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The Appalachian Other: Struggles of Familial and Cultural Assimilation in Fred Chappell's
Kirkman Tetralogy

A thesis
presented to
the faculty of the Department of English
East Tennessee State University

In partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree
Masters of Arts in English

by
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May 2005

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Keywords: Chappell, Appalachia, assimilation, culture

ABSTRACT

The Appalachian Other: Struggles of Familial and Cultural Assimilation in Fred Chappell's

Kirkman Tetralogy

by

Abbey Mabe

In his Kirkman tetralogy, Fred Chappell refutes ill-conceived Appalachian stereotypes via his refreshingly intelligent and sophisticated cast of mountaineer players. However, Chappell's characters do not exist without flaws. Jess Kirkman, the tetralogy's narrator, is a particularly tortured figure. Perpetually struggling to assimilate into his native mountain culture, Jess represents the Appalachian Other, an individual who is born into Southern Highland society, but who is, ironically, treated like an outsider by his peers. Throughout Chappell's first novel, Jess's inability to connect with his own family members becomes evident. In books two and three, readers see that, although several of Jess's male relatives share his assimilative struggles, the women in his family are warmly embraced members of Appalachian society. While Jess desperately attempts to win the approval of his peers in novel four, he ultimately accepts his otherness, thus embracing the permanency of his outsider status.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

It remains an unfortunate fact that Appalachian literature has only recently begun to achieve a position of true distinction in the world of academia. Admittedly, works by a few select Appalachian authors—such as Jesse Stuart, Wilma Dykeman, and James Still—have received notice in university classrooms for several decades. The number of popular Appalachian writers, however, continues to be relatively small even today, and those who are widely studied are too often defined by the umbrella term “Southern writers,” a label that fails to recognize the unique culture and area from which Appalachian writers hail. Granted, much of Appalachia lies within the greater American South; but the highlands of Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, Tennessee, Virginia, West Virginia, North and South Carolina, and Kentucky function as a discrete microcosm within a macrocosm. Therefore, the literary works of Appalachian artists form a distinctive branch upon the metaphorical tree of American literature, a shoot that shares the origin of, yet breaks away from, the limb upon which Southern letters rest.

Despite the often struggling position of Appalachian works, several contemporary writers from the Southern Highlands continue to promote their heritage, and among the chorus of proud voices is that of Fred Chappell. Throughout his various novels, poems, and short stories, Chappell, a native of Canton, North Carolina, and a lifetime resident of the state, returns again and again to Appalachian settings, themes, and concerns. In an interview conducted by William Friday, Chappell expresses his admiration of authors who celebrate their mountain—not simply Southern—roots: “[Lee Smith] was the first person I ever met who admitted to being an Appalachian writer rather than a Southern writer, and I admired her a great deal for it” (qtd. in Clabough, “Experimentation” 32). And while his regard for Smith is certainly well-founded, Chappell, in his modesty, fails to mention the fact that he too has long voiced an allegiance to Appalachia. In a 1985 interview, for example, Chappell declares, “By and large . . . I generally

tend to think of myself as an *Appalachian* writer rather than simply a [S]outhern one” (qtd. in Underwood 34; Chappell’s emphasis).

Chappell similarly expresses his frustration with the popular tendency to view Appalachian literature as an inferior subset of Southern literature in a fanciful “interview” he conducts with the fictitious writer Wil Hickson. During the discussion, Hickson (i.e., Chappell) explains,

[In the past] Appalachian Literature was just a little tiny bit of a thing, with only Thomas Wolfe and Harriette Arnow as nationally ranked reputations, and here it was nestled like a toadstool beside a rotting log against [S]outhern literature, which may still be the proudest literary tradition in the United States. (“Shape” 58)

Though Chappell’s likening Appalachian writings to literary fungus exhibits the author’s creative humor, the undertones of his statement are quite serious. For even though the widespread success of present-day Appalachian writers such as Lee Smith and Charles Frazier has helped promote the literature of the Southern Highlands, works by authors from the greater South continue to receive far more academic and popular recognition. Due to the fact that so many of America’s literary giants are Southern artists—Twain and Faulkner, to name only two—Chappell’s toadstool analogy seems depressingly accurate. Because it seems that no matter how impressive *Oral History* and *Cold Mountain* might be, these works still reside in the long shadows of magnum opuses like *Huckleberry Finn* and *The Sound and the Fury*. However, Chappell’s comment is not wholly negative, for the author insinuates that Appalachian literature, though relatively young, is growing (“like a toadstool”), feeding off the already-established canon (i.e., “log”) of Southern literature. In fact, Chappell’s describing Southern letters as a “rotten” log even suggests that this literary tradition is losing strength, perhaps because Appalachian literature is gaining life. But despite the potential growth of Appalachian works, Chappell admits that Southern literature is probably “still . . . the proudest literary tradition in the

United States.” Thus, though the writings of the Southern Highlands may be receiving a bit more attention now than in the past, Appalachian literature is still eclipsed by Southern works.

Chappell’s own humble popularity offers further evidence that Appalachian literature remains an ignored field. Throughout his professional career, Chappell has proven a prolific writer, publishing eight novels, sixteen books of poetry, two collections of short stories, and a myriad of literary criticism. He has also received several awards in years past, the most prominent being the T.S. Eliot Award, which he won in 1993 (Lang 7). His talent for composing in different genres has likewise helped Chappell earn the admiration of his fellow writers, Appalachian and non-Appalachian alike. Author George Garrett effectively illustrates Chappell’s success among his peers:

We have among us a very modest number of writers who, in spite of the overwhelming trend towards specialization, write both fiction and poetry. We have only a very, very few who can do both things tolerably well. Fred Chappell is among the best American poets alive, an energetic, innovative, wonderfully imaginative master artist. Likewise his novels—always from the beginning first rate and getting better all the time, . . . are among our few and finest. (xiv)

Despite Chappell’s clear literary talents, however, the field of criticism relating to Chappell’s works remains relatively small. During his forty years as a writer, only two collections of Chappell criticism have been published, Patrick Bizzaro’s *Dream Garden: The Poetic Vision of Fred Chappell* (1997) and Bizzaro’s *More Lights Than One: On the Fiction of Fred Chappell* (2004). The fact that both of the preceding texts appeared only in the last decade suggests that Chappell’s popularity among literary critics has been quite belated. Nonetheless, supporters of Chappell’s work can find comfort in the author’s own Appalachian literature-as-toadstool comparison. After all, given enough time, even a toadstool can flourish. Similarly, it appears that Chappell’s work, along with that of other Appalachian artists, is finally beginning to mushroom within the canon of American letters.

In a larger sense, the distinctions between Southern and Appalachian literature prove reflective of the regions' cultural differences. In his essay "Writing on the Cusp: Double Alterity and Minority Discourse in Appalachia," Rodger Cunningham recognizes the long-standing antagonism felt between America's North and South. Cunningham argues, in Saidean terminology, that these two distinct regions have long viewed one another "as each other's Other" (42), with each area seeing its geographic neighbor as a social oddity. More important, though, is Cunningham's assertion that "[t]here is, however, within America another Other—indeed, an Other's Other—a region marked by a double otherness that complicates its very sense of its own being" (42). It comes as no surprise then, given the historic struggle of Appalachian works to overcome the domination of Southern literature, that Cunningham refers to the doubly stigmatized region of the Southern Highlands.

Stereotypes associated with mountain culture have long plagued Appalachia and her people. And while the greater South has certainly borne its share of popular criticism throughout the past, the South's internal Other, Appalachia, struggles perhaps even more ardently to dispel popular misconceptions of its unique social structure. In a 1999 interview, author Donald Harington, who discusses the similarities between Ozark and Appalachian culture, accurately elaborates on the social stigma associated with mountain life as he claims that "the mass of Americans . . . think of the population of the mountain country . . . as being the peculiar, silly, strange, quaint, weird people who just never caught up with the rest of the world" (90). Harington likewise targets Hollywood as a major propagandist of mountaineer stereotyping, citing television shows like *The Beverly Hillbillies* and *Hee Haw* (91). *The Andy Griffith Show* offers perhaps an even better example of television's degradation of the Southern Highlands, as Andy Taylor is the only sensible Appalachian in Mayberry, surrounded by a town full of childish simpletons whose troubles only Andy can solve. More contemporary examples of Hollywood's exploitation of Appalachian culture include a variety of comedians, many of whom perpetuate the idea of mountaineers as vulgar rednecks ("redneck" itself being an offensive term) and the notion that Southern Highlanders are ill spoken, poorly educated, badly mannered men and

women. Due to the intensely prevalent nature of such images, one has only to flip through a few television stations before viewing at least one howdy-declaring, overall-wearing, completely caricatured representation of Appalachia.

Regardless of television's and film's often condescending portrayal of mountain life, however, contemporary Appalachians are a prideful people, and rightly so. Contrary to popular images of the Appalachian as farmer, most mountainfolk of today enjoy just as wide a range of professional and educational opportunities as any other social group in America. Despite the sophistication of today's Southern Highlanders, though, some things never change; and one Appalachian attribute seems to flow throughout the generations: an intense distrust of outsiders. Rodger Cunningham acknowledges the fact that the greater South, and virtually the rest of America, views Appalachians as an Other; but he fails to explain that mountain dwellers often reciprocate these biased feelings. To a great number of native Appalachians, anyone from outside the Southern Highlands is an Other, an intruder worthy of suspicion. In John C. Campbell's seminal study of Appalachian life, *The Southern Highlander and His Homeland*, the author, who spent several decades among mountainfolk, describes the rigid social barrier maintained by the people of that region: "[The Southern Highlander] is . . . first of all a Highlander [as opposed to a Southerner], and those without his favored land are 'foreigners,' be they from [the] North or Lowland South" (90). And though Campbell penned this declaration over eighty years ago, his observation is still a valid one. For example, in an interview that appeared in *Southern Quarterly*, Fred Chappell, always open to discourse concerning Appalachian life, recalls his and his fellow Cantonians' attitude toward city folk: "[P]art of our awareness of the outside world came from the phenomenon of Florida people, who come to the mountains in the summer time. . . . And they bring a whole different way of civilization with them that to us, when I was growing up, always seemed faintly ridiculous" ("Southern" 96). Chappell's terminology, "the outside world," perfectly illustrates the intensely protective nature of Appalachians toward their region and way of life—the mountains that surround them essentially form their own interior world, and non-natives, or outsiders, who threaten to

introduce a new way of life to their isolated homeland are immediately stigmatized as “faintly ridiculous.”

A later comment by Chappell lends further credence to Campbell’s assertion that Appalachians do not discriminate between Northern outsiders and visitors from the greater South because mountaineers view individuals from both regions as equally suspicious. During the same *Southern Quarterly* interview, Chappell says, “[My peers, family, and I] were always making fun of Florida flatlanders” (“Southern” 96). The fact that Chappell targeted visitors from Florida in both of his preceding comments is quite ironic; after all, the author’s homeland is part of the greater South, yet Chappell admits that he and his fellow Appalachians mocked Floridians, individuals who come from the southernmost state in the continental U.S. Regardless of the seemingly discriminatory overtones of Chappell’s comments, however, his statements merely reflect the honest attitude of mountaineers toward outsiders. To Appalachians, there exist basically two types of individuals: highlanders and, as Chappell declares, flatlanders. And highland natives do not readily embrace any flatlanders, whether they hail from Mexico, Oklahoma, or west Tennessee.

As a native Appalachian, in his literary portraits of Southern Highland life, Fred Chappell attempts to dispel popular notions associated with his homeland while simultaneously offering his readers a realistic portrayal of Appalachia and her people. Particularly in his tetralogy of fiction—*I Am One of You Forever*; *Brighten the Corner Where You Are*; *Farewell, I’m Bound to Leave You*; and *Look Back All the Green Valley*—Chappell introduces his audience to a refreshingly sophisticated, intelligent, and resourceful set of Appalachian men and women. But Chappell’s characters are certainly not flawless, and the mountain region in which they live is no Utopia.

The narrator of the tetralogy, Jess Kirkman, is perhaps the most unsettled of Chappell’s players. Ironically, despite the fact that Jess is a native of Tipton, North Carolina, he forever stands on the periphery of his own Appalachian culture. Jess consequently represents yet another brand of Other, the Appalachian Other, a person who is born and raised within the

Southern Highlands yet who is essentially treated like a foreigner by his mountain peers. Interestingly enough, Jess's unique position in his community seems to be a situation with which Chappell himself is familiar. One of the most prominent similarities that Jess and Chappell share is that Jess, like Chappell, discovers early in life that he wants to pursue a writing career. His intense love for reading and learning oftentimes separates Jess from his more practically-minded acquaintances. In an article that appears in *More Lights Than One: On the Fiction of Fred Chappell*, George Hovis notes that Chappell experienced a similar feeling of isolation due to his dedication to his literary craft: "[Chappell] . . . discovered that to be a writer was to be at odds with his culture, and he clung to this new-found identity of the outsider" (31). Whether Chappell's clinging was always an enjoyable task, however, remains questionable. In an interview conducted by Resa Crane and James Kirkland, for instance, Chappell sounds rather bitter about his early feelings of isolation, as he exclaims that his family members, who failed to understand his aspirations, "discouraged" him "very thoroughly" from writing (Chappell, "First" 12)—much like Jess's parents object to his literary pursuits.

Whether or not Jess Kirkman is an autobiographical character remains a favorite debate among contemporary Chappell critics. But the commonalities that Chappell and Jess share are surely too uncanny to be coincidental. Thus it becomes quite clear why Jess is such a masterfully constructed character. Readers feel Jess's social angst so acutely because the wordsmith who gives Jess life is himself an Appalachian Other.

CHAPTER 2

(ALMOST) ALL IN THE FAMILY: DOMESTIC ISOLATION IN *I AM ONE OF YOU FOREVER*

I Am One of You Forever, the first installment in Chappell's tetralogy, traces the exploits of Jess, a young boy growing up on a farm in Tipton, North Carolina, during the war-ridden 1940s. Despite the fact that Jess describes his home as a picturesque Appalachian nook "surrounded by hills to the north and east and south" (1), he often feels out of place in his quaint mountain community. Though the narrator struggles to connect with his fellow Tiptonians, however, he remains more concerned with the fact that he has difficulty relating to his kin. Jess thus lives the frustrated life of the Appalachian Other, struggling to assimilate not only into his greater community but also into his own family.

From the very beginning of Chappell's work, Jess's desperation to bond with his parents becomes evident. In the novel's italicized prelude, "The Overspill," Jess and his father, Joe Robert, attempt to construct an ornate creek bridge for Jess's mother, Cora. As the now-adult Jess recalls this childhood episode, his early adoration for his father rings clear: "I was convinced that my father could design and build whatever he wished—the Brooklyn Bridge, the Taj Mahal" (4). But despite his father's engineering talents, an upstream paper mill releases its floodgates and destroys the small bridge, and in the fantastical moment that follows, a tear from Cora's cheek becomes so large that it encapsulates Jess's mother and father. Most important, though, is the fact that the tear does not immediately take Jess in as well. And when he does finally enter the gargantuan tear, Jess "[begins] to swim clumsily toward [his] parents" (6). This brief moment of magic realism foreshadows the feelings of remoteness Jess feels toward his mother and father throughout the novel. Much like he strives to meet them in the tear, Jess forever struggles awkwardly, "clumsily," to break the emotional barrier that separates him from his closely-connected parents. That Jess merely begins to swim toward his mother and father in this episode is also significant, because readers never know for certain whether he actually reaches

their embrace. Much proves the same throughout Chappell's story—Jess's true connection with his parents, as well as his extended family, is always uncertain.

The narrator's adoration is not limited to his father. Johnson Gibbs, the spirited farmhand virtually adopted by the Kirkman family, quickly becomes another object of admiration for Jess. Johnson's talent for spinning yarns about such traditionally masculine pursuits as fishing and playing baseball results in Jess's admitted "profound . . . worship of Johnson" (20).

Interestingly, despite the difficulties Jess has relating to his father in latter sections of *I Am One*, the months following Johnson's arrival prove the happiest time for Jess and Joe Robert. The narrator explains that it is mischief that draws him and his father, along with Johnson, "into a tight high-spirited company" (9-10). And thus, for a brief while, Jess, along with his fellow pranksters, embarks on a series of misadventures, including a hilarious incident in which the trio replaces a box of fine chocolates with rotten pullet eggs. The bond among the three becomes so strong at one point, in fact, that Jess proudly declares, "The time soon came when [my father, Johnson, and I] could hardly look at one another without grinning" (10).

Unfortunately for Jess, the feeling of belonging he experiences after Johnson's arrival proves fleeting. The first hint of Jess's seclusion from his co-conspirators appears in chapter two, "The Posse." The section begins with the arrival of Jess's womanizing Uncle Luden. Included among the gifts Luden brings to Jess is "a binocular contraption," inside of which appears "a dozen or so inviting naked ladies" (32). But unlike previous episodes in which Jess shares his father's and Johnson's fun, this time Jess is ousted from the joke. When Jess begs of Johnson, who has commandeered the graphic contraption, "Let me see one time," the teenager replies in the negative: "You'll have to wait till you're older and know your business" (33). Granted, at this point in the novel Jess is a lad of ten, and thus it seems natural for Johnson to censor such sexually explicit images from the boy. However, Johnson's seemingly trivial refusal to show Jess the gadget triggers within the narrator a stunning epiphany; he suddenly realizes that the role of the outsider, of the Other, will be his permanent position within his family:

I looked down at the battered toes of my brogans. That was going to be my destiny always, I thought. When I was as old as Ember Mountain they would still be keeping the important things from me. When I was ninety-nine years old and sitting on the porch in a rocking chair combing my long white beard, some towhead youngun would come up and ask, “What’s it mean, grampaw, what is this world about?” And I would lean over and dribble tobacco spit into a rusty tin can and say, “I don’t know, little boy. The sons of bitches never would tell me.” (33)

The fact that Jess resorts to obscenities illustrates the severity of the frustration he feels from being excluded from his family’s sacred circle. After all, the “they” to whom Jess refers is surely his kin, including his father and Johnson, who functions as an older brother to Jess throughout the story and is a self-described “part of the family” (83). Also inherent in Jess’s reflection is the narrator’s feeling of hopelessness. For even when he reaches the ripe old age of ninety-nine (certainly a mature enough age to view risqué photographs), Jess figures that he will not know anything more than he does at ten because “[t]he sons of bitches”—i.e., his own folks—refuse to share with him the essential secrets of life.

It is also in the second chapter that Jess first expresses a longing to see the world beyond his North Carolina hills. He draws inspiration from his well-traveled Uncle Luden, eventually resolving that he, like his uncle, will someday speed away from Appalachia on a motorcycle. Jess explains, “I wanted to learn [about motorcycles] so that when it was my turn to escape to California, I’d have no difficulty. Just crank her up and boil away into the sunset” (28). Jess’s desire to break away from mountain life is a feeling Chappell himself experienced at a tender age. In a *Southern Quarterly* interview, Chappell, who, like his narrator, was raised on a western North Carolina farm, remembers, “The routine of farm life is something I learned to be accustomed to, but to be honest, not without a certain feeling of resentment also, because . . . I felt, since I was about fourteen years old, that I was being held back from my true vocation, whatever in the world that was” (“Southern” 88). Jess, as did Chappell, intuitively senses that

his destiny, his “true vocation,” lies somewhere outside of his hometown. In fact, it is his fascination with places unknown that apparently draws Jess toward Luden, who showers the boy with “presents from the unimaginable world beyond [the] mountains” (*I Am One* 32). And, unlike those around him who cannot fathom living anywhere else, Jess yearns to hop on a motorbike and speed off toward the mysterious regions outside of Tipton.

Jess’s admiration for his uncle, as well as for Joe Robert, reflects the notoriously strong family ties long associated with Appalachian folk. As do so many authors, in *The Southern Highlander and His Homeland*, John C. Campbell perpetuates the popular notion that Appalachians and their kin share an impenetrable bond. Campbell states that “[t]he Highlander is . . . a clannish person” and understandably so, for “most of the inhabitants” in mountain communities “are more or less closely connected by ties of blood” (103). Interestingly, Jess’s surname, Kirkman, suggests Scottish roots, as “[k]irk” is “the Scottish word for church” (Abowitz 152). One therefore might expect the Kirkmans to perpetuate the powerful familial dedication demonstrated by the clans of ancient Scotland, the stereotypical bond that several authors (such as Campbell) assume still exists among contemporary Southern Highlanders. Granted, Jess’s family is indeed rather clannish. They do, for example, participate in many activities together, including agricultural and household chores and family mealtimes. The early connection shared by Jess, Joe Robert, and Johnson likewise suggests that the Kirkmans care for and are dedicated to one another. Nevertheless, the only overt supporter of family bonding in *I Am One* is Cora. The narrator explains that his mother “liked anything having to do with *family*. If she heard there was a cockfight in hell, she’d favor it as long as the whole family was involved” (*I Am One* 37; Chappell’s italics). But even though Jess’s folks obviously care for him and though he engages in family activities, even under the best of circumstances Jess always seems partially detached from the rest of the Kirkman clan.

For example, when Jess, Joe Robert, Cora, Johnson, Annie Barbara (Jess’s maternal grandmother), and Luden head out for an early morning picnic, Jess strays from his relatives because he finds their talk of times past distasteful. He declares,

Now they were talking about the old days and I moved away to watch Johnson build a smaller separate fire for the coffee. I didn't want to hear about the old days, the drab tragedies and the cruel rusties. Those mountain people of used-to-be seemed as alien to me as Siberians. (39)

Given the fact that the narrator is a third-generation Tiptonian, some of the “mountain people of used-to-be” most likely are Jess's relatives. Thus in three short sentences Jess shuns an allegiance to his ancestors, the “ties of blood” that Campbell claims are so vital to Appalachian men and women (103). But, as is the case from the novel's introduction, Jess is never the same breed of mountain-revering, farm-loving, past-honoring Southern Highlander that his folks—and especially his grandmother—are. Birth alone, Chappell suggests here, does not insure the boy's connectedness to his native culture.

The most revealing element of Jess's declaration is the fact that he calls the long-passed individuals of whom his family speaks “*Those* mountain people” (39; my italics), which indicates that Jess does not think of himself as a mountain person. And Jess's use of the word “alien” in this passage proves ironic, for just as Jess views his ancestors as strangers, so do his own kin often see him as an outsider. In his essay “The Longing to Belong,” Chappell again returns to the subject of alienation as he explains the feelings of seclusion so common to literary artists. He writes, “[T]he sense of detachment, even of alienation, which is indispensable for a writer is often established in childhood and . . . the memory of this alienation may remain powerful throughout a long literary career” (23). Jess represents the perfect fictional embodiment of Chappell's statement. The narrator's “sense of detachment,” after all, is established “in childhood,” at the tender age of ten; and readers eventually learn that Jess's feelings of separation “remain powerful throughout [his] literary career.”

Jess yet again fails to connect with his kin when he and Johnson embark on a fishing trip. The outing initially appears to be an ideal opportunity for Jess to bond with his brother figure. Jess's early description of the trip emphasizes the unity he feels with Johnson, for he repeatedly speaks in the plural first person: “*We* struck out upstream, dodging through laurel thickets and

clambering over rock fences. *We came to a pool all dark and silent*” (*I Am One* 23; my italics). Jess’s narration quickly shifts, however, when Johnson abruptly leaves the boy in order to “move on upstream” (24). Thus a day of potential male bonding goes awry. Jess’s impressive maturity level is the catalyst that ultimately causes Johnson’s abandonment of Jess. Unlike more easily bamboozled boys his age, Jess quickly sees through Johnson’s boasting and understands that his companion does not know the first thing about fly fishing. Consequently, because he feels intimidated by Jess’s acute intuition, Johnson flees upstream in order to salve his bruised ego. Jess even takes on the role of leader in one fishing scene, when Johnson loses his shirt to the river in an ill-fated cast. In an almost fatherly act, Jess calmly takes charge of the situation, “lift[ing] [the shirt] out dripping with [his] cane pole” (24). At this point in the story, it becomes uncertain just which one of the fishermen, ten-year-old Jess or eighteen-year-old Johnson, is the adult of the pair.

Repeatedly inspired by Joe Robert’s elaborate tomfoolery, Jess often participates in his father’s early exploits. But as Jess grows older, he becomes noticeably less and less involved in his father’s pranks. For instance, during Joe Robert’s scheme to cure Luden of his womanizing, Johnson—who is already in on the joke—drops subtle hints of the plan in Jess’s presence. “[T]he ever-listening Jess” (Byer 91), however, surprisingly attentive for his age, immediately senses something exciting in the air as he follows a hushed conversation between Johnson and Joe Robert:

“Tonight’s the night,” Johnson said, but my father shushed him.

“What’s tonight?” I asked.

“Oh, nothing,” Johnson said.

I asked my father. “What’s tonight?”

He grinned. “Little pitchers have big ears,” he said. (*I Am One* 42)

The fact that Jess twice repeats his inquiry exhibits the narrator’s eagerness to participate in Joe Robert and Johnson’s trickery. The lighthearted tone of Joe Robert’s remark echoes that of Johnson’s refusal to show Jess the naughty binoculars. These seemingly harmless comments,

however, have a profound effect on Jess. To him, the teases of Joe Robert and Johnson are not simply the kind of rite of passage gibes that every youngster must endure; he instead views them as clear indications of his not fitting in with his companions. Jess's reaction to his father's comparing him to a large-eared pitcher clearly exhibits the narrator's increasing self-consciousness: "I'd heard that before, but I couldn't help touching my ears to feel how enormous they had become" (42). Jess cannot keep his hands from flying to his ears any more than he can help feeling hurt by his father's words. But Jess's initial pain ultimately metamorphoses into resentment. He later says of the upcoming conspiracy, "[I]t's some kind of rusty they didn't let me in on. . . . I began to reflect bitterly once more about how they never let me know nothing" (43). Jess is clearly not just hurt by his exclusion; he feels bitter about it. And his admitting that he "began to reflect bitterly *once more*" also proves that this is not the first time that Jess has felt resentful toward his kin (43; my italics).

By the time Jess's eccentric Uncle Gurton pays a visit to the family, Jess's ties to Joe Robert unravel further. Infatuated with the unknown length of Gurton's beard, Joe Robert devises a plan to catch a glimpse of the uncle's hidden whiskers. Granted, Joe Robert allows Jess to participate in this scheme, but this time the narrator joins his father's plan only reluctantly. Author Fred Hobson similarly notes that while Jess "[goes] along with his father's pranks," he "rarely [initiates] them" (84). However, as Hobson makes clear, Jess, whether willing or hesitant, always joins his father's shenanigans when he has a chance. Jess's unwavering willingness to follow Joe Robert illustrates the boy's acute desire to connect with his father—by whatever means possible.

As always, Joe Robert leads the foray during Gurton's visit, and Jess, quite predictably, tags right along. Much as the narrator's maturity drives Johnson away during their fishing excursion, Jess's being responsible beyond his years becomes a barrier between him and his father in this scene. Joe Robert's plan to drug Gurton into unconsciousness with a livestock "sleeping draught" exhibits a juvenile recklessness (*I Am One* 54), a complete disregard for Gurton's health. In a sudden reversal of roles, Jess becomes the responsible adult in this episode,

worrying about the safety of his father's plan despite Joe Robert's childish reassurance that they "won't be hurting [Gurton] any" (54). And for the first time in the novel, Jess questions the legitimacy of one of his father's claims by asking Joe Robert, "You sure?" (54). Apparently both surprised and insulted by Jess's abrupt lack of faith, like a sullen little boy, Joe Robert becomes "impatient" and begrudgingly replies to his son, "Sure I'm sure" (54).

The closer he and his father come to executing their prank, the more intense Jess's discomfort grows. Demonstrating his increasing moral awareness, Jess explains that he suddenly feels "like a thief" as he approaches Gurton's bedroom (56). The fact that Jess becomes physically distressed also showcases the narrator's escalating feelings of reservation. He describes, "My breath was quick, the pulse tight in my temples" (56). These symptoms are not simply those induced by boyish excitement. Rather, Jess's breath becomes short and his pulse races because he knows that what he and Joe Robert plan to do to Gurton is unethical. Though he never describes it as such, the pounding Jess feels in his head might well be the narrator's first stress-induced headache—a clear indication that Jess is quickly approaching adulthood. Noticeably absent from Jess's description of the event are any hints of Joe Robert's hesitation. Jess might worry about the morality of their prank, but his father, the boy's supposed role model, appears not to care whether his decision to drug Gurton and clandestinely search the old man's body is right or wrong.

Most disturbing to the narrator in this scene is his sudden realization that his father is not the superhero he once thought he has been, the man Jess once has felt could easily construct the Taj Mahal. Jess recalls that his stunning epiphany took place while he and his father began to enter Gurton's bedroom: "I realized, maybe for the first time, that my father wasn't always the safest protection in the world" (56). And much like Jess takes charge of his and Johnson's fishing trip, the boy quickly becomes the voice of reason after he and his father finally view Gurton's beard. In this moment of magic realism, Gurton's mysterious beard begins to grow, filling the entire room and eventually most of the house.

It seems only fair to note that Chappell has repeatedly expressed his disapproval of critics' describing several of the scenes in *I Am One* (including the novel's prelude and the episode involving Gurton's beard) as "magic realism." In an interview conducted by Irv Broughton, Chappell exclaims, "All I did in *I Am One of You Forever* is simply take folk stories and use them as literal story. Nothing in there you can't find in Mark Twain, whom I've never heard referred to as 'magic realist'" (qtd. in McDonald 128). However, as Hal McDonald agrees in "Fred Chappell as Magic Realist," with all of the otherworldly elements that appear against several of the novel's otherwise realistic settings—such as "The Beard," which takes place in Gurton's bedroom but which includes the spontaneous appearance of a mermaid, a wide assortment of marine life, and a pair of Indians—it is difficult to describe these episodes by any other literary term.

But bona fide magic realism or no, Jess's reaction to the fantastical creatures that emerge from Gurton's beard proves more sensible than his father's. Shocked into an almost infantile state of helplessness, Joe Robert can only stare at the beard and mumble "*My God*" (*I Am One* 59; Chappell's italics). Fortunately for Joe Robert, Jess becomes the protector in this scene, suggesting to his stunned father, "Let's please leave" (59). Jess's newfound independence obviously disturbs his father, for by the end of their excursion, Joe Robert "[gives] a deep and mournful sigh" (61). Joe Robert's long exhalation indicates his understanding that he has fallen from grace in Jess's eyes; his sigh is "mournful" because he knows that the brief time of closeness that he shared with his son has forever passed away.

Despite his escalating maturity, though, Jess always yearns to gain his father's acceptance. And by the time he reaches eleven, Jess still embraces an opportunity to go fishing with Joe Robert in "The Wish." Throughout the chapter, Joe Robert makes a few futile attempts to introduce his son to some of his own favorite activities, such as drinking coffee and sipping wine. But Jess, ever different, takes to neither beverage, declaring that both drinks are "nasty" (155). Despite Jess's best attempts to humor his father, for the first time in the story, Joe Robert treats Jess almost cruelly. When the narrator tries to lighten the mood of the trip by making a

joke about his father's rusty casting skills, Joe Robert snaps, "Let me tell you, Jess: nobody likes a smart-mouth kid" (154). He again attacks Jess when the youngster displays an aversion to carving out a fish's eyeballs to use as bait. "Don't go squeamish on me, Jess," Joe Robert warns (156). Jess likewise displays his sensitivity when he suggests that his father throw some fish eggs, which Joe Robert extracts from a catch, back into the lake so that "Maybe they'll hatch" (158). But Jess's hopes are quickly crushed by his father, who does not share his son's compassion and openly mocks the boy's sensitivity by retorting, "They will if you'll set on them" (158). The mere incongruity of Joe Robert's and Jess's movements further enhances the emotional gap between father and son. While Joe Robert fishes, Jess "[lies] lazy against the . . . [boat] motor" (154); while Joe Robert mutilates fish eyes, Jess stands back, "watch[ing] the whole process . . . uneasily" (156); while Joe Robert attempts to fish with plugs (after he and his son run out of worms), Jess just sits in the boat (157). Ironically, even though they sit alone in a tiny boat in the middle of a lake, Jess and his father remain in separate worlds.

Though Jess's isolation from Joe Robert receives the most emphasis in *I Am One*, the narrator's unsteady relationship with his other family members also proves an important element of Chappell's text. Critic George Hovis explains how Jess's relationship with his father is reflective of the narrator's larger familial concerns: "The emotional distance of the father lends the Jess Kirkman novels a pathos that enhances the longing of the adult narrator for unity with his family" (39-40). But for Jess this much longed-for unity remains unrealized, for the narrator often has as much trouble bonding with his other relatives as he has connecting with his father.

Annie Barbara, Cora's mother and matriarch of the family, demonstrates a particularly reserved demeanor throughout the novel. Even in the humorous chocolate swapping episode, as everyone else laughs, Annie Barbara's only indication of emotion comes in the form of (happy?) "tears" that "[streak] down her cheeks" (*I Am One* 15). While the matron obviously loves her grandson—she helps raise the boy, after all—Annie Barbara does not always relate to Jess. The detachment between the narrator and his grandmother becomes most apparent in chapter four, as Jess ponders Annie Barbara's close relationship with God. Inspired by his grandmother's

devotion, Jess longs to question her about her religious experiences. Jess remembers: “Many questions came into my mind to ask her, but I knew she wouldn’t answer. She would just tell me to spend more time on my knees at my bedside. There would never be a right time to ask her, and I never did” (68). While the information Joe Robert refuses to share with Jess is often trivial (such as his plan to trick Luden), the information that Annie Barbara apparently withholds from Jess, religious instruction, is of great importance. Admittedly, Jess knows that if he were to ask Annie Barbara his questions, she would at least advise him to pray more often; but the youth desires personal guidance from his grandmother, not the kind of general religious instruction he could hear at any Sunday sermon. Jess’s confidence when he declares that he “knew”—not “thought”—his grandmother would refuse his inquiries proves unsettling. In fact, Jess is so certain that Annie Barbara will reject his questions that he “never” attempts to approach her about the subject. At this point in his life, Jess has become so accustomed to being the Other in his family that he fears even potential rejection by his kin.

When Johnson comes home to Tipton while on furlough, even Cora helps oust Jess from the Kirkman family circle. Because they fear Johnson’s potential engagement to a local young woman, Cora, Annie Barbara, and Joe Robert “[gather] in set-apart places to confer with one another in low tones” (83). Their shifty behavior does not escape Jess’s notice, though, and he confidently claims, “I knew what they were talking about” (83). But merely knowing what his family members are discussing behind his back is not enough for Jess. As always, he feels aggravated because his folks do not admit him into their discussions. He frustratingly exclaims, “I wished they’d ask for my opinion” (83). Jess does not want to dictate his family’s decisions; nor does he necessarily care whether or not his folks see his opinions as valid (he is, after all, a child). The boy simply wants his kin to ask him what he thinks, to give him an opportunity to participate in family conferences. Unfortunately for Jess, neither he nor his opinions ever receive such an invitation.

Jess’s avid love of all things literary functions as yet another barrier that separates the narrator from his kin. For such a young fellow (the novel follows Jess’s pursuits from age ten to

twelve), Jess is well read. His devotion to literature proves so strong, in fact, that it seems as though most everything either reminds Jess of a story or inspires him to read a new text. In “The Change of Heart,” Joe Robert, Johnson, and Jess attack the arduous task of removing cow manure from their barn. From the very beginning of the episode the differences between Jess and his elders become clear. “Johnson and [Jess’s] father sock and sigh” because they hate mucking out the stalls; Jess admits that he “never minded” the task (69). The two men complain about the stench in the barn; Jess disagrees, saying it “wasn’t as bad as they made out” (69). Despite the stifling heat, Johnson and Joe Robert “[refuse] to take [their shirts] off” (69); Jess thinks nothing of removing his. Due to their obvious differences, therefore, it is unsurprising that Jess’s reaction to a subsequent thunderstorm varies from Joe Robert’s and Johnson’s. For instance, unlike Joe Robert, who stands transfixed by the strangeness of the lightning, mumbling repeatedly “Oh Lord” (69, 70), Jess’s thoughts turn to his favorite subject: reading. The narrator explains his thoughts—

I had been reading lately a library book of Norse mythology and I thought of Thor. There was a wonderful wild picture of Thor hard at work, his hammer raised above his head, his legs spread heroically apart. His legs reminded me of his name, short and thick and powerful. (70)

In this moment Jess thinks nothing of his companions. His imagination instead engrosses him, a creativity that readers eventually learn inspires Jess to pursue a writing career. The extent of Jess’s knowledge here proves impressive. After all, few ten-year-olds are intellectually driven enough to read books about such subjects as Norse mythology. And Jess’s natural talent for literary studies shines through in this passage, as the narrator attempts to form a connection between Thor’s name and the god’s physical attributes. While Joe Robert and Johnson gape at the approaching storm, Jess’s imagination takes him to his own small world, a world that remains separate from the one in which Joe Robert and Johnson reside. Obviously, books are a source of comfort for Jess. For what other reason would the narrator turn to literary thoughts during such a violent display of nature?

Jess peruses several other texts throughout the novel, including “a Victorian prose translation” of the *Iliad* (103). The voice of Chappell’s work explains that he picks up the translation because his father’s “redaction” of the tale is “confusing” (103). Granted, Joe Robert shares Jess’s love of classical stories. However, as Peter Makuck points out, despite his literary interest, Joe Robert ultimately proves “one of the worst storytellers in the [Kirkman] family” (170). Makuck also asserts that Joe Robert’s inability to tell tales reflects the character’s “imaginative blindness” (175). Joe Robert’s handicap further illustrates the inherent dissimilarities between him and his son, because Jess—unlike his father—enjoys clear imaginative vision, as he demonstrates by beautifully narrating the entire tetralogy.

Jess’s otherness appears to be a male-inherited flaw, which he shares with several of his relatives, particularly his eccentric uncles. Essayist R.T. Smith perfectly describes these four unique characters: “There is Uncle Luden, the Don Juan; Uncle Zeno, the sighted Homer; Uncle Gurton, the Merlin; and Uncle Rankin [sic], Nosferatu in coveralls” (43). Of the quartet of uncles, only Luden successfully blends in with his relatives, bringing the entire clan together for several activities, including a sunrise picnic. Uncle Gurton, on the other hand, has an even harder time relating to his kin than does Jess. The most obvious of Gurton’s disabilities is his refusal to establish verbal communication with his hosts. During his entire visit, the hermitic uncle says only one sentence, which he repeats at the conclusion of every meal: “I’ve had an elegant sufficiency; any more would be a superfluity” (*I Am One* 51). Interestingly, Gurton’s lone declaration is a pretty sophisticated one, especially for a fellow who never exhibits a gift for gab. While Gurton’s eccentric behavior fascinates the Kirkmans, his muteness is always a barrier between him and his hosts. Joe Robert especially becomes frustrated with Gurton, ineffectively “testing” the uncle’s silence (52). Gurton’s tendency to disappear at will likewise reinforces his position as a family outcast. In “Fred Chappell’s *I Am One of You Forever*: The Oneiros of Childhood Transformed,” Amy Gray notes that Gurton “lives [partially] . . . outside of traditional time, a fact evidenced by his ability to ‘disappear’” (31). Outside of family

conversation and outside of time, Gurton's consistent oddball behavior secures his role as an Other.

Uncle Zeno, whose talent for telling stories is as great as Joe Robert's inability to spin tales, proves even more aloof than Uncle Gurton. The fact that Jess cannot precisely describe Zeno illustrates the uncle's elusiveness, for the narrator remembers Zeno as only "a frayed cuff, a shred, a nibbled husk" (*I Am One* 97). Essayist Sally Sullivan explains that Zeno's "name may allude to Zeno of Citium, the stoic philosopher who told stories from his *stoa*, or porch, to illustrate his philosophy" (123). While Chappell's Zeno does tell stories, because of the chaotic nature of his oration, his philosophy remains glaringly unclear. And though Zeno is a gifted narrator, he never speaks directly to any member of Jess's household. In fact, Zeno remains completely unresponsive to the Kirkmans, even when they openly address him. Jess recalls that when his father questioned Zeno about one of his tales, the old fellow merely "turned to [Joe Robert]" with a "gaze . . . so abstracted that the chair [his] father sat in . . . might as well have been empty" (*I Am One* 102). Unlike Jess, who forever struggles to become a fully accepted member of his family, Zeno, via his blank stares, proves that he does not care whether his kinfolk embrace him or not.

Jess's death-obsessed Uncle Runkin is no more companionable than his predecessors. The voice of Chappell's work emphasizes this uncle's dry personality, declaring of Runkin that "it was easier to be sociable with the midnight wind" (120). Granted, Runkin—unlike Gurton and Zeno—does talk with his hosts, but his conversation is sparse and always distastefully morose. Not only does Runkin's bleak demeanor separate him from his jovial hosts, but his "silly prognostications" about death actually repel Jess's family (121). The narrator admits that he feels the "most" disturbed by Runkin's melancholy (121). Strangely, however, despite his lack of social skills, Runkin actually attempts to get along with Jess. Perhaps sensing in his nephew a kindred outsider spirit, Runkin acts "pleased" to show Jess his ornately carved, self-made coffin, "proudly" explaining to the boy that the wood of the casket "came from an enormous black walnut" (121-22). Runkin also "[makes Jess] go with him to look at a

graveyard” later in the chapter (128). But the dismal fellow soon abandons his half-hearted endeavors to befriend Jess after the boy falls asleep in Runkin’s precious coffin. Offended by Jess’s audacity, Runkin takes prompt leave of the Kirkmans—and they are glad of it. Jess and Cora concur when Joe Robert declares, “I don’t know about you-all, . . . but Uncle Runkin kind of took it out of me” (134). In a sense, then, Runkin’s otherness is more severe than Jess’s. For though Jess’s folks often treat him like an outsider (as they do Runkin), they never actually celebrate the boy’s absence.

Jess’s feelings of isolation come to a culmination in “Helen,” the novel’s italicized conclusion. In the section Johnson, Joe Robert, Luden, and Jess reside in a cabin while on a hunting trip. Jess initially appears to be an embraced member of the hunting party, as he participates in all the outdoorsmen’s leisurely pursuits: “We amused ourselves with poker and setback and eating. . . . That night we stayed awake late, swapping lies and jokes about hunting, cars, sports” (180). At this point in the story, Jess stands at the threshold of his kin’s acceptance. He swaps lies, plays card games, and eats with his three favorite men; thus, it seems as though Jess might finally be “one of the boys.” But as Jess reflects on the situation he admits, “I began to feel a little as a stranger among them. They knew different things than I did” (181). These “different things” most likely include the very subjects the men are talking about (i.e., “hunting, cars, sports”) (181, 180). Thus Jess is, essentially, trapped in a liminal space between acceptance and separation. Anthropologist Victor Turner describes “liminality” as a “transitional, threshold condition [that] is charged with uncertainty” (Strenski). Such is the unsure, transitory situation in which Jess finds himself. In fact, the very setting of the scene reflects Jess’s dividedness, as the cabin lies in a liminal area between the North Carolina and “Tennessee border[s]” (*I Am One* 180).

But Jess’s subsequent failure to share Joe Robert, Johnson, and Luden’s simultaneous dream vision of “Helen” reinforces Jess’s otherness. Jess stresses the unity of the three dreamers’ movements: “As one man they gasped”; “They remained sitting, all three” (182). Jess, though, cannot see the image that transfixes his companions, and at most he catches a mere

glimpse of the apparition. The narrator's uncertainty becomes clear when he prefaces his description with, "*if I had seen something*" (182; my italics). Just exactly who Helen is remains uncertain. Sally Sullivan suggests that the vision allegorically represents "Helen of Troy," who is the "archetype" of "ideal beauty" (121). However, there exists just as much evidence in Chappell's text to suggest that Helen is a foreboding presence. The moment the specter appears, for example, the men "[gasp], like divers coming out of the ocean" (*I Am One* 182). In this light, it seems as though Helen is an ominous manifestation, because she literally draws the life breath from Joe Robert, Luden, and Johnson's chests. Her "glossy black hair" likewise corresponds to archetypal images of raven-haired witches (182), much as her late appearance is suggestive of a traditional nighttime haunting. But whether Helen symbolizes the embodiment of beauty or the quintessence of evil remains rather trivial. The most important aspect of Helen's appearance is simply the fact that Jess, unlike his relatives, cannot see her or comprehend her significance.

When Jess awakens the following morning, he frustratingly declares, "I felt myself at a distance from them, left out" (183). It is no wonder that Jess feels separated from his relatives, for, much like they move together during their shared dream, Joe Robert, Johnson, and Luden scurry about the cabin as one unit while Jess completes his own tasks:

They packed up and I . . . went back to the cast-iron range to wash the tin plates and cups. They stripped the bunks and swept. When I finished washing up and had damped down the cook-stove fire, I sat at the table while they loaded the gear. They waited in the car and still I sat there, gazing about the cabin. (183; my italics)

Jess hesitates to leave the cabin because he desires to recapture the early unity he feels with his companions. The fact that he gazes (and not merely "looks") at his surroundings proves that Jess is engaged in serious thought. And Johnson soon verbalizes the question that plagues Jess's mind, both in this scene and throughout the entire novel: "Well, Jess, are you one of us or not?" (184).

It is no surprise that most scholars claim the novel's title affirmatively answers Johnson's closing inquiry. Interestingly, the title of Chappell's work, *I Am One of You Forever*, bears a striking resemblance to a declaration made by John C. Campbell in *The Southern Highlander and His Homeland* (1921). In the preface of his text, Campbell, a native Northerner, laments that he is not a Southern Highlander by birth: "[I have] almost wished at times, my Southern friend, that [I] might have first seen the light of day south of the Mason and Dixon line, for then you would have accepted [me] as one of you always" (xx). Campbell's phrase—his expressed wish to be "one of you always"—closely mirrors the title of Chappell's work. Campbell's concern with Appalachian assimilation reflects that of the classic outsider, an individual who is born outside of the Southern Highlands yet who yearns to become an embraced member of mountain society. Jess Kirkman faces this same struggle, even though he is, ironically, a native of Appalachia. Thus, while it remains uncertain whether Chappell has drawn inspiration from Campbell's book, the similarities between the two texts prove too significant to ignore.

Essayist Karen McKinney exhibits the positivity shared by many of her fellow critics when she asserts that Johnson Gibbs's final question "initiate[s] Jess into full membership in the community" (220). Such optimism, however, proves a bit hyperbolic. Granted, Jess is, in a sense, always a part of his community and his family. His very birth insures this permanence. But, as is evident throughout Chappell's text, Jess never achieves the level of complete familial—and, as subsequent novels emphasize, social—acceptance that he struggles toward. Even the ending scene of *I Am One* reaffirms Jess's perpetual separateness. After all, while Jess's response to Johnson's question remains uncertain, the fact of the matter is that Jess is still sitting alone in his chair when the novel ends. Although Johnson initially appears to re-join Jess in the cabin, he actually does not; on the contrary, Johnson merely stands "[in] [t]he door" of the dwelling (183). Thus the significance of Chappell's title finally becomes clear: Jess Kirkman *Forever* remains slightly detached from both his kith and his kin.

CHAPTER 3

EVERYTHING'S RELATIVE: FAMILIAL OTHERNESS IN *BRIGHTEN THE CORNER* *WHERE YOU ARE* AND *FAREWELL, I'M BOUND TO LEAVE YOU*

The peculiar uncles of *I Am One of You Forever* are not the only men in Jess's family who share the narrator's assimilative struggles. In *Brighten the Corner Where You Are*, the second installment in Chappell's fictional quartet, readers see that despite their many dissimilarities, Joe Robert, like Jess, often clashes with his fellow Appalachians. Structurally, *Brighten* differs from *I Am One*. Whereas the first novel is essentially a collection of separate tales that take place over a period of years, *Brighten* traces the exploits of Joe Robert throughout the course of a single day. Jess likewise plays a less prominent role in this novel, functioning as the "effaced narrator" who describes Joe Robert's adventures (Makuck 178). But structural incongruities aside, both books share one common focus: the obstacles associated with otherness. And Joe Robert's professional endeavors in *Brighten* separate him from his peers much as Jess's literary pursuits divide him from his kinfolk in *I Am One*.

Repeatedly throughout Chappell's first novel, Jess expresses his dissatisfaction with Appalachian life via his plans to escape Tipton. In the introductory chapter of *Brighten*, Joe Robert displays a similar frustration with mountain society. While Joe Robert rests by a fire during a coon hunting trip, "he . . . stare[s] into the heart of the blaze as if some secret nest[s] there, some message to tell him why the world he live[s] in must be so poky, so matter-of-fact, so lacking in spice" (12). Jess is unhappy with his hometown because its inhabitants do not understand him; Joe Robert, on the contrary, is displeased with his community because of its insipidness. He gazes at the flames because his intense longing for excitement (which he apparently does not find in Tipton) engulfs him. The fact that Joe Robert yearns for excitement during a hunting trip proves rather ironic: while he meditates, a pack of hounds bay frantically in the distance, and his hunting companions animatedly attempt to out-lie one another—events that create an environment that is anything but boring.

Joe Robert likewise feels frustrated with the small-mindedness of his dull community, and his irritation comes to a climax when he faces public persecution for teaching Darwinism to his high school science students. Never one to shirk confrontation, Joe Robert ardently defends his decision to include evolutionary theory in his classroom instruction. Jess first describes his father's rebellious spirit in chapter one, as Joe Robert goes in search of his fabled devil-possum. The narrator declares, "[This] was the sort of adventure [my father] was always eagerly into, Satan take the world and all its prune-faced disapproval" (10). Such is Joe Robert's attitude toward teaching Darwin's theory; he is determined to defend his decision no matter how much his conservative, "prune-faced" opposers rage against him. Unlike Jess, who strives to fit in with his acquaintances, Joe Robert actually seems to enjoy the fact that his liberal views isolate him from his more traditionally-minded peers. Early in the novel Jess explains that his father proudly "had declared eternal war upon custom" (32). Therefore, Joe Robert's teaching Darwinism comes as no surprise, for by doing so he dismisses his town's established method of science instruction (which obviously does not include evolution). Joe Robert Kirkman flourishes in his role as classic agitator.

Interestingly, midway through *Brighten* readers learn that Joe Robert is not a native Appalachian, as he originally hails "from the eastern middle part of [North Carolina]" (82). In actuality, then, Joe Robert is a traditional outsider, a foreigner who attempts to become part of mountaineer society. His efforts to bring new-fangled ideas to Tipton—such as evolution—reinforce the character's outsider status. Indeed, one of Joe Robert's priorities in life is to educate Tipton's youth and expand the minds of its elders. The fact that he once worked for a local power company metaphorically illustrates Joe Robert's endeavors to "enlighten" his community. Jess recalls,

[My father] once worked two long years for the Carolina Power and Light Company, clearing land to install power lines through the ruggedest part of the mountains. He'd grubbed out bushes and topped trees and cut them down . . . ,

bringing scientific electrical illumination to fleabite settlements in the mountains, where such light had never been heard of before. (22-23)

Not only does Joe Robert bring literal light to the “fleabite” town of Tipton, but he also attempts to bestow upon the community the illuminating glow of modern thought. In *Understanding Fred Chappell*, John Lang similarly notes that throughout the novel “one of the most significant symbolic meanings of fire [even in electrical form] is its association with enlightenment, with the acquisition of knowledge and insight” (228). It is unsurprising that Joe Robert yearns to increase his peers’ wisdom. After all, he is quite an educated fellow (Jess explains that his father attended Acton College), especially for an Appalachian resident living in the 1940s, a time and place in which educational opportunities were often scarce.

However, while Joe Robert’s pedagogical philosophy separates him from several of his acquaintances, the fact remains that the majority of Tipton’s residents admire Joe Robert and even support his unconventional beliefs. As he awaits a school board inquest, the educator assumes that he will be fired if he does not apologize for his radical classroom instruction. But rather than face the humiliation of either renouncing his beliefs or of being dismissed, Joe Robert throws open the door of the inquiry room, shouts, “*Look here. . . . You can’t fire me. I quit,*” and hurries away (*Brighten* 170; Chappell’s italics). Because Joe Robert enters and exits the room so quickly, though, the board members do not recognize him and do not comprehend his declaration. And it soon becomes clear that Joe Robert’s assumption that he will be condemned at the meeting is just that—an ill-informed supposition. Because immediately after he blurts his resignation, his supposed opponents display their overwhelming support of Joe Robert:

[Ben said], “[A]s far as I’m concerned, Joe Robert can come in here right now and shake hands with us and then we can all go home.”

Irene said, “Those are my feelings, too. How does everybody else feel?”

“I’m on Joe Robert’s side,” Susie said.

“Me, too,” said Jack.

“And me,” Handy said [.]. (175-76)

Thus, though Joe Robert is not a native Tiptonian and though he brings outsider ideals to his adopted community, most of his fellow citizens still embrace him. Granted, Joe Robert's peers might not agree with all of his convictions, but they do not persecute him for them. As a matter of fact, for the most part, Joe Robert blends rather smoothly into Appalachian culture. In chapter seven, for instance, as he attempts to remove a stubborn goat from the high school rooftop, Joe Robert says to the animal, "[I]f you choose to prolong your visit in this exhibitionist way, our good old mountaineer tradition of hospitality might feel some sense of strain and our sentiments of welcome might well turn into annoyance" (144). Joe Robert's saying "*our . . . mountaineer tradition*" and "*our sentiments of welcome*" suggests that—at least on one occasion—he considers himself a fully accepted member of Southern Highland society (144; my italics). In this light, Joe Robert's otherness seems far less severe than Jess's. After all, unlike his father, not once in *I Am One* or *Brighten* does Jess so confidently express an alliance to Appalachian culture. Neither does anyone ever defend Jess's unique behavior, as the school board members uphold Joe Robert's unconventional actions.

Out of the relatively small body of criticism relating to Chappell's second novel, most articles concentrate on the development of Joe Robert's character. Admittedly, such a focus seems perfectly logical. *Brighten* is, after all, a book about Joe Robert. But many scholars fail to recognize the fact that Jess also plays an important, albeit smaller, role in the story. Through Jess's subtle narration, readers see that the friction between Jess and his father, which began to surface in *I Am One*, is still growing steadily. In the novel's italicized prelude, Jess recalls one frosty morning when he and his father headed out to do their early chores. He explains, "Those winter mornings were so cold that I felt I would ring like an anvil if my father touched me" (3). Jess's comment symbolically reflects his strained relationship with Joe Robert. For much like Jess feels cold from the morning air, so does he feel coldly detached from his father. Likewise, his emotional distance from Joe Robert has increased to the point that Jess knows even "*if [his] father touched [him]*"—which the boy apparently does not think will happen—he would stand frozen like an anvil, unable to respond to Joe Robert's gesture (3; my italics).

In the second chapter of the story, Jess imagines his father's morning reflections, and the thoughts Jess conceives are far from comforting. According to the voice of Chappell's work, as Joe Robert heads outdoors to begin his early chores, he thinks: "[L]et Jess sleep in. Let him dream those incomprehensible dreams completely out of his head; let him wake up late then, having become as sane and sensible as his father" (31). At this point in the story, and throughout the entire novel, the narration comes from Jess's point of view. Thus, as Richard Abowitz points out, "Jess narrates events that he could not possibly have witnessed or known about in such detail" (149). Granted, the narrator cannot know Joe Robert's exact thoughts. But even if he is unable to recount his father's precise musings, Jess's narration reveals his own, bleak concept of how his father views him. Jess simply assumes that Joe Robert sees his aspirations as "incomprehensible" and that his father wishes he would put his "dreams"—which probably include Jess's desires to escape Tipton and to begin a literary career—"completely out of his head" (*Brighten* 31). The fact that Jess suggests he is not "as sane and sensible as his father" further exhibits the narrator's skewed self-image (31). Jess believes he is not the same type of grounded, workaholic fellow that he views Joe Robert as; rather, the youth is of a more imaginative disposition. In this passage, Jess clearly feels uncomfortable with his otherness, with the fact that he is not practical like his father.

Though Jess's descriptions of his father's thoughts are mostly conjectures, one of Jess's declarations proves strikingly accurate. The narrator states, "Joe Robert felt certain in his heart that he would never understand his son and would always live uneasy with him" (31). This time Jess's claim is a fully substantiated one. Throughout *I Am One* it becomes clear that Joe Robert and Jess do not enjoy an idealistic relationship, because even when they are together fishing, doing chores, or simply lounging about, they often remain worlds apart. Neither does their relationship strengthen in *Brighten*, for, with the exception of the italicized prelude, Jess sleeps throughout the entire novel, not once participating in his father's adventures. And readers eventually see in the last two installments of the tetralogy that Jess's relationship with Joe Robert is, unfortunately, "always" imperfect.

Though Jess senses that he will forever remain distant from Joe Robert, ironically, the narrator never abandons his attempts to connect with his father. And the fact that Joe Robert enjoys a close relationship with Jess's younger sister, Mitzi, seems only to increase Jess's desire to earn his father's acceptance. The narrator explains how Joe Robert exhibits his love for Mitzi as his father gets ready for work: "Before he went into the kitchen, he . . . looked in on my sister and me. . . . Easy to recognize the tender smiling gaze he gave my sister. Mitzi was four years old and blondly adorable and she was his sunshine, his only sunshine, who made him happy when skies were gray" (36-37). Borrowing lyrics from the popular 1940 country tune "You Are My Sunshine," Jess emphasizes his father's favoritism toward Mitzi. Jess obviously thinks that Joe Robert cares more for his daughter than he does for his son, for Jess says Mitzi is Joe Robert's one and "only" sunshine. Neither does Jess's presence merit a smile from Joe Robert, as does Mitzi's "adorable" visage. Inherent in Jess's description is the simple suggestion that he, unlike his sister, does not make his father "happy." In this passage, for the first time in the tetralogy, Jess's jealousy toward his father's displaced affection rings clear.

The voice of Chappell's work further emphasizes the essential differences between him and his father later in the same passage. While Jess lies sleeping, he imagines that Joe Robert "pick[s] up the translation of Vergil [his son is] reading" and then "[shakes] his head slowly" before he exits Jess's bedroom (37). As often proves the case in *I Am One*, Jess is again engaged in serious literary study in *Brighten*. However, at this point in the tetralogy, Jess is thirteen; thus, it seems as though he has finally grown into his complex reading material. But as Joe Robert shakes his head at Jess's book, he demonstrates that he still does not understand his son's literary interest. Yet Jess continues to reach out to Joe Robert—even in his dreams. After his father exits the bedroom, Jess explains, "I slept on . . . dreaming of the man who battled the devil-possum and the false prophet and the forces of dark ignorance. I dreamed, too, of Aeneas carrying his father on his shoulders toward the shores of the future" (37). In Jess's mind, Joe Robert is not only his father; he is a hero. Strangely, here Jess seems to renounce the more realistic image of Joe Robert that the lad sees during the Uncle Gurton episode of *I Am One*.

Apparently, Joe Robert is such a great influence in Jess's life that the boy simply cannot help but idolize his father. To Jess, Joe Robert is a warrior, who bravely combats unknown creatures such as the legendary "devil-possum." He is likewise a defender of truth, who rids his community of the "false prophet" Canary, whose fanatic proselytizing of Virgil Campbell angers Joe Robert in *I Am One*. Jess even views his father as a source of enlightenment, who fights the "dark ignorance" of Tipton's overly conservative citizens by bestowing the light of evolutionary theory upon his town's youth. And, as Virgil's Aeneas carries his father from the fallen city of Troy, so will Jess metaphorically carry Joe Robert into "the future." Because even though Jess's father cannot physically be with his son forever, Jess always carries Joe Robert's memory with him, even into the years to come.

Whereas Jess's father and uncles often stand on the periphery of their mountain culture, as becomes clear in *Farewell, I'm Bound to Leave You*, the narrator's women relatives blend easily into Appalachian society. In Chappell's third novel, the Kirkmans struggle with Annie Barbara's approaching death. And as Cora waits by her mother's bedside, Jess sits with his father, remembering all the stories that have been passed down to him by his mother and grandmother. Unlike *I Am One* and *Brighten*, which emphasize the musings of male characters, the tales of *Farewell* come from feminine perspectives. Chappell's masterful portrayal of the women in book three has earned much critical acclaim. For example, in "Chappell's Women: Models from the Early Novels," Shelby Stephenson exclaims, "Some of Fred Chappell's most compelling writing has to do with women, exemplified best perhaps by his creation of the fugue of women's voices in *Farewell, I'm Bound to Leave You*" (51). And through Annie Barbara and Cora's elegant discourse it becomes clear that, unlike several of Jess's male relatives—whose otherness often causes trouble among their kith and kin—most of the narrator's female relatives are not only revered family leaders but also embraced pillars of their community.

One of Chappell's strongest fictional characters, masculine or feminine, is Jess's grandmother, Annie Barbara. Jess's grandmother functions as the undisputed leader of her family. When Annie Barbara speaks, all of her relatives heed her words—including Jess and,

surprisingly, his rebellious father. For instance, in an episode of *I Am One*, Joe Robert, always critical of organized religion, makes light of “hillside Holies” who “are always talking to Jesus in person” (67). But Annie Barbara, whose religious devotion is emphasized throughout the tetralogy, immediately silences her son-in-law by declaring to him, “You ain’t ready for any meeting with your Lord” (68). Annie Barbara’s words obviously shame Joe Robert, for, despite his stubbornness, he “[hangs] his head before her like a little boy” (68). Jess likewise remains attentive to his grandmother’s instruction. In *Farewell*, when Annie Barbara warns Jess about the evils of infidelity, she reiterates, “I hope you’ll remember that, Jess, in your days to come” (68). The fact that Jess proves a devoted husband in *Look Back All the Green Valley* suggests that the narrator does not dismiss his grandmother’s advice.

In addition to holding an authoritative position in her family, Annie Barbara demonstrates exceptional “intelligence” (Lang 249). The matron displays her love of learning when she laments that she “never had the advantage of learning a foreign tongue” (*Farewell* 32). John Lang additionally asserts that Jess’s grandmother is a woman of “resourcefulness . . . and foresight,” as she displays via her successful plot to bring Joe Robert and Cora together (248-49). Indeed, Annie Barbara Sorrells is not the stereotypical soft-spoken, jolly, deferential (and often dim-witted) grandmother found in many fictional works. Rather, she is a smart, strong, self-assured matriarch. But Annie Barbara’s folks never seem repelled by her authoritativeness. Not once in Chappell’s quartet do any of Annie Barbara’s kin quarrel with the matron (except Joe Robert, of course, whose sparring with Annie Barbara is always lighthearted). As a matter of fact, Jess’s grandmother plays such an integral role in her family that Joe Robert and Jess are sure that time will literally stop after Annie Barbara’s life ebbs away (*Farewell* 4).

Jess’s grandmother is not merely an embraced leader of her family, however. She is also a celebrated member of her community. Throughout the first three novels, Annie Barbara proves an active part of Tipton society. In *I Am One*, for instance, readers learn that Annie Barbara entertains members from her ladies’ “Bible Circle” (12). Also in the first book, Jess notes that Annie Barbara welcomes her church’s pastor into her home and that she faithfully “pay[s] [her]

respects to a shut-in friend” (11, 111). Cora, Annie Barbara’s daughter, enjoys a similarly healthy social life and warm popular reception. The fact that Cora’s employer allows her to take home one of the school’s skeletons (which Joe Robert uses in a failed attempt to scare Uncle Runkin) proves that Jess’s mother is a trusted Tiptonian. And she, like her mother, makes numerous social and “duty calls” throughout *Farewell* (103). Joe Robert, who bears his share of social criticism when he faces a school board inquisition, even believes that Cora’s and Annie Barbara’s popularity will positively influence the outcome of his inquiry. He reflects, “[The school board members are] all friends of Cora . . . and of my mother-in-law. They’ve known each other all their lives, and they’d probably do anything in the world for those two ladies, whether it involved me or not” (*Brighten* 179). In his declaration Joe Robert validates his wife’s and his mother-in-law’s successful integration into mountain society. For he admits that Annie Barbara and Cora’s peers admire them so much that they will “do anything in the world” for the women—even look past Joe Robert’s pedagogical rebellion.

Several other, less prominent characters in *Farewell* are also distinguished members of Appalachian culture. Granted, not every player in Chappell’s feminine cast is so revered. However, those women who are apparently related to Jess, whose first names are preceded by the title “Aunt,” are all socially-venerated women (with the exception of poor Aunt Chancy Grudger, who becomes entangled in a love triangle and suffers a mental breakdown). But even though Jess’s aunts exhibit shades of otherness every now and again—unlike Jess’s mother and grandmother—they are still accepted by their mountain peers. In fact, due to their uniqueness, Jess’s aunts function as perfect character foils to his bizarre uncles, for Jess’s female relatives, unlike Runkin, Zeno, and Gurton, easily blend in with their kith and kin.

Aunt Sherlie Howes receives much attention in Chappell’s third novel. Sherlie, “whose name identifies her as [her] community’s Sherlock Holmes” (Lang 249), is widely renowned for her impressive problem-solving skills. Annie Barbara describes to Jess:

Aunt Sherlie Howes was known . . . as hands down the smartest woman there was. Only she wasn’t—she was the smartest *person*, man, woman, or child. Of

course, the menfolk would never say so; they say women rush at a problem with their feelings and don't think. But Aunt Sherlie was not only keen-witted; she was orderly in her thoughts. Folks called her "the Figuring Woman" because nobody could beat her at figuring things out. (*Farewell* 41; Chappell's italics)

In this passage Annie Barbara's feminist views shine through. Jess's grandmother feels proud to tell Jess about a woman of such great wisdom and acclaim. Annie Barbara noticeably stresses the fact that Sherlie is "the smartest *person*" in Tipton, which exhibits Annie Barbara's rather modern (for a person living in the 1940s) opinion that gender should not be considered a measure of intelligence. In "Tracing the Hawk's Shadow: Fred Chappell as Storyteller," Karen McKinney notes that an "important aspect of Jess's education in the nature of women is the manner in which the strongest of them depart from the accepted paths carved out for them by society" (229). It is no wonder, then, why Annie Barbara insists that Jess hear the story of "the Figuring Woman," whose intelligence allows her to depart from the strictly homemaker role of many women mountaineers. Jess's grandmother, a strong woman herself, wants her grandson to understand that there exist just as many incredible mountain *women* as mountain men.

While McKinney acknowledges the fact that independent women are presented to Jess as role models, she does not explain that these unusually headstrong ladies are not ostracized by their peers. For instance, though Sherlie Howes digresses from her conventional social role, the inhabitants of Tipton never discourage her from her distinguished calling. Conversely, men and women alike eagerly seek Sherlie's advice about all manners of subjects, including "farming and carpentering and money matters" and even love (*Farewell* 43). In this respect, Sherlie differs greatly from Jess's eccentric uncles. Admittedly, Sherlie, like Gurton, Zeno, and Runkin, is perhaps a bit eccentric. However, in contrast to Gurton and company, Sherlie has no social handicap whatsoever, for her peers warmly embrace her unconventional behavior.

Aunt Samantha Barefoot, the accomplished musician of Jess's family, likewise functions as a role model—and source of amusement—to the narrator. Aunt Sam, as the Kirkmans call her, is a woman of colorful character, "a go-getter, a hustler, and funny as hell" (Stephenson 54).

From the moment she enters Chappell's tetralogy, Sam acts unlike any other lady in Jess's family. A "free-talking woman" (*Farewell* 116), Sam's talent for creative cursing shocks Cora and Annie Barbara as much as it delights Jess. But her sharp tongue is not the only feature that distinguishes Sam from Jess's other female relatives. Jess's aunt is also an accomplished country music singer and a loudly opinionated individual, qualities traditionally associated with men. In fact, throughout *I Am One* Jess emphasizes his aunt's rather masculine character, which is most obviously indicated by Sam's manly nickname. Jess also declares that his aunt has a "freckled mannish face" and that she carries a leather bag "by its shoulder strap like a man fetching a bucket of water" (*I Am One* 167). For all her masculine attributes, however, Sam is a very emotional person, a characteristic traditionally associated with women. In chapter ten, for example, Sam cries twice in two pages (167-68). But neither Sam's unique blend of masculinity and femininity nor her forwardness ever hinders her popularity among her friends and family. Cora expresses her admiration of Sam by calling her animated relative "a sweet woman" (*Farewell* 118); Annie Barbara, despite her conservative demeanor, warmly "hug[s]" Sam and "murmur[s] endearments" in her ear (*I Am One* 167); and Jess expresses his entire family's worship of Sam when he admits, "If we had possessed a casket of jewels we would have poured them at her feet" (168). The general populace of Tipton likewise reveres Sam. In fact, when the musician visits the Kirkmans, "a steady stream" of locals rush to see her, and her admirers' calls keep Jess's telephone ringing "incessantly" (173). Sam, like Jess's uncles, is a unique character. However, no one—relative or mere acquaintance—is ever repelled by Sam's individuality, as people are often driven away by the otherness of Jess's male relatives.

The reflections of Annie Barbara and Cora dominate Chappell's third novel, as they tell Jess the stories of their community's greatest women, both living and dead. But even though the narrator's personal reflections are significantly fewer in *Farewell* than in preceding novels, as always, Jess's voice cannot be ignored. At the age of fifteen, Jess initially appears to have finally earned the acceptance and support of his folks. In "The Shooting Woman," the third section of the book, Annie Barbara praises Jess's intellectual endeavors for the first time. "I hear

tell, Jess,” the matriarch states, “that you take a keen interest in the ancient tongues, and that’s something to admire, because it’s so close to how Moses and Jesus and Paul spoke in the Bible” (32). Annie Barbara ignores the fact that Jess strives to learn classical languages in order read non-biblical texts in their original form (such as the *Aeneid*, which he peruses in *Brighten*, and the *Iliad*, which he reads in *I Am One*). But nonetheless, her support of Jess’s foreign language interest marks a milestone in the narrator’s life because Jess seems to have at last discovered the academic encouragement he has long searched for.

Unfortunately, however, Annie Barbara’s support of Jess is short-lived, as she never inquires after Jess’s learning again. Neither does Cora perpetuate her mother’s kind words. If anything, Jess’s mother actually discourages her son’s studiousness. After Jess admits that he would love to hear his Aunt Sam sing “Oh Shenandoah” (a tune that once drove Aunt Chancy to madness) his mother turns to him and exclaims, “Jess, maybe your teachers are right to make you out such a keen scholar, but you don’t have the common sense of a wall-eyed mule” (133). Most significant is the fact that Cora does not personally acknowledge Jess’s intelligence in her statement. She admits that his “teachers” may say he is a great “scholar,” but she never concurs. The uncertainty of Cora’s statement also proves telling, for she states that “maybe”—not “probably”—Jess’s instructors are correct to call him an outstanding student. Cora’s most hurtful suggestion, though, is that “a wall-eyed mule” enjoys more “common sense” than Jess does. It is true that Jess Kirkman is a bit of a dreamer; however, he is also a hard-working farm boy who uses his common sense every day to perform agricultural tasks such as plowing fields and milking cows. Thus, Jess’s otherness, which in this case is expressed by his unusual intellectual endeavors, is again reinforced. And Cora’s lack of understanding pushes Jess back to the periphery of his family’s inner circle.

Jess’s attempts to become a bona fide part of his Appalachian culture continue in “The Wind Woman.” Expecting to encounter the wise owner of a cabin atop Wind Mountain, Jess enters the dwelling only to discover that it is unoccupied. But as Jess settles into a rocking chair to rest from his mountain hike, he begins to hear strange “voices” and “sounds” carried in the

wind (114). These noises are not just a chaotic mix of echoes; they are the very sounds of mountain life. Jess explains, “[I was] sitting alone in the cabin up on Wind Mountain with my eyes closed and patient to consort the sounds of the hollers and slopes and valleys below into music” (115). Such is Jess’s lifelong wish: to understand his own Appalachian culture, to hear the loving call of the “hollers and slopes and valleys” that his family members already listen to. Jess’s intense longing to decipher the sounds of his homeland is expressed by his willingness to be “patient” during his quest. Jess is ready to wait however long is necessary—up to this point in the story, he has already waited fifteen years—to become a fully-initiated member of Southern Highland culture.

As proves typical of both Chappell’s verse and prose, *Farewell* attempts to dispel stereotypes associated with Appalachia and her people. Annie Barbara is the first character to exhibit her dissatisfaction with the world’s ill-conceived notion of the Southern Highlands. She expresses her wish that outsiders “would learn . . . that [Appalachians are] people like other people, wise and foolish, brave and frightened, saintly and unholy and ordinary” (197). The key adjective in Annie Barbara’s statement is the only one not paired with an opposing adjective: “ordinary.” Jess’s grandmother suggests that there is nothing so unusual in Appalachian culture that would merit the criticism long bestowed upon the region. Cora similarly acknowledges Appalachian stereotyping near the end of Chappell’s text as she tells Jess that many people call mountaineers “ignorant hillbillies” (221). However, Cora also subtly chastises these rude name-callers when she says that they “ought to be ashamed” of their hateful speech (221).

In fact, Chappell’s very portrayal of the Kirkman family challenges popular notions of the unlearned Appalachian. Jess himself is a shining scholar, even from childhood. And both Cora and Annie Barbara are learned educators. Joe Robert’s remarkable vocabulary, however, offers the clearest proof that mountain folk are not dim-witted wonders. Joe Robert exhibits his knowledge during a classroom discussion: “The fact is that Darwin’s theory of evolution has long been accepted by the scientific community as being incontrovertible in its major conclusions” (*Brighten* 161). In this passage Joe Robert not only displays his formal learning

through his description of Darwinism, but he also demonstrates his impressive word bank by using the word “incontrovertible,” an adjective never muttered by any Duke in Hazzard. Also worth notice is the fact that Joe Robert’s students rather easily follow their instructor’s elevated speech. For instance, Scotty Vann, who takes on the role of Socrates during a classroom activity, perfectly understands Joe Robert’s dialogue and even exhibits his own intelligence as he inquires of his teacher: “Would you agree that in science, as in other areas of human endeavor, there are certain individuals . . . who have been preeminent in the history of the discipline [?]” (162). Quite refreshingly, then, Jess and his family are apparently not the only clever individuals in Tipton.

While Chappell attempts to dispel popular misconceptions associated with Appalachia in his novel, as John Lang notes, the author also refuses to “romanticize either the region or agrarian life” (204). Indeed, Chappell never idealizes agricultural tasks in his novels. Joe Robert has a very difficult time taming Annie Barbara’s farm in the introductory chapter of *I Am One*. And Jess openly complains that hoeing crops is “agonizing tedium” (7). Neither does the author romanticize farming as a profession. In *Brighten* Joe Robert reluctantly takes a second job teaching school merely because, as he explains, “[It is] hard . . . to support one family on a farm these days” (103). Farm life is essentially, undeniably difficult in Chappell’s works. Throughout the tetralogy, hard ground must be plowed, hateful weeds must be hoed, and malodorous cow manure must be removed from barn stalls—activities that create to an unsympathetic mind an environment absolutely dystopic.

Despite the difficulties of agricultural life, however, Chappell also acknowledges the fact that many mountaineers are successful farmers. The Laffertys, who make their appearance near the conclusion of *Farewell*, are perhaps Chappell’s best example of agrarian success. Jess explains that, while “It’s doubtful that [the Laffertys] heaped great stores of money in bank vaults, . . . they never owed a dime, either” (198). What makes the Laffertys debt-free existence even more impressive is the fact that they have “maybe . . . an even dozen [of] children” to feed (198). Yet unlike so many popular images of the spindly, ill-fed mountaineer, no one in Quigley

and Qualley Lafferty's family ever goes hungry. In fact, as Annie Barbara and Cora witness when they join the Laffertys for lunch, their farm is so bountiful that their table is perpetually stocked with an endless cornucopia of "green beans and baked onions, stewed chicken and trout fried in cornmeal, boiled potatoes and salad greens, pickled beets and applesauce" and many more delectable dishes (208). The Laffertys are not merely successful farmers, though; they are also intelligent individuals. Echoing Cora's condemnation of "ignorant hillbilly" stereotypes (221), Quigley Lafferty declares to Dr. Holme Barcroft, a noted folklorist who studies the Laffertys' folkways: "I'm afraid you'll find us an ignorant crowd, Dr. Barcroft. . . . But everybody of age in the Lafferty family can read and write and cipher. I hope you'll set that down in your book" (205). Quigley's prefacing his comment with "I'm afraid you'll find us an ignorant crowd" merely demonstrates the fellow's modesty. For even though Quigley and his family might not enjoy an abundance of formal educational training, the fact that all of the Laffertys are literate and math-competent prove they are not wholly "ignorant." And as Quigley insists that Barcroft recognize the Laffertys' learning in his book, so does Chappell maintain throughout his texts that Appalachian folk are surprisingly astute.

Dr. Barcroft, "the celebrated musicologist and folklorist" who studies the Laffertys' square dancing (197), "is presented as the ideal outsider" in *Farewell* (McKinney 234). And the reason that Barcroft is the idyllic visitor is because he "approaches [Appalachia] not through stereotypes, not with preconceptions about the primitivism or the peculiarities of its people, but with a genuine interest in their culture and a profound sense of their humanity" (Lang 255). Granted, Barcroft is a classic Other, a complete foreigner to Appalachian society. But even though they probably would never accept him as a fully-assimilated member of their home culture, the Appalachians whom Barcroft encounters are at least willing to treat him cordially, respectfully. In this episode Chappell suggests a simple solution to the eternal insider/outsider Appalachian conflict: if more outsiders were willing to approach the Southern Highlands with open minds, then the tension between natives and non-natives would be greatly reduced.

As proves true of Chappell's first novel, *Farewell*'s title likewise offers readers a prophetic look into Jess Kirkman's future. John Lang claims that the title of the third book emphasizes "mortality," a fact of life Jess first encounters when he deals with Johnson Gibbs's death (214). However, while Lang makes a valid observation, he misses the true significance of Chappell's title. For the name of the third novel has nothing to do with mortality. Jess's *Farewell* is not a valediction to life; rather, it is a farewell to his homeland, which he is *Bound to Leave* in pursuit of the very dreams that separate him from his culture.

CHAPTER 4

SING HIM BACK HOME: JESS'S CULTURAL CONCERNS IN *LOOK BACK ALL THE GREEN VALLEY*

Look Back All the Green Valley, which concludes Chappell's Kirkman quartet, validates the prophesy foretold by *Farewell*'s title. For in this last novel, readers learn that Jess has indeed bid adieu to his hometown and family in order to pursue a teaching career at the University of North Carolina, Greensboro. The narrator returns to Tipton, however, to settle the final affairs of his dying mother. Throughout *Look Back* it becomes evident that Jess's struggles to connect with his family members are merely reflective of the narrator's greater cultural concerns. As an adult, Jess no longer views his otherness as a barrier that simply separates him from his kin, but, more importantly, as an obstacle that divides him from Appalachian society.

From the opening scenes of the novel, Jess experiences a sort of regression to childhood, as he again endures his mother's disapproval. But whereas Cora is unsupportive of Jess's unusual endeavors throughout the first three novels (which trace Jess's adventures from age ten to fifteen), in *Look Back* her discouragement metamorphoses into outright condemnation. The ailing Cora particularly attacks her son's literary pursuits. She sharply retorts to Jess: "You're a dreamer. Head in the clouds. Nose in a book. . . . Making footnotes. Writing poetry nobody can understand" (12). It is really unsurprising that Cora attacks Jess's passion for verse. After all, the Kirkmans fail to comprehend the narrator's literary interest from his childhood, when he first begins to devour classic works. In her declaration Cora does not just condemn Jess's passion for poetry but she criticizes his ingenuity as well, because Jess no longer only reads verse—he creates it. Rather than praising Jess's poetic accomplishments (he has published three successful books of poetry) Cora dismisses his life's work as nonsense, as incomprehensible gibberish that "nobody can understand."

Cora's worship of Jess's sister, Mitzi, enhances the already-strained relationship between mother and son. Much as Joe Robert expresses his favoritism toward Mitzi in *Brighten*, Cora

exhibits her partiality toward her daughter in *Look Back*. For example, Cora ridicules Jess's managerial skills by declaring, "I don't see why you can't be more like your sister. She knows how to get things organized so she doesn't waste time and energy" (10). Surprisingly, though, Jess agrees, "I wish I had Mitzi's skills" (10). Jess's declaration does not only express his envy of Mitzi's organizational talents. The narrator also envies his sister's ability to assimilate easily into Appalachian culture—a skill he has never possessed. The voice of Chappell's work recognizes Mitzi's popularity when he notes that his sister stops to chat "at no fewer than six tables" as she exits an Asheville café (27). Jess also explains that Mitzi, a successful chamber of commerce liaison, is "warmly esteemed" by Asheville's "business community" (29). But even more importantly, Jess's sister is embraced by her family members and her Tipton acquaintances, the same people whose approval Jess perpetually fights to win. When the siblings discover that they must find a new burial location for their already-deceased father and their ill mother, Jess displays his comprehension that Mitzi is more popular than he. For Jess insists that Mitzi contact all of their parents' old friends, whom the pair hopes will open their private cemeteries to Cora and Joe Robert. Jess urges Mitzi to phone the prospective plot donors because he knows they accept her—as much as they tend to alienate him. It is important to note, however, that Jess's envy of Mitzi is not hateful. On the contrary, Jess declares that he feels "a flush of pride" when he notices his sister's popularity (21). Jess does not despise his sister's assimilative talents (which Mitzi apparently inherits from her well-liked mother and grandmother); he merely wishes he shared them.

Jess directly addresses his ties to Appalachia in *Look Back*'s introductory chapter. As he politely rises to greet his sister, he reflects,

[This gesture] was only one of those reflex actions that are supposed to distinguish [S]outhern gentlemen from the lower animals. But since I am Appalachian by heritage, I don't consider myself a [S]outhern gentleman and don't particularly desire to be set apart from animals wild or domestic, which are never so low as to clothe themselves in bedsheets and burn crosses. Appalachia is

a different world from the Deep South, though few will allow that it is a better one. (21)

Jess's reflection about Appalachian-ness versus Southern-ness is unlike anything that appears in the previous novels. A bit out of place in the text (the preceding paragraph speaks of Mitzi's popularity), Jess's words strangely echo a comment Chappell makes in a 1985 interview. In the discussion, Chappell, like Jess, emphasizes his Appalachian—not merely Southern—heritage: “By and large . . . I generally tend to think of myself as an *Appalachian* writer rather than simply a [S]outhern one” (qtd. in Underwood 34; Chappell's emphasis). But whereas Chappell is nonjudgmental of the greater South in his declaration, Jess's attitude toward the “Deep South” is most unforgiving (*Look Back* 21). After all, he suggests that, as an Appalachian, he does not mind being likened to “animals wild or domestic”—a possible reference to the stereotypical image of the brutish mountaineer—because even these base animals are too moral to participate in Deep South hate crimes. Jess particularly condemns the “more nearly tropical” South's ties to the Ku Klux Klan, to which the “bedsheets and burn[t] crosses” are clear allusions (21).

It proves somewhat ironic that Jess celebrates his connection to the Southern Highlands in the preceding passage, proudly declaring he is “Appalachian by heritage,” because Jess is an Appalachian Other; thus, his being a mountaineer by birth never insures his successful integration into Southern Highland culture. In fact, three short pages after he acknowledges his heritage, Jess admits that he does not feel he is a true part of Appalachian society. As he and Mitzi try to locate a final resting place for their parents, Jess unexpectedly spurts an Appalachian colloquialism and declares, “[W]hen I return [home] . . . I begin to sound like I almost belong here” (24). The tentativeness of Jess's words is telling. The narrator might “begin” to talk like his peers, but he does not complete this verbal transformation. Jess likewise admits that he “almost” belongs in his native community; however, “almost” is an adverb that reeks of uncertainty. Such is Jess's position throughout life. He perpetually stands on the brink of societal—and familial—acceptance. Though Jess nearly succeeds in his assimilative endeavors, however, he never actually does. Even when Mitzi asks Jess directly, “Don't you [belong

here]?” he will not answer her question (24). Instead, her words make Jess feel “desperate” (24). Jess becomes anxious because he cannot decide how to evade Mitzi’s inquiry, for he knows that he cannot wholeheartedly answer “yes.”

James Kirkland similarly notes that in Chappell’s fourth novel “Jess dwells . . . on the incompleteness of his quest for . . . communal identity” (251). Surely Jess knows that he is innately different from his Appalachian relatives and peers. After all, he has difficulty connecting to his kith and kin from early childhood. But never one to give up his quest for societal approval, Jess refuses to accept the inevitable permanency of his outsider status. And the narrator’s denial often results in feelings of confusion. For instance, when Jess dines at the misnomered Hillbilly Heaven restaurant, a waitress admits that she “[doesn’t] always know who’s local and who’s a tourist” (95). In a moment of admirable candidness, Jess replies, “To tell the truth, . . . I don’t quite know which I am myself” (95). Unable to confess that he feels more like a tourist than a native, Jess at least acknowledges his uncertainty here. The narrator’s confusion partly stems from the fact that he has been away from his home region “for twenty-one years” (24), living and teaching in Greensboro. He complains to Mitzi that he has “lost touch with just about everybody” during his two-decade absence (24). But Jess has never truly connected with any of his mountain peers or relatives. Essentially, then, how can his moving away from Tipton damage relationships that were never really formed?

Jess’s life situation in *Look Back* bears a striking resemblance to Chappell’s own. Though the author ironically claims that “[a]utobiography presented as fiction has something shady about it” (“Too Many Freds” 259), the similarities between Chappell and Jess in book four are too numerous to be coincidental. In *Look Back*, Jess is an English teacher at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro; Chappell was an English professor at the same university for 40 years (he recently retired in 2004). Jess’s wife’s name is Susan; Chappell’s spouse bears the same name. Jess says that Joe Robert eventually becomes a furniture retailer; so did Chappell’s father. Moreover, Chappell and Jess even share the same name, as Jess’s pseudonym is “Fred Chappell.” And the list goes on and on. However, the most significant similarity between the

author and his narrator is that Chappell shares Jess's position as an Appalachian Other. Like Jess, "Chappell himself . . . has left the mountains to live in the piedmont section of North Carolina, has forsaken direct ties with the land to pursue the . . . sometimes less rewarding life of the mind" (Ragan 22). Both Chappell and Jess are torn between their native mountain cultures and their adopted city lives, between the farm life they were born into and the academic life they have assumed. The men are neither complete foreigners (because they are always Appalachian, if only by birth), nor are they fully assimilated members of mountain society (because their intense academic interests divide them, both physically and emotionally, from their native culture).

In chapter three, "Dr. Electro's Secret Laboratory," Jess's unsteady relationship with his home community becomes further apparent. While the narrator sifts through his father's mysterious workshop, he realizes that Joe Robert has perused his poetry. As a result, Jess, simultaneously shocked and pleased by this discovery, says he will "now feel his [father's] glance over [his] shoulder when . . . [he begins] to compose" (66). However, Joe Robert's stare is not the only one Jess feels. The narrator reflects: "But didn't I always feel that intimidating gaze upon me whenever I wrote, the invisible presences in the room of my father and mother, my aunts and uncles, my grandmother and all the community of our common mountaineer history?" (66). In this passage, Jess obviously does not feel encouraged by his family and acquaintances. Rather, he is disturbed by their "intimidating gaze," as if their presence reminds him that he has something to prove. Also significant is the fact that all members of "mountaineer history" look upon at Jess. Apparently, in addition to his kin, every Appalachian who ever lived expects more from Jess. The voice of Chappell's work thus finds no welcome place anywhere in mountain society, either past or present.

As Jess finds little encouragement among his increasingly bitter mother and his too-busy sister, interestingly, he turns toward rural Appalachia and the ghost of his father for comfort. After he discovers a puzzling Hardison County map drawn by Joe Robert—which features the names of a dozen mysterious ladies—Jess embarks on a journey to that region, determined to

locate the women named on his father's sketch. Jess does not begin his quest without some feelings of reservation, though, for he admits that he "always felt . . . a stranger" in Hardison, despite the fact that "[his] family ha[s] blood ties" to the region (107). Jess's admission proves predictable; after all, he has always felt like a stranger in the Southern Highlands, even in his native Harwood County. But Jess describes Hardison as being situated deeper into Appalachia than his home county, as the "rough-hewn" area is completely "[i]solated . . . by tall mountains" (107). Strangely, the farther Jess ventures into the heart of mountains, toward the most unchanged Appalachian area in North Carolina, the more exaggerated his assimilative efforts become.

Most noticeable is the fact that Jess's speech patterns take a sudden turn toward the colloquial when he enters Hardison. Jess first displays his verbal metamorphosis when he greets Aunt Penny Hillis with a warm "Howdy" (117)—a word Jess probably never uses to welcome his English students back in Greensboro. As the day wears on, Chappell's narrator further abandons his academically-cultivated vocabulary. When he speaks to The New Briar Rose Ramblers, for example, Jess drawls, "Boys, . . . it is plain to see you-all have scouted out the females in Easy. If there was a Helen Wilson here, you'd know her. Question is, Would you tell me or would you keep it to yourself?" (149). In this sentence, Jess exchanges his normal term "you" for the regional expression "you-all," and he greets the Ramblers as "Boys," surely not the word he uses to salute his colleagues at UNC. He likewise omits a needed article before "Question is." Thus, Jess, who openly admits his "university crowd ha[s] shed a slight academic tint on [his] sentences" (177), digresses from his regularly refined speech, which he displays in the introductory chapter of *Look Back*:

He was Joe Robert Kirkman and she was his beloved Cora, his mainstay and counterpart but not his mirror image. Where his nature gleamed with streaks of fantasy and sparkled with uninhibited impulse, hers was rooted in the clinging clay of pragmatism and patched here and there with fatalistic gloomings. (7)

The distinguished flavor of Jess's reflection is emphasized by both his extended metaphor—i.e., Cora's nature is "rooted in the clinging clay of pragmatism"—and his self-consciously poetic terminology (such as "fatalistic gloomings"). The important question, then, is why does Jess abandon his normally sophisticated dialect when he explores Hardison? But the answer to this conundrum is simple: Jess begins speaking like the inhabitants of Hardison in an attempt to fit in with them. He knows if he approaches the mountain folk with his regular, "highfalutin" language, he will immediately be rejected as an outsider. At this point in the novel, Jess's desire to connect with his Appalachian peers is so great that he is willing to deny his regular speech—a reflection of his essential self—in order to win the acceptance of his peers.

Jess's expedition through Hardison County is undeniably Dante-esque. Before he explores Hardison, Jess, who becomes frustrated while struggling with his translation of *The Divine Comedy*, quotes to Mitzi a line from Dante's work. He recites, "*Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita Mi ritrovai per una selva oscura*. That is to say, I'm having a midlife crisis and have got lost in the murky briar thicket" (168). Though Jess uses this line to express his translating woes, the quote is actually reflective of Jess's current life position. Robert Pinsky offers a more precise translation of Dante's line, which appears at the beginning of the *Comedy*: "Midway on our life's journey, I found myself / In dark woods, the right road lost" (1.1-2). Such is Jess's confused situation in life; he remains "lost" in a metaphorical "dark [wood]" because the pathway toward cultural acceptance (1.2)—i.e., his "light"—remains elusive. And, as Dante journeys through hell, so does Jess travel the hellish hills of Hardison in an effort to connect with his homeland and peers. As John Lang asserts, Hardison's "tripartite geography" reflects "Dante's three divisions of the afterlife" (263-64). Though Lang does not discuss the geographical similarities between Chappell's and Dante's landscapes in detail, it is nonetheless apparent that Downhill, the "darksome" low-lying region of Hardison, which is "a breeding ground for bootleggers, poachers, cow thieves, and worse," corresponds to Dante's Inferno (*Look Back* 114). And Vestibule, a liminal area that "ha[s] neither the darksome character of Downhill nor the happy one of Upward" (114), is a slightly disguised version of Dante's Purgatory.

Finally, with its “well-groomed, leisurely hamlets” and Edenic “generous orchards” (114), Upward—whose very name indicates that the region lies in a more heavenly latitude—is reflective of Dante’s Paradise.

Not only does the geography of Hardison parallel that of Dante’s *Comedy*, but the inhabitants of the county resemble Dante’s players. Jess, for example, is led through Hardison by his Virgilesque guide, Cary Owen. With his endless supply of local tales, Cary impresses Jess with his narrative talents. Much the same, Dante virtually worships Virgil, whom Dante declares is “the font that pours / So overwhelming a river of human speech” (Alighieri 1.61-62). The further Jess travels toward Downhill, as happens when Dante nears the Inferno, the more acrimonious people become. The closer Jess comes to Upward, as occurs when Dante approaches Paradise, the more affable individuals grow. Despite Jess’s best efforts to camouflage his regular speech with local slang, however, most Hardison residents treat him like an intruder. In Downhill, Jess receives only “tight-lipped negative shake[s] of the head” when he inquires about the women named on Joe Robert’s map (*Look Back* 137). The reception Chappell’s narrator faces in Vestibule is little better, for the first inhabitant he encounters eyes him “with sharp suspicion” and asks Jess rudely, “Now, who might you be?” (139). Up to this point in his journey, no one in Downhill or Vestibule likes Jess enough to offer him even a refreshing drink or a place to rest his feet (time-honored gestures of politeness in Appalachian society). To these sullen men and women, Jess is a foreigner, an unwelcome invader who annoys them with his equally unwelcome questions.

Jess’s journey suddenly becomes more enjoyable when he reaches Upward. For the first time during his trip, Jess receives a warm welcome from these more-cordial inhabitants of Hardison County. The delight in Jess’s voice rings clear when he notes that Upwarders “[entreat him] to step down from the car to have a bite of this and take a little sup of that” (147). It proves most fitting that Upward parallels Dante’s Paradise, because, for Jess, Upward is an earthly heaven. In this tiny spot of Appalachia, Jess finds the genial social reception that has so long eluded him. After all, no one in Tipton ever invites Jess to dinner. Granted, Jess is accompanied

by Cory Owen when he visits Upward, and thus his guide's regional popularity might positively influence the locals' behavior toward Jess. But even so, Jess carries on a delightful conversation with the cordial New Briar Rose Ramblers by himself—with no assistance from Cary.

Furthermore, there is no clear indication in Chappell's text that the Ramblers even know Cary. In fact, the musicians seem to favor Jess over his companion, who refuses to "crack a smile" at the band members' jokes (148). Essayist Robert Morgan praises Chappell's "portrait" of the entertaining "Ramblers . . . [as some of] Chappell's most delightful writing" (xiii). Apparently, Jess likewise views the musicians as "delightful" characters, for he proudly joins their banter. While in Upward, Jess revels in the sweet knowledge that his fellow mountaineers actually embrace him and treat him as a friend. Unfortunately for Jess, his visit to Appalachian heaven is all too brief.

"Into the Unknown!" the ninth chapter of *Look Back*, is perhaps the most peculiar segment in Chappell's tetralogy. The entire episode is a fantastical flashback to Jess's childhood, to the year 1949. In the scene Joe Robert carries his entire family—Cora, Annie Barbara, Jess, and Mitzi—to space in his original "multi-dimensional starship" (217), the *Isambard* (named after Joe Robert's engineering hero, Isambard Kingdom Brunel). Chappell openly acknowledges the criticism this unusual chapter has earned. In a 2001 interview, Chappell explains:

I made a mistake [with "Into the Unknown!"] that's pretty basic, which is to assume that folks would know an area of literature that most readers might not know. . . . I thought that people would see that it was a kind of parodic fantasy about the optimism and cheerfulness and belief in human ingenuity that characterized the science fiction of the 1940s and '50s, particularly. . . . I had thought that readers would recognize that this kind of silliness actually characterized a whole side of Joe Robert Kirkman [.] ("Interview" 39)

Chappell's including a science fiction segment in *Look Back* is reflective of the author's childhood reading habits. In an interview conducted by Resa Crane and James Kirkland,

Chappell expresses his early interest in this genre of literature: “My fun reading in those days [i.e., as a youngster] was science fiction” (Chappell, “First” 13). Unfortunately, as Chappell points out, not all of his readers are so receptive to science fiction, especially when it is interwoven into an “otherwise realistic work [like *Look Back*]” (“Interview” 39). Though Chappell indeed emphasizes Joe Robert’s “optimism . . . in human ingenuity,” however, Jess’s relationship with his father in chapter nine proves far more significant than Joe Robert’s technological interests.

Throughout the fourth novel, Jess chases his father’s spirit, first by cleaning out Joe Robert’s cluttered workshop and then by searching Hardison county for his father’s supposed mistresses (who ultimately turn out to be rose bushes). As Jess rambles after Joe Robert’s elusive trails, the narrator makes the obvious understatement: “I hadn’t known my father nearly so well as I thought” (*Look Back* 91). Jess’s belief that he once knew Joe Robert “well” is a bit delusional. In none of the preceding novels does Jess enjoy a close relationship with Joe Robert. And throughout the concluding book, Jess’s inability to connect with his father becomes even more pronounced. For example, Jess knows nothing about Joe Robert’s attempt to dupe local preachers with his “Satanic Enterprises Amalgamated” scheme. The narrator is likewise unaware of his father’s elaborate plan to hurl an enormous waste-filled pie onto T.J. Wesson (the Challenger Paper Mill supervisor whose carelessness leads to the destruction of Joe Robert’s creek bridge in *I Am One*). Neither is Jess aware of his father’s financial generosity toward Royal and Dilly Elden, who own the antique clock shop above Joe Robert’s makeshift laboratory. Essentially, then, throughout *Look Back*—as in the previous novels—“Jess seems to barely understand Joe Robert” (Bizzaro 85).

Though in reality Jess has an unhealthy relationship with Joe Robert, in the narrator’s science fiction fantasy, he and his father are closely connected. During Jess’s daydream, Joe Robert asks his son’s opinion of the *Isambard*: “Now what do you think?” (*Look Back* 218). Joe Robert’s inquiry proves momentous, for he dismisses Jess’s judgment in the preceding books. And in this episode, not only does Joe Robert bestow upon Jess the integral position of pilot, but

he “put[s] his hand on [Jess’s] shoulder and guide[s]” his son toward his button-and-knob cluttered station (224). Joe Robert’s gesture here is likewise unordinary, as he rarely touches Jess in the first three novels. Most significant, however, is the declaration Joe Robert makes when he prepares to venture toward the moon. Before he departs, Joe Robert looks at his son and says, “I will need your help, Pilot Jess” (239). Such are the words Jess has always yearned to hear from his father, words that express Joe Robert’s desire, his “need,” to have Jess in his life. This entire scene exhibits Jess’s idealized notion of the perfect father-son relationship—which he never shares with Joe Robert. In the narrator’s fantasy world, Joe Robert is sensitive of his son’s needs, physically affectionate toward him, and even reliant on Jess. Sadly, Jess’s tight bond with his father is as transparent as the Veilwarp through which Joe Robert passes, for their connection is literally science fiction.

Jess’s perpetual fight to win the acceptance of his fellow Appalachians comes to a culmination in chapter ten. In the episode, Jess gathers his parents’ old acquaintances together for an afternoon picnic. As the narrator prepares to make his acknowledgements to the crowd, all of whom have offered to share their cemeteries with Joe Robert and Cora, Jess begins to feel intimidated by his guests. He worries to himself, “How [am] I supposed to greet them? What tongue [do] they speak?” (251). Jess’s internal dialogue demonstrates his separation from his company. The narrator feels so far removed from his peers that he does not even share a common language with them. Later Jess similarly notes that his guests are “as uncertain about [his] identity as [he is] about theirs” (252). Not only are the picnic-goers “uncertain” of Jess’s physical identity, but they are also unsure of the narrator’s peculiar conduct. Jess’s intellectual otherness, coupled with his desperate desire to blend in with his fellow mountaineers, results in his muddled academic/down-home demeanor. One minute Jess spouts colloquialisms such as “ma’am” (249), and the next moment he recites Italian poetry (250). During this episode Jess becomes most visibly torn between who he really is (a somewhat eccentric, verse-loving academic) and who he wants to be (a plain-spoken, popularly accepted Appalachian).

Jess further displays his increasing feelings of discomfort via his physical reactions to the crowd. After he begins to make his thank-you speech, Jess's body movements start to become erratic. He "clenche[s]" his "toes in [his] shoes" and "[takes] a shaky deep breath" as he stands on the stage (255). When the crowd proves increasingly unresponsive to Jess's questions and jokes, his desperation grows steadily. The voice of Chappell's work explains, "My hands shook so visibly that I stuffed them into the pockets of my trousers, where they immediately began to sweat" (256). While Jess is obviously agitated when he scrunches his toes and breathes unsteadily, he at least remains in control of his body. But soon thereafter, his movements become involuntary, for his "hands [shake] . . . visibly" and "sweat" on their own. Ironically, Jess explains that he is "accustomed to teaching classes . . . about the same size" as the picnic crowd (254), thus his becoming nervous before his peers seems surprising. Jess should be accustomed to public speaking; he performs the task daily at work. However, though Jess admits this "situation" is "different" from his classroom addresses (254), he fails to articulate *how* it is unusual. The reason Jess does not get nervous in front of his students is because he does not worry about their approval. Conversely, his desire to earn the acceptance of his Appalachian acquaintances is so great that the narrator trembles—literally—at the very thought of their rejecting him.

Unfortunately, Jess's concerns that the crowd might not positively respond to his address prove well-founded. Most obviously, the narrator's audience feels bewildered by Jess's academic speak. When he inquires, for example, "this [asking you to donate burial plots to our parents] is the kind of expedient that is born only of desperation, right?" (255), the only answer Jess receives is puzzled "silence" (255). But even when Jess's speech becomes less ornate, his reception does not improve. For instance, after he explains that he will choose his parents' final resting place via a lottery, he plainly asks the crowd, "[D]oes this method seem suitable to you?" (256). However, as before, Jess's question merits "no response," with the exception of a few nods "here and there" (256). The fact that Jess expects an affirmative answer to most of his inquiries proves significant. For Jess wants his audience to voice their approval of not only his

ideas, but of him in general. The crowd's consistent refusal to cheer Jess along, though, merely reinforces the narrator's hopeless outsider status.

Despite the neutral reaction Jess receives from his listeners, he nonetheless proceeds to deliver a seven-page address to his unimpressed audience. Critics like John Lang criticize Jess's lengthy speech. The author argues, "This final chapter is somewhat marred . . . by Jess's protracted address to the gathering and by his inclusion in that address of remarks that would seem to have little meaning to the people attending the picnic, however interesting they may be to the reader" (276). In "Too Many Freds," Chappell himself similarly admits that the "picnic scene at the end of [*Look Back*]" is "longish" (270), due in great part to Jess's extended address. Admittedly, Lang and Chappell make valid points. Yes, as Lang claims, Jess's ramblings about his father's past seem far more significant to him than to any of his listeners. And yes, as both Lang and Chappell suggest, the length of Jess's speech becomes rather tiresome. But if nothing else, this episode proves successful because it clearly exhibits Jess's desperation to connect with his audience. Jess rambles on and on, hopelessly trying to stimulate a reaction—by the end of the speech, *any* sort of reaction—from his listeners. At the end of his address, when an exhausted Jess asks, "Am I making any sense at all?" Harley, the Ramblers' mandolin player, speaks for everyone when he answers, "Not yet, Mr. Kirkman" (266). Harley's simple admission perfectly sums up Jess's never-changing relationship with his fellow mountaineers. His acquaintances do not understand him as a boy, and they do not understand him as a man.

Interestingly, it is Aunt Samantha Barefoot's famous song "Look Back All the Green Valley" that serves as a life-altering catalyst for Jess. At the narrator's request, The New Briar Rose Ramblers play the old tune, which begins:

Now our days are dwindling down
The fresh green leaves have turned all brown.
Look back look back the Maytime days
Look back all the green valley. (266)

Jess figures that “hearing” the mournful song “might bring [him] to the verge of tears” (267). But Jess does not cry when he listens to the tune; instead, the simple lyrics trigger an epiphany within Jess. He explains, “If [the song] remedied no sorrows of the world, if it could not console the time-abused heart or assuage all the distresses of the weary spirit, it brought them into the light and offered them an understanding” (267). Perhaps the first two lines of the song remind Jess that he is quickly approaching the fall of his life. And, more importantly, maybe when he recalls the “Maytime days” of his youth, he suddenly realizes that, while he enjoyed a relatively healthy childhood and while he had a family who loved him, much of his earlier life was worried away by a boy who never quite fit in. However, even if these are not Jess’s precise thoughts, the “understanding” the narrator reaches is undoubtedly the acceptance of his otherness, the suppression of which has long “distresse[d]” his “weary spirit.” What other realization could cause Jess to declare that he “feel[s] . . . complete”? (267). Jess becomes whole because he refuses to squander any more of his life feeling torn between his uniqueness and a culture that does not understand it. The narrator accepts the fact that he will never completely blend in with his family and peers, and he feels—for the first time in his life—that this is all right.

The most obvious proof that Jess has indeed come to terms with his otherness is that, after he hears “Look Back All the Green Valley,” he abandons his desperate efforts to connect with his acquaintances. Because he no longer is burdened by assimilative pressures, unlike every other scene in which Jess nervously takes the stage, after the Ramblers’ song, he confidently approaches the platform. Never again contending with sweaty palms and twitching toes, Jess states that, right before his address, he calmly “[rises] from [his] chair” (267). Jess’s relaxed demeanor when he bids the crowd adieu likewise demonstrates his alteration. Even though he makes a point to “not [let] anyone leave without a farewell hug or a handshake” (268), these are no longer the desperate acts of a man striving to win acceptance. For while Jess notices that some of his guests shoot him “an amused or unamused glance” as they leave (268), he never indicates that he cares which category these looks fall under. Jess is absolutely willing to make friends with his acquaintances—this is why he speaks to all of his guests as they depart the

picnic. But Jess is no longer willing to fret if his peers are “unamused” by his unique personality or uninterested in his kind gestures.

Amazingly, after Jess overcomes his obsession with assimilation, for the first time in the tetralogy, he begins to make some friends. Throughout the entire quartet, there is only one short scene in which Jess has a companion who is approximately his own age. In *Brighten the Corner Where You Are*, Jess enjoys the companionship of Burrell Farnum, the son of a tenant farmer who tends Joe Robert’s acreage. Even this friendship is short-lived, though, for Jess and Burrell eventually get into a terrible fight, which naturally sours the boys’ feelings of camaraderie. However, Jess discovers an entire band of prospective pals in The New Briar Rose Ramblers. From the first time Jess meets the musicians at their Hardison County home, they are cordial toward him. And as “the band members . . . are about to make their exits from the stage” in what Peter Makuck describes as “a Shakespearean moment” (184), Dobber (the banjoist) expresses his appreciation of Jess: “We thank you for calling on us, Mr. Kirkman. It was good to play for you” (*Look Back* 269). Granted, by no means does Jess enjoy a close friendship with the Ramblers. The band members, for example, insist on addressing Jess as “Mr. Kirkman” (269), a formality that irritates the narrator. The musicians likewise mock Jess’s passion for Dante’s poetry, calling the verse “a lot of salty speech” (250). But all in all, the men genuinely appear to like Jess, for they feel “good” about performing for him (269). The Ramblers accept Jess’s otherness better than most of the narrator’s acquaintances. Thus, while they are not intimate comrades, the potential for friendship between Jess and the musicians definitely exists.

By the conclusion of *Look Back*, however, Jess’s closest Appalachian companions prove to be the nearly-interchangeable Ireland brothers. When the voice of Chappell’s work first meets Tod and Bud Ireland, Jess repeatedly emphasizes the differences between him and the hefty siblings. Jess notes, for instance, that Tod “could have crushed [his] knuckles like Rice Krispies” with his strong handshake (200). Later Jess similarly states, “I rose . . . and when the boys closed in on both sides of me, I felt oppressed, like a little honeymoon bungalow stranded between a couple of skyscrapers” (209). Despite the humorous tone of his observations, Jess’s

admission that he feels “oppressed” by the Irelands’ Herculean bulk proves quite serious. Not only does Jess feel intimidated by his acquaintances’ physical strength, but he likewise feels oppressed by the knowledge that his comparative weakness is yet another attribute that separates him from his peers.

But in the final, italicized section of Chappell’s novel, while Jess and the three Ireland brothers (including Ned, whom Jess meets at the picnic) begin to exhume Joe Robert’s remains, Jess does not dwell on the dissimilarities between him and his companions. Neither does the narrator make any self-deprecating remarks about his physical weakness. At this point in the novel, Jess is no longer disturbed by the fact that he is essentially unlike his companions. Jess’s more relaxed outlook on life obviously lessens the feelings of tension between him and the Irelands. The very fact that the four men work so smoothly together in this episode (taking turns shoveling, passing tools to one another, etc.) suggests that the men form a rather comfortable quartet. And the brothers’ consenting to help Jess unearth Joe Robert clearly indicates that the brothers like Jess. After all, surely Jess’s mere acquaintances would not assist him in such an awkward—and illegal—task.

While Jess digs into the earth of father’s grave, he suddenly sees a ghost from his childhood past: Uncle Zeno. Zeno’s reappearance in this final novel has merited a significant amount of critical attention. John Lang, for example, proposes that “[t]he repeated references to Uncle Zeno in *Look Back* are meant to remind the reader that the nature and functions of storytelling remain among the tetralogy’s principal concerns” (270). But whether Zeno’s appearance is merely a reminder of the storytelling tradition that pervades Chappell’s novels proves rather insignificant. What matters most is that Jess—like his companions—can see the apparition. This episode wonderfully parallels the concluding segment of *I Am One of You Forever*, in which Jess cannot perceive Helen, the mysterious dream vision that his father, Johnson Gibbs, and Uncle Luden share. However, whereas Jess fails to view Helen, Jess not only can see Zeno, but he spies the apparition before his fellow exhumers do. If, as Lang suggests, Zeno is indeed representative of the storytelling tradition—which in Jess’s case would

be the Appalachian storytelling tradition—the narrator’s seeing Zeno before the Irelands, suggests that, for the first time in his life, Jess is more attuned to his native culture than his peers.

Jess’s perceptive advantage over his companions proves fleeting, however, for they too eventually view Zeno. Most significant is the fact that when Jess catches his best glimpse of Zeno, the ghost is “walk[ing] away into the rain” (*Look Back* 278). Zeno’s action metaphorically illustrates Jess’s connectedness to Appalachian culture. For even though by the end of *Look Back* Jess is more closely related to mountain culture than ever before, complete assimilation always eludes Jess—much as Zeno evades the narrator in the final scene. For example, despite the fact that Bud, Ned, and Tod share Jess’s vision of Zeno, they do not comprehend his philosophy concerning the old storyteller. Jess explains: “Uncle Zeno’s stories used up the world. . . . When he told a story about you, you were trapped inside of it and couldn’t get out” (276). Bud speaks for his brothers when he dismisses Jess’s declaration by bewilderedly replying, “That don’t make good sense” (276). Neither do the men understand Jess’s refusal to continue searching for his father’s remains after they discover a fox skull in the grave (an obvious allusion to Joe Robert’s sly character), which Jess secretly believes is Joe Robert. After Jess suddenly jumps out of the open grave and announces they will dig no longer, Bud confusedly inquires, “Don’t you want to find the coffin?” (278). But despite the men’s puzzlement at abandoning their task, Jess refuses to reveal to them the skull’s true identity. Jess states, “I wasn’t going to say [to them], That’s *him*; my father was the fox” (278; Chappell’s emphasis). Jess will not explain to the Irelands that Joe Robert is the fox because he knows they will not understand his admission—just as they do not comprehend his description of Zeno’s storytelling.

Jess Kirkman wastes much of his life chasing after a collection of ghosts, including the ever-elusive spirit of Joe Robert, and, to a much lesser degree, the puzzling apparition of Zeno. However, by the conclusion of the tetralogy, Jess determines that he “can’t give up [his] life” pursuing a father he will never truly understand (271). Likewise, by the end of the series, Jess no longer insists upon discovering Zeno’s secrets, for he does not follow the storyteller’s ghost as it

“walk[s] away into the rain” (278). Much as Jess ultimately finds the strength to leave these spirits in peace, so is he finally able to lay his assimilative worries to rest.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

In an interview with Gene Hyde, Fred Chappell expresses his attachment to Appalachia: “Only the mountains have ever seemed truly like home to me. Some mornings I still get up in Greensboro and look out the window, and don’t have a mountain to rest my eyes against, and I feel a little apprehensive and, also, a little cheated sometimes” (Chappell, “Southern” 88). However, though he can no longer view Appalachia from his adopted homeland, the imprints of Chappell’s native mountains forever press upon the author’s memory, as is evidenced by his vivid portrayal of the Southern Highlands in his later novels.

As does his creator, Jess Kirkman always feels irresistibly drawn toward Appalachia and a culture of which he is never fully a part. Unfortunately for Jess, as the books progress, and as he grows older, his otherness becomes increasingly apparent. From the boy who is ousted from family conversations in *I Am One of You Forever*, to the youngster who sleeps through his father’s shenanigans in *Brighten the Corner Where You Are*, to the teenager who faces ridicule for his scholastic endeavors in *Farewell, I’m Bound to Leave You*, to the man who is still misunderstood by his peers in *Look Back All the Green Valley*, Jess spends a lifetime as a foreigner in his own native society. And even though Jess eventually comes to terms with the permanency of his outsider position, it is Chappell’s masterful portrayal of his narrator’s (nearly) lifelong obsession to connect with mountain culture that makes Jess one of the most remarkable—and divided—characters in Appalachian literature.

Despite Jess’s assimilative struggles, however, Chappell’s overall portrait of Southern Highland life is refreshingly complimentary. Absent in Chappell’s novels are the dim-witted Appalachian caricatures found in so many pieces of fiction. Instead, the mountaineers that appear throughout the author’s tetralogy are gifted educators (Annie Barbara, Cora, Joe Robert), talented musicians (Aunt Samantha Barefoot, The New Briar Rose Ramblers), and resourceful problem solvers (Aunt Sherlie Howes, Mitzi). Moreover, Chappell often emphasizes the beauty

of the region in which his characters live. On the first page of *I Am One*, for example, Jess speaks affectionately of the picturesque “Carolina mountain landscape” that surrounds his family farm (1). Granted, not all of Chappell’s players are as astute as Jess’s relatives; nor does the loveliness of Tipton’s hills make farm life any less challenging. Ultimately, therefore, as John Lang agrees, Chappell’s portrait of the Southern Highlands is not “romanticize[d]” (204)—it is merely realistic.

When asked in a 2001 interview whether he felt as if he had “done [his native] area of the country justice,” Chappell replied: “I don’t think I’ve done it justice. I don’t think anyone can quite do a whole region justice, not even the best of us—not even Wolfe or Charles Frazier can get the whole thing down. Nevertheless, I think I made an honorable attempt over four novels and I’m glad I undertook them the way I did in regard to the region” (“Interview” 38). However, as always, Chappell proves modest in his declaration. For in his fiction, Chappell’s “attempt” to do Appalachia—and her people—justice is not merely “honorable,” but most successful indeed.

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