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Hammering at the Reader's Heart: George Ella Lyon Talks about Her Latest Novel

Kathryn B. McKee

The poet George Ella Lyon, a native of Harlan, Kentucky, is the author of *Catalpa* (1993) and the chapbook *Mountain* (1983). She is likewise an acclaimed writer of children's books, including *Father Time and the Day Boxes* (1985), *Come a Tide* (1990), and *Mama Is a Miner* (1994), as well as of novels for young adults, among them *Borrowed Children* (1988). I visited her in her Lexington, Kentucky home, where we chatted in the orderly disorder of her slant-roofed writing study, watching the snow pile up outside. We began by talking about *With a Hammer for My Heart*, Lyon's latest novel and her first aimed at an adult readership.

To a reader, *With a Hammer for My Heart* may appear to be a departure from your earlier work—the form is different, the audience is different. Did creating this novel involve a transition for you from previous work habits, patterns of thought?

Well, because I worked on it for so long—I began it in 1988—most of the things that people know me for were written when I was writing this. So it all seems a part of this time of my life. It's different from my other work, in that it did take so long, and although I have written plays, I have not written a novel with several voices. My three novels for young readers all have a single voice, first-person narrator, whereas *With a Hammer for My Heart* has eight voices. So that was a difference. In fact there were more voices, but I took some of them out.

It strikes me that one of the book's major achievements is the distinctive quality of the individual narrators' voices—how do you create a person strictly through his or her own language?

I write primarily by ear, by listening for voices. For the most part, I just let them talk, see what it is they have to say, and then cut out the parts that don't pertain because characters, like the rest of us, will wander in their words. And then sometimes I'll get a character

who's just not interesting, as you may meet someone who's not interesting. I don't feel so much that I create them as that in the process of writing, I go where they are. It's like if you dig far enough down, you'll hit water—not everywhere but a lot of wheres. The water table may be low, you may hit a rock, you may have to do blasting, you may have to get a dowsing rod to help you locate where to drill, but if you keep at it, the water is there, and it seems to me the voices are there—all those stories that haven't been told.

You said it took a long time to write this compared to other things you've done.

The first words of the novel came to me when I was driving from my hometown of Harlan [Kentucky] over the mountains to Virginia, and I thought I saw a sign by the side of the road that said "Little Splinter Creek Church." Now the next time I came through, that sign was not there. But that doesn't mean that it wasn't there before, or maybe I misread another sign, because my vision is not the best and I tend to invent what I can't read. Creative reading! So I thought it said "Little Splinter Creek Church," and I began to think about that as I was driving along. It was Sunday, and I had the radio on. I was listening to radio mountain preachers, who I love to listen to, and one of them was so—he just made me mad, because his notion of salvation was so violent. And I began meditating a little bit on other ways of looking at God. The words that came to me were "Little Splinter Creek Church of the Mother Jesus." So I had those words.

This was in 1986, but I didn't actually start writing the novel until 1988. I was, in fact, pregnant at that point, and then I had my son Joey, and there was a time that I didn't do a lot of writing, plus I had to finish another novel called *Borrowed Children*. Then I read a book by Natalie Goldberg called *Writing Down the Bones*, which was really important for me because she talks about writing as a spiritual practice. She's a Buddhist and was trying to reconcile how to have meditation time and also writing time. And her Zen Roshi said "let your writing be your practice." So in this book she describes a way of moving toward that. I decided I would try to do it too. Not just free writing, not just journal writing, a conscious way of trying to go deeper, as you do in meditation. The first voice of the book that came up was not Mamaw but Garland. His introductory piece was the first piece I wrote, and I thought, well now this is interesting. So I expected the next time I sat down to

hear more from him, but the next voice was Mamaw, and the next was Lawanda. At first I didn't know the relationship between any of them, and I thought it was a play.

So you didn't set out to write with multiple narrators?

No, I didn't. I had no agenda, other than to write and try to practice Goldberg's approach. Several years later she came here [the University of Kentucky] to do a workshop at the Women Writers Conference, and I went and told her afterward, "I read your book and it got me into a novel. I wish you would write another book and get me out." And she said, "I can't get out of my *own* novel." I know a number of people who have felt *The Artist's Way* really moved their writing in a different direction. For me it was *Writing Down the Bones*. I was just ready for it, and it's very freeing and directive at the same time.

From the time of the first voices, how long was it until you felt the novel was finished?

I don't know. Let's see—from 1988 . . . it was supposed to come out in 1996, so it must have been accepted in 1995—I would say I thought it was ready in about 1993. I think after about five years I started sending out a version of the novel, and I sent it to about thirteen publishers, all of whom rejected it for various reasons. I had a year's break while I got rejected—*it* got rejected—and then I took it back, knowing it was the ending that was wrong.

It had another ending?

Yeah, Yeah. And I knew it was wrong. So I took it back and wrote a different ending, and I knew that was wrong too. I began to do some more research—research is always good writing prevention. I like research, love libraries, like copying down other people's words; it's always easier than coming up with my own. It was on that last round of research that I came up against what the truth of the book was. I can't describe how this happened because that would give away the ending of the book, but it was in such a way that I couldn't refute it. I was just devastated, and I felt terrible. I did not want this to happen and I felt just—wretched. But then when I looked back at the book I could see that it's there, it's there from the beginning. Any reader except the author would be able to look back and see that. As I find almost always, the writing is ahead of the writer, the poem knows things that the poet doesn't know. Part of the revision process is always the inner revision of the writer. That's why you have to be willing to be transformed if you're going to write. It's not just making stuff up and writing it

down—that sounds like a lark! At least that's not what it is for me—for me it's always a process of following something and having things taken apart and put back together, in my understanding and in the work as well.

So the book was trying to work itself out the right way and you were the one that was keeping that from happening?

I think I was. I think I had to get out of the way, to quit trying to make the book's ending more bearable.

It is a haunting ending. As I was reading, I felt that something was sort of simmering beneath the surface and then it all erupted.

There were pieces that really scared me when I wrote them, but I didn't know why. So in some way I must have felt that foreboding. There's the scene between Mamaw and Garland when she looks at his pictures and all the faces are burned out. I found that horrifying and it made me afraid to go on. Writing is a very mysterious process, and that's one of the reasons why I love it so much. It's always new; I don't know what's going to happen.

Can you elaborate on the connection Garland initially makes between Lawanda and Little Red Riding Hood?

The first thing Garland says to Lawanda is "Lookie here, if it ain't Miss Riding Hood come to entertain the wolf." That's his greeting, and you know Red Riding Hood does not have an easy way to go. She survives, but being in the belly of the wolf, being cut out by the hunter, she's gone through a dark night of the soul. In one version of the fairy tale the grandmother comes back and the wolf eats her as well. Of course Lawanda's grandmother is so important to her, but I didn't think about that when I wrote Garland's words.

They're just what he says, what he is.

So you don't necessarily set out to create an image that goes all the way through a piece of writing?

No. I went to graduate school and then went on and did a Ph.D.—I wanted to be in the writing program and that's how I got to do it. I did all that critical work and enjoyed it, and I loved writing about Virginia Woolf—she's my hero. But I found when I came to write fiction, my critical tools were of no use whatsoever. It's like going out to make a garden with a set of piano tuning equipment! So it's not that what the critic does is not of value, it's just that it's a very different thing. If I decided to use an image, I'm sure the reader would be aware that I was using an image. It would have that mechanical feel to it, which isn't to say that that is true of anyone else, but it is true of me. Whenever I have an agenda in writing,

I better be doing an essay where I have ideas to lay out and something to prove, a case to make. That's where I need to do that, not in poetry, not in fiction. So I think in images, I always have—that's much more natural to me than thinking in abstract terms. It's not something I am even conscious of doing. In fact one of the last things I did with the first novel, *Borrowed Children*, was go back through it with a metaphor rake to take some of those things out, because I was afraid it became distracting. And it can be, you know—sometimes the metaphor takes you farther away from the feeling you want to convey.

Recently I sent something to my editor [Dick Jackson] and he said, "you've got to cut the writing." And I said, "it's really hard to talk to you! What do you mean cut the writing?" He said, "it reads like it's written." You don't want to be aware that the writer is making decisions, or that the writer is having a great deal of fun with the language, because that's distancing. You can see later on that the language is wonderful, but you don't want the awareness of the language to come between the reader and the experience that's happening on the page. So I had to admit—as I so often do—that he was right, but it's pretty funny.

One reviewer cited "healing" as a major theme in the book. How specifically do you see that theme at work in the novel?

I think that's true. I'm only one reader of the book though, but to me that seems true. It's what happened; I think it's the central theme. It's what happens with Garland and Nancy Catherine. And what's potentially there to happen in Lawanda's family and in Lawanda herself. She seems very resilient to me, very strong, and I have faith for her. I feel shattered by what's happened, but I also feel that the creation that's ongoing in Lawanda's life is still full of energy. She still has a direction. She has a lot to reckon with, but I don't feel that in the deepest part of herself she is damaged in a way that is going to be destructive. I have hope in her, not just for her. I really like her too. I admire her. I should be so punky! I would like to be.

I read the interview that you did with Anne Beattie [see *Conversations with Kentucky Writers*, 1996], and you said in reference to a particular experience teaching creative writing: "When I tried to talk about the writer's responsibility, not to censor what's in the story, but to deal with the moral implications of what's in the story, one student said, 'Oh you're talking about that moral fiction shit,' like it was a little compartment off

somewhere." What are the moral implications of this novel, and how would you hope that we would deal with them?

Well, I certainly don't think I know everything about the book—I am sure I'll read it at some later point and it will say things to me that it doesn't say now, and I'm sure other people will teach me things about it. That always has happened with things I have written. But it seems to me that a deep concern of the book is that violence arises out of a lack of imagination. That Howard Ingle—Lawanda's father, whom I love—when he thinks of Lawanda and Garland there's only one thing he can think of, he can only imagine one kind of love. He is outraged, and he can only imagine one kind of solution that would make everything right. That one thing is again a violent act. I think what has so wounded Garland is having been a soldier and seen that mentality operating and wondering: is this all we can think to do to one another? We think this is going to answer our prayers? He sees that violence carried out in one direction will happen in the other direction. That it's not a solution. That it's not something you can put a boundary on and say, "it's only over here." That too shows a severe limitation of imagination because if you know more about how life works, you know that you can never compartmentalize things like that. You can do horrific things, and wrongly believe that because they were in the name of good, they will not have power over you. I think the notion that the end justifies the means is psychotic—I think that's the word I want—because the means are in the end and the means carry on beyond the end. So I think for me that is a big part of the moral implication of the book, the dangers of being locked into one perspective, the perspective of "I know what's going on and I'm all right. I know what we have to do, and if we can just put enough force behind what we know and polarize the opposite side we'll be fine." I think we all have those violent elements of pain and frustration which we can get to, and which can result in violent behavior, whether it's physical violence or emotional violence. That's one of the places where community can save us. If Howard had spoken to anybody, if he had talked to June, his wife, he could have had another point of view about this, but he was on the holy war, and full of love, fired by love. That was the worst thing about it. The thing he did was the last thing he would have ever done. A lot of people have that experience.

In the Beattie interview you also said: "I guess I think of myself first of all as a poet, because that's my starting place, and also I

think that's really my sensibility, metaphorical, with my writing having a lot to do with the music of language. But, I think it's regrettable that we categorize writers so tightly. . . . I have a novel for adults that's out at publishers now, and if that gets accepted, that would make a difference." Has creating a novel for adults changed your image of yourself?

No, because I just think of myself as a writer. It's fun to get to talk to adults, it's fun to have adult readers. In this same time period, though, I've also done a couple of plays that were for adults, and had a book of poetry for adults and a book of stories, so this is not a new experience for me. It's a new experience to have these people—the people in the book, whom I lived with for so long—out there for people to talk about. I had somebody call me up from a book club one Friday night and say, "my book club has chosen me to call you and find out what happened between Lawanda and Garland after the book was over!" I just loved it! I don't know the answer, but I loved it that she cared!

I spent so many years worrying about all these people, and nobody knew about them except a couple of writer friends who I showed it to and my husband. So it's great to have readers and to feel that I delivered the story; I saw it through. Because I feel that it was given to me, in a way, to do that. Especially when I went out to the VA [Veterans Administration Hospital] in between the second draft and the third draft of the book and met with a psychiatrist who specializes in post-traumatic stress. He let me read some case histories from men who were there (without their names of course). I wanted to see if there were ways in which Garland's voice was not convincing or his response was not convincing. What I was struck by was that Garland is out there [at the VA Hospital]. They said things that he could have said, they had the kinds of strange bends that his mind takes, the being stuck in a moment, being horrified by some image that recurs in his life back here. If Garland had not had Father Connor and Curtis Mallard, and had not had a community that tolerated him in some way, sold him the buses cheap, he could've been at that hospital. What I was struck by is that the stories of those men in there, they need to be told, and I think Garland's voice is a voice that needed to be heard. It's like if you have a pillow, and if you push it down over here, the force is going to push it up over there. Voices get repressed in our culture (and certainly people don't want to hear the voices of vets) but if there are storytellers listening for the voices, then those voices are

going to rise up. If there's an open well and you have the water pressure coming down over here, then the water's going to come up out of the well. So that's my image. I was just stunned to see how I could've edited Garland's voice out of there because I didn't know any of that stuff. No one in my family was in the First World War, the Second World War, the Korean War, the Vietnam War. It's not like I have those stories; they're not stories that I have wanted to read.

So where did Garland come from then?

Well, I think he came from that water table, that storage table that's down there somehow! I must say that when Garland's journal started to become important, then I realized that the journal was going to have to be in there. And then I started thinking, "where am I going to get it? Well, I'm going to have to write it," and that was a bit daunting. To write what someone would be thinking is one level, but to go into what they would be writing, and to already know that it was charged in this way—I felt like I hadn't signed on for that. But there wasn't any way I could get around it.

Several of the characters in the novel seem to have a conflicted relationship with their home region. Nancy Catherine has left it and seems to find it oppressive when she returns, Lawanda describes the mountains at some point as almost walling her in. Do the sentiments of those characters reflect in any way your relationship to Appalachia?

As far as those two characters go, Nancy Catherine's feelings are to some degree projections of what happened to her as a child there, and Lawanda is of the age where nature propels you forth. I certainly felt some of what Lawanda feels at that age. I wanted to go away, at one point I wanted to go away to high school. I didn't know anybody who had done that, but I brought it up, and it didn't fly. When I did leave, I wanted to go directly to Columbia and New York. So I had that feeling of being walled-in, in a way. I think that's really very much a developmental thing, that you do need to go, and whether you come back or not, you need to have that experience to ever see your place and your ties to it. So I think I certainly had Lawanda's feelings and experiences.

But I feel double-minded now, I guess, because I love to go and be in the mountains, but it's now a place I could live with the work I do. I'm a migrant worker, you know; I work in schools. And I have to be able to get to Louisville; I have to be able to get places that will support my work, and I couldn't do that from there. There

are a lot of things living here that I miss from the mountains, and there are a lot of things that if I lived there, I would miss about being in a different sort of place. So I have both kinds of feelings.

I went from my hometown in Kentucky to Centre [College in Danville, Kentucky] and then I went to Arkansas and then I went to Indiana. At Centre I was writing poems about medieval monks, and at Arkansas I forget what I was writing about but it was fairly abstract, and I got to Indiana and I still was trying to speak in a poetry voice. I was trying to conjure one, and it was a male voice from somewhere else. Serious poets were men. This was before women's studies, before I had ever heard of women's studies. Books by women you had to find out about by yourself. Then I heard this poet from Ohio read a poem about a field of corn, his grandparents' land, and I thought, "you can write about stuff you *know*? You can write about where you're from?" I thought, "well if he can do it, I can do it!"

In fact, I had kept notes in my journals about things my grandmother had said because I loved the language. But having been brought up during the war on poverty, when you were labeled as being from an area not only economically deprived, but culturally deprived, I felt very much that I needed to sound like I was from somewhere else. Once I succeeded at that, then I had to really struggle to sound like where I was from. I just saw a book in the library the other day that's a tape set about getting rid of your original accent, for Americans. I was horrified! I thought, "if I checked this out and ran it over, how much would it cost me?" I think that's so destructive, like cutting a singer's throat!

How do you feel that being from Appalachia has shaped who you are?

I can't separate where I'm from from my family. I lived in the same small town with all four of my grandparents, so I heard those voices, I heard their stories, I had that sense of going back farther in time. Virginia Woolf talks about digging out caves behind your characters, and I feel that where I grew up did that for me, for the characters in my own life. Because I heard my grandparents talk about my parents when they were children. I saw my aunts and uncles as brother and sister to my parents. I heard the stories of my community.

The southern love of good talk and the mountains' insistence on relating everything by story come together in the southern mountains. It's really intense. You ask directions, you get a story.

And so everything is related to everything else, nothing is just on the left-hand side! Forget it if you think they're just gonna tell you you've gone too far and turn around! Sometimes you think you're not going to have any time to go anywhere by the time you find out how to get there! That is absolutely wonderful and can drive you crazy. You're always so-and-so's grandchild or so-and-so's little sister . . . everything is related. It's a wonderful school for a writer, to try to follow those threads. And also, to try to see where an individual voice gets heard, where an individual voice comes from in all of this web of words and points of view and notions of who we are and why. This is a truism, but it turned out that what I went seeking, I had all the time. I just had no regard for it. I didn't recognize it. That was a life lesson.