads and plays a fine guitar. People from outside the region are astounded that we join in to sing songs after hearing two notes and that harmony comes, unpracticed. It's not unpracticed; we mostly learned it in country churches, some from shape-note hymnals. The standing joke is that we know the first verse of everything.

Legends abound concerning the practice of “sworping,” a term that originated at Hindman for its own unique, “after party” if you will. After evening singing, the hearty move on to sing, recite and relax until the wee hours—actually the two occasions often overlap, and some move back-and-forth, but the sworping always lasts longer. This distinctive gathering moves easily from individual conversations to “plenary” poetry readings, to group singing to background guitar-playing. Many deep and philosophical insights have formed in these gatherings, important ideas hatched, sermons preached, and the spirit has even moved some to dance! In my tenure, the party has settled in at different locations in different years but has always been so raucous that it has been forced to move. Hopefully, plans to build an all purpose gathering room away from light sleepers will come to pass.

Hindman sits in the fortress of surrounding mountains. Morning comes late, and night is early. The landscape is immutable (unless, perish-the-thought, some absentee coal owner decides to decapitate the mountains, as is the practice of late). I always feel protected and enfolded in the green mountains. Many, me included, speak and write of a sense of the mystical there at the Forks of Troublesome Creek. Whether this is a place of power, or whether there are so many minds of one accord with such creative purpose, I do not know. We tend to make Hindman sound like an Appalachian Brigadoon. Not all find it so peaceful. One friend accompanied me for the week a few years ago. She was so frightened and claustrophobic in the mountains that she could barely breathe and was visibly upset. She loved the people, hated the landscape.

There have been changes. I remember the old swimming pool that was torn out; May Stone dining hall has been enlarged and improved. (No more Hell’s Kitchen! There is a gorgeous dishwasher.) The Knott County Public Library was rebuilt as a modern multi-use facility. For many of us the most notable change is the bridge across Troublesome Creek. Earlier writings often mention crossing the narrow one-lane bridge into an insular world. A traveler coming from Whitesburg and Carr Creek had to make a sharp, sharp turn down a steep little hill to the bridge. Two years ago, I was stunned to find what looked like an interstate bridge between the Knott County Health Department and May Stone dining hall. It may be safer and sturdier. I’m not sure I like it.

When Al Stewart first founded the workshop in 1977, I’m not sure if he had any notion that it would be so important and have such a long run. The first workshops were not so well attended, but the word

spread. I had already been to a couple of workshops when I found Hindman. At the other events, no one understood what I was writing about; they didn't want to understand, and they made fun of my accent. Perhaps that's one of the keys to the Hindman experience. We sound alike. Of course many people from outside the region have found their way to Hindman, feel the energy and passion of the participants, and some return. However, here, mountaineers are the majority—any cracks about accents or patronizing the hillbillies will make for either a very long and miserable week or perhaps even a truncated very short week! The rest of us love having a place where ideas and art are not devalued because of vowel shifts and word endings.

I have dissected the workshop and tried to rebuild it for others to appreciate. Still, a written description of the experience of the workshop, like a diorama of African lions on the prowl at a museum, cannot convey its inimitable ambiance. It has to be experienced to be appreciated.

