

## **Words, Actions, and “Resurrecting Home”: the Fiction of Denise Giardina and the Ethical Imperative**

by Sylvia Bailey Shurbutt

“There is a tendency in our society,” writes West Virginia novelist Denise Giardina, “to make clear distinctions between right and wrong . . . . The overly simplistic way in which we often raise children and impart values does not always allow for the complexity of the human condition and the difficult decisions we must all confront in our lives” (Feeley 5). Few writers, Appalachian or otherwise, have been as concerned as Giardina with the moral complexities that obstruct the intellectual and ethical roads we travel, and few Appalachian storytellers have been as consistently concerned as she to direct those winding roads through the hills and hollers of the region she calls home. “Sin and redemption, moral choices, the nature of good and evil,” Giardina has asserted, are her themes. “I try to explore,” she continues, “the human side of evil and the flawed aspects of good and see [within both] moral complexity” (Feeley 6).

Whether she carries her readers back to the Seventeenth Century (as she does through the time-travel fantasy of her latest novel *Fallam’s Secret*), to the coal fields of West Virginia to relive the mine labor wars of the first half of the Twentieth Century (as she does in *Storming Heaven* and *The Unquiet Earth*), to the blood-drenched battlefields of Agincourt and Shrewsbury (as in *Good King Harry*), or to the Nazis Holocaust of *Saints and Villains*, Denise Giardina is never far afield from the central moral imperative of her canon: to explore the “fearful symmetry” and puzzling duality of this complex moral universe, where we each so exquisitely fumble and flounder through life. In every instance, as we travel in our imaginations through the pages of her stories, no matter how far from home she takes us, we find that those fictional roads always carry us back to our own time and place so that we might, in some sense, “resurrect home” and attempt to heal both our own disheveled lives and the environmental and human circumstances that plague us. This essay will explore the “ethical imperative” of Denise Giardina’s stories as she unfolds a moral landscape that challenges us to question and to comprehend those “circumstances” but also invites us to construct a response for healing.

“I am an Appalachian writer,” Giardina writes in *Contemporary Authors (CA)*, “interested in the affinities between Appalachia and other exploited places . . . .” She adds, “I am also interested in writing that includes the political and spiritual dimen-

sions of life and am not much interested in fiction that pretends these areas do not exist” (276). The fiction of Giardina originates from the very core and heart of the mountains, all the way back to the Black Wolf Coal Camp in McDowell County, West Virginia, where she grew up in the 1950s and early '60s. Black Wolf was meager at best, writes Giardina: “Ten houses, little boxes once painted white but now grey with coal dust. A hulk of a company store . . . owned by Nassau Coal Company, bought out by Page, bought out by Pocy Fuel, bought out by Consol, surface acreage held in fief to Pocahontas Land, owned by N&W” (“No Scapin” 130).

The childhood impressions of Black Wolf would always linger in the writer’s consciousness of Denise Giardina. She recalls in “No Scapin the Booger Man”: “In Black Wolf I grew so intimate with death and decay that even now they feel like home to me. Andy Wyatt fell on a conveyor belt in the mine and was crushed, Douglas Finley was shot by his daddy, the jobs were gone, the children’s teeth rotted black in their gums, Uncle Brigham moved to Richmond and drank himself to death, we left Black Wolf and the houses were torn down behind us” (130). Thus the motif of “resurrecting home” would become a central issue in the adult perceptions of Giardina. “The remainder of my life” she writes, “has been searching for home, a search complicated by the fear that I would despise it if I found it” (130).

Almost all of Giardina’s West Virginia kin were associated in some form with the coal mines. Her grandfather was a miner, as well as uncles on both sides of the family; her father was a low-level mine company manager, while her mother was a nurse. Growing up in Appalachia, Giardina has said, “is what made me a writer—staying here is what keeps me the kind of writer I want to be” (Boudreau 10). In Black Wolf, Giardina not only developed her social consciousness but was drawn to the storytelling traditions of her community and to the oral heritage of mountain folk. She kept this love of language with her through college at West Virginia Wesleyan, where she received a degree in history in 1973, and through graduate school at Virginia Theological Seminary, after which she was ordained an Episcopal deacon in 1979. Yet the very education that provided for her the tools to look critically at the world around her also caused a degree of estrangement. “The innocence I had lost when I obtained my education was irretrievable,” she writes, “and I had become as alien as the mythical Hapsburgs in my Welch apartment building. On the other hand, I felt equally estranged from mainstream America” (“No Scapin” 130).

The social consciousness that Giardina grew into as a young adult was often in conflict with the authorities around her, and in 1980, after a dispute with church authorities over her criticisms of the coal companies, she left the church to work in Washington. There she began her first novel *Good King Harry* (1984), a fictionalized biography of Henry V and a book which explores the making of a prince, the horrors of war, and the uses and misuses of power. By the time *Harry* was completed, she had returned to West Virginia to take a job as a congressional aide in Charleston and to write; and after studying fiction writing with novelist Laurel Goldman at Duke, she settled into a teaching position at West Virginia State University, where today she teaches writing and literature and where she continues to write a quality of prose that challenges our social and moral consciousness as well as entertains and enriches us. Giardina’s activism, however, goes beyond her writing, as evidenced in her candidacy for governor of West Virginia in the 2000 election, running against and defeated by Bob Wise, who chose not to seek a second term in 2004 because of ethics charges. Giardina’s Mountain Party campaign brought to the attention of the State and the region a host of issues, including unfair taxation, corporate favoritism, timber misregulation, and mountain-top removal—the latter issue figuring prominently in her prose.

Giardina is fascinated by history, principally those “nooks and crannies” of historical record that reflect an ethical question; she is also interested in how historical particulars shape individuality. In her coal mining series, *Storming Heaven* (1987) and *The Unquiet Earth* (1992), she chronicles a family and a community as they become involved in the 1921 Battle of Blair Mountain and the 1972 Buffalo Creek disaster. Both historical incidents allow Giardina to explore a range of characters and the moral dilemmas they encounter as they participate in these events. The Blair Mountain debacle in *Storming Heaven*, where United States troops are pitted against their own citizens, follows the conflict between miners and labor unions and mine owners and the U.S. government over a twenty-year period, as seen through the eyes of a coal miner’s wife (Rosa Angelelli), a nurse (Carrie Bishop), a union organizer (Rondal Lloyd), and a social activist (C. J. Marcum). These first person accounts bring a sense of immediacy to the story, personalizing the narrative for the reader. Giardina has said, “I like to write in first person. I want the reader to live inside the skin of the characters. This is especially important since we live in a time when it is fashionable to be uninvolved in the lives and problems of other people” (CA 276).

*The Unquiet Earth* continues the saga of this Justice County, West Virginia, family and their veneration for the land and the people of Appalachia—their story culminating in the catastrophic accident of the slate dam disaster that killed a hundred and twenty-five people as a wall of water tore through a mountain community on February 26, 1972. In these two novels it is the destruction of both the earth and the people that portend disaster and posit Giardina’s moral imperative. Dillon Freeman, Carrie Bishop’s son, muses at the beginning of *The Unquiet Earth* that in the mountains, “we are tied to kin and land as closely as any people ever were” (17). Dillon’s daughter Jackie echoes her father’s sentiments long years later when she says, “I crave the mountains. They invade my dreams, and so do my kin, living and dead” (250). The principal point that Giardina tries to make through these characters that live so closely to the earth and to each other is that the heaven or hell that we construct through our interactions with each other and with our environment is to be found in this world alone, not the next. “Hit’s this here,” Rondal Lloyd says to Carrie Bishop the night before they will face the guns of government troops on Blair Mountain; “Heaven is this here. Hit’s all these men together, and you, and knowing this here is the way we was meant to do. But it only lasts a minute. Then hit’s gone” (262).

Without doubt, Giardina’s finest example of fiction writing is *Saints and Villains*, the complex story of German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who forfeited his life in 1944, in a failed plot to bring Hitler’s villainy and the war to an end. Bonhoeffer’s *Ethics* was the impetus for Giardina’s telling his story, particularly the theologian’s words: “The villain and the saint emerge from primeval depths and by their appearance they tear open the infernal or the divine abyss from which they come and enable us to see for a moment into mysteries of which we had never dreamed” (qtd. in “Denise Giardina” 1). In her novel, Giardina explores the most fundamental questions about the nature of good and evil, right and wrong, morality and immorality—utilizing an episode in the Twentieth Century when these issues faced the whole of the Western world in the most horrific and tragic circumstance of our time: Hitler’s rise to power and the ensuing Holocaust. To construct a credible and organic story from such an epic event, Giardina chose to follow the career of a young German theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer; and to clarify her points, she also follows the jaded career of a young Nazi, Alois Bauer, Bonhoeffer’s “doppelganger” or moral antithesis. In order to provide a narrative structure that likewise complements her ideas, she organizes the story around the *Mass in C Minor* by Mozart.

Giardina carefully begins the book with “Program Notes,” where she sets forth the musical motif in the story. Mozart’s unfinished mass causes a scandal when first performed, its “flamboyance and eroticism” too profane to reconcile with the sacred (1). The work is never completed by the brilliant but flawed genius, but it is a sublime musical masterpiece that captures the imagination of many—including Bonhoeffer, who originally had hoped to become a classical musician, and Bauer, the SS trooper, associate of Himmler, devotee of Hitler, and nemesis of Bonhoeffer throughout the story, a man obsessed with the mass. At the end of the novel, in a poignant confrontation between the two men, Bauer tells Bonhoeffer that to save his own skin Bauer has become an informant to the Allies, and he points out to the condemned theologian that he has saved perhaps far more Jews from death than Bonhoeffer and will be immensely more useful to the Allied Forces than any of the failed plotters.

Bauer also tells the protagonist that he has taken from the Prussian State Library the original manuscript of Mozart’s *Mass in C Minor* (which did indeed disappear during the war and has never been recovered). Giardina makes clear by the end of *Saints and Villains* that though both Mozart and Bonhoeffer are frail, flawed human beings unable to complete their work successfully, they are nonetheless able to transcend their human failure. Giardina is intrigued by an age-old conundrum of human nature, a concept that can be traced back to the ancient Greeks and poignantly articulated by the poet William Blake: that the two sides of human nature, the darkly fearsome Dionysian and the beautifully benign Apollonian, may both be interfaced within the same person. In a universe where the duplicity of good and evil is interwoven, a universe created by a God whom Nietzsche called “beyond good and evil”—within such a cosmic scheme one can find the potential for both saint and sinner within the fabric of any single individual.

Giardina portrays Bonhoeffer as a man with an extraordinary intellect but without the gift of imagination, intuition, or profound emotion (a metaphor himself for both the Germany that conspired with Hitler in the Holocaust and the Western World that, for a time, conspired to ignore the gathering storm). As a young boy, Bonhoeffer studies music, hoping to become a concert pianist. He selects the *Kyrie* from the Mozart mass to play at his audition for one of Europe’s great teachers, Leonid Kreuzer. When he is finished, Kreuzer tells the young artist: “There is talent. Ja. Competency. But interpretation— . . . What is missing, training cannot provide. . . . His is not the gift of interpretation” (8). With this, young Dietrich tells his family that he will give up music.

Bonhoeffer’s relationship with the two women in the novel, the fictional Elizabeth Hildebrandt<sup>1</sup> and the real-life Maria von Wedemeyer, reveals a great deal about his personality and failings. Elizabeth, a Jew, is Bonhoeffer’s first love, and yet he loses her, in great part because of his inability to reveal his emotions and to connect with her. Elizabeth is Giardina’s moral gage for Bonhoeffer. She is far braver than he, committed from the first and ready to lay down her life to help her people. Her commitment and fortitude pale his, and her blame haunts him and ultimately compels him to become a better human being. It is principally for Elizabeth, who helps him recognize his failings, that Bonhoeffer does penance by refusing to remain safe in England or to escape from prison when he has the opportunity. Yet Elizabeth’s moral superiority dooms their relationship.

In much the same way, Giardina utilizes Maria, to whom Bonhoeffer was later engaged. At times, he is condescending to both women, but particularly to Maria, who is much younger than he. He denigrates her admiration for the romantic poet Rilke and advises her to study the austere philosopher Kierkegaard, whom he him-

self admires. Bonhoeffer's coldness and dearth of emotion as he interacts with the women in his life are metaphors for his spiritual life, for religious principle, as Giardina makes clear, must be more than intellectual abstraction—one must act on one's principles. Bonhoeffer's failure to act saddles him with profound guilt in a number of episodes in the narrative; for example, he feels himself a moral failure when he declines to officiate at the Jewish funeral of his twin sister Sabine's father-in-law, an action that he knows to be "politically correct" at the time for a German clergyman yet cowardly. His difficulty in reconciling being a man of God and at the same time a participant in a plot to assassinate the Führer is another example of his equivocation and understandable doubt.

As with any historical novel, there is in *Saints and Villains* an intriguing blending of nonfiction and conjured characters. Giardina's selection of characters and events serves the organic quality of the story. For example, Bishop George Bell, Bonhoeffer's friend and clerical associate in Britain, helps Bonhoeffer in his struggle with the German Church, which is slowly subdued and dominated by Nazis. Bell supports Bonhoeffer in his effort to block the German Reich faction of the Church from its seat during the International Ecumenical Conference of 1934, but more important, he is one of the contacts a decade later to pass on information to the British government for the plotters planning to assassinate Hitler. Bell also functions in the narrative to introduce Bonhoeffer to Tom (T. S.) Eliot, whose conversations with Bonhoeffer, as Giardina portrays in the novel, help Eliot clarify and shape his play, *Murder in the Cathedral*. The connection between Eliot's play and the plot of *Saints and Villains* presents obvious irony for Giardina: both deal with plots to assassinate a leader, but in the case of Thomas Becket, the murdered bishop is a saint, while, of course, Hitler is a profound villain. In "A Conversation with Denise Giardina," the author clarifies how she reconciles the imaginative with the historical in this and other episodes of *Saints and Villains*. Her comment gives the critic insight into her creative and her thinking processes:

While we don't know for sure if T. S. Eliot and Bonhoeffer actually met, we do know that Bishop Bell was Eliot's patron and Bonhoeffer's friend. We also know that Eliot was with Bell at the Swedish conference that Bonhoeffer attended. . . . How might meeting someone like Bonhoeffer have influenced Eliot's writing of *Murder in the Cathedral* which is the story of a famous religious martyr? Fiction gives us a chance to raise these important 'what if' questions and explore the complexity of the human condition. (3)

Another character to serve Giardina's narrative is Falk Harnack, the communist student whom Bonhoeffer saves when SS troops break up a student drama production early in the story. Later Harnack plays a pivotal role in linking the Abwehr assassination conspirators to the student White Rose League and exposing their plot to kill the Führer. Finally, the fictional character Fred Bishop allows Giardina to connect the epic tragedy of the Holocaust with an American tragedy (the Hawks Nest Industrial Disaster at Gauley Mountain) and thus further universalize the story. While a student studying in New York, Bonhoeffer forms a friendship with Bishop, an African American labor activist. The two young men meet in Harlem, and Bonhoeffer accompanies Bishop on his work among the African American miners of West Virginia. Bishop's unambiguous commitment to his cause to help the exploited miners is contrasted with the more nominal, superficial commitment of Bonhoeffer, and it is clear that Bishop is willing to give his life for what he believes, which Bonhoeffer is not yet able to do. It is also clear that Giardina's parallel between events in Germany leading up to the

Holocaust and the treatment of African Americans in this country is meant to invite us to ponder the nature and universality of genocide. What happened in the German collective conscience in the 1930s, culminating in such an horrific event as the Holocaust? How can such a catastrophic event occur? Why did Western governments sit by idly without protest while Jews were being objectified, branded as subhuman, and the road to genocide paved? How could good German folk participate in Hitler’s crimes; indeed, how can any nation be complicit in falling down the path to an illegal and unjustified war?

Each of us, according to Giardina, have within the potential for great good and great evil. There is only a thin red line that separates the villain from the saint. Thus the duplicity of good and evil in a fallen world is sometimes difficult to discern or comprehend, as is the good or evil within individuals. Shakespeare understood this complexity when he created a character like Iago, who twisted the good and the bad to suit his own personal, distorted vision. Likewise, the “stage was set” in Germany long before Dietrich Bonhoeffer touched the piano keys to play Mozart’s *Mass in C Minor* or Adolf Hitler set pen to paper to write *Mein Kampf*. Indeed, the stage is set within each of us for national as well as personal tragedy if we slip into nominalism, if we are too timid “to act” when called upon or too callous to listen to that moral voice or compass within our deepest, most intuitive self.

---

## Works Cited

- Boudreau, Tim. “Fighting Back: Denise Giardina Talks about *Storming Heaven*.” *Now and Then*. Spring 1988: 9-10.
- Contemporary Authors, New Revised Series*. Vol. 72. Detroit: Gale Research Company.
- “Denise Giardina.” Annie Merner Pfeiffer Library, West Virginia Wesleyan College. <[http://www.wvwc.edu/lib/wv\\_authors/authors/a\\_giardina.htm](http://www.wvwc.edu/lib/wv_authors/authors/a_giardina.htm)>
- Feeley, Kathleen. “A Conversation with Denise Giardina.” *Saints and Villains*. New York: Fawcett Books, 1998. 1-12.
- Giardina, Denise. *Fallam’s Secret*. NY: W. W. Norton & Company, 2003.
- . “No Scapin the Booger Man.” *Bloodroot: Reflections on Place by Appalachian Women Writers*. Joyce Dyer, Ed. Lexington: The U of Kentucky P, 1998.
- . *Saints and Villains*. New York: Fawcett Books, 1998.
- . *Storming Heaven*. New York: Ivy Books, 1987.
- . *The Unquiet Earth*. New York: Ivy Books, 1992.

---

## Endnotes

1. While Elizabeth is a fictional creation who serves the narrative and facilitates Giardina’s exploration of Bonhoeffer’s moral character, she is an interesting fictional composite. Giardina explains in “A Conversation with Denise Giardina” that she knew Bonhoeffer had “a girlfriend and while they might not have been officially engaged, they had an ‘understanding’ though they eventually broke off their relationship” (2). Giardina eventually learned that the woman’s name was Elizabeth. She further explains that Elizabeth is a “composite character drawn from many sources”—a Jewish friend of Bonhoeffer’s sister as well as a personal friend whom Bonhoeffer helped escape from Nazi Germany (6-7).

---

## Acknowledgment

The Author wishes to thank the West Virginia Humanities Council for funding the research and writing of this article.