

Stories from coal mining towns in Appalachia

An interview with author Ruth White, author of *Little Audrey*

Jane Stimmen
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Author Ruth White, 1997 recipient of the Newberry Honor for *Belle Prater's Boy*, often deals in her books with the lives of poor and working class children living in the coal mining towns of Appalachia in the 1950s. Her work is certainly influenced by her own life experiences, especially so in her most recent offering, *Little Audrey*).

A review on the WSWWS commented: "Set in the coal town of Jewell Valley, Virginia, in 1948, *Little Audrey* deals forthrightly with the effects of poverty, illness and drunkenness. It also paints a starkly different picture from that which is often presented of the post-war years. This narrative makes clear that not all communities experienced an economic boom."

A *New York Times* reviewer, writing about *Belle Prater's Boy* in 1996, observed: "Young-adult fiction is a slippery genre. Virtually no subject is considered off-limits, yet there are restrictions on the way those subjects can be conveyed. As a result, nuance is sometimes sacrificed in the name of clarity, and the books come off as literal, earnest and deadly. It takes a writer of real lyricism and energy to tell a good young-adult story, and Ruth White is one."

Reading, education and an appreciation for the shared humanity of the characters figure prominently in White's writing.

Her realistic view of both the experiences of the poor in general and of poor and working class children in particular is unusual in the world of literature. Always sympathetic, never given to sappiness and deeply honest, her works offer a clear window into the lives of people very often disregarded. Unlike many portrayals of the working classes, White's characters are fully drawn in their own right—not taken as the subjects for improvement or pity by more moneyed people.

I recently had an opportunity to interview Ms. White by email. The following is an edited version of the exchange.

Jane Stimmen: You grew up poor, but with parents who had definite interests in literature, which they passed along to you

and your sisters. What kind of educational opportunities were available to you in Appalachia? What were the highest levels of education completed by your parents?

Ruth White: Yes, we were very poor, and I always wondered where my dad picked up his love of books. I know that mom's Uncle Hannibal Compton was an educated man, and had a whole library which she was free to use. Growing up on the top of Compton Mountain [in Virginia], which was a desolate place, mom filled the empty hours reading books from her uncle's library.

Both mom and dad completed eighth grade.

I stayed with an aunt and uncle when I was a teenager, and finished school at Grundy High School in southwest Virginia. My teachers encouraged me to go to college, and I received a small scholarship from a local women's club. With that, a government grant, some help from my church and work scholarships, I managed to get through Montreat-Anderson Junior College in Black Mountain, North Carolina, where I met my husband. After my marriage, I finished my last two years at Pfeiffer College in Misenheimer, North Carolina.

JS: Do you see many educational opportunities in the area now? How are issues of war and the economic crisis going to affect this, and how have they?

RW: I don't visit the area much anymore, but I still have old friends and a few relatives there. From what I see, the educational opportunities are much improved over my day. There are community colleges there now, and a few state-of-the-art schools, some of which I have visited to talk to the students about my books.

The coal mining industry affects this area more than anything else. Grundy was a booming town of about eight thousand people in the 1950s when the local mines were working at full capacity. Today many of the mines are depleted, and the population is around one thousand people.

Incidentally, Grundy has been in the news lately for the unprecedented operation of moving the whole business area of the town to higher ground. Poor mining procedures, such as strip mining, have brought flooding into the area, which was not seen before the fifties. Wal-Mart has moved in and will be

the center of the new town.

I don't know, specifically, how the wars or the economic crisis have affected the area. But I imagine this very poor (and Republican) part of the country is even poorer, as most of us are. I don't think they see the connection between George W. Bush's policies and the erosion of our standard of life.

JS: What is your view of education in Appalachia? In the country? What could be done to improve things for poor children?

RW: I think I received a surprisingly good basic education in the small country schools of southwest Virginia. I had excellent, caring teachers. But the elementary schools I attended had no running water or bathrooms, no central heat, no lunchroom or sports programs. They were just small three or four room schools where we learned the basics. Yes, we still learned, even under the worst conditions, but it was terribly unfair. I know now that more affluent neighborhoods in our country, even in our own state, had all the amenities that were available at that time.

JS: It can be said that the inequalities are still there—in some cases more dramatically than others. What do you see as a solution to this?

RW: I don't know if the inequalities are still there, as I am involved in the public schools only by visiting two or three per year. What I have seen is a great improvement over the schools I grew up with and also the schools in which I taught in the 1960s and '70s. If there are inequalities it is shameful in a country as rich as ours. Nothing is more important than educating children from all socioeconomic backgrounds, and they should all have equal opportunities in the schools.

I do see evidence every day that the priorities of our government are often misplaced. When I see bank CEOs openly stealing money which was directed at propping up our economy, I am outraged. But our government handed our money over to these people with no strings attached, and I wonder if anybody in power knows the meaning of accountability, of integrity, of ethics. And I think of how many schools and how many educational programs this stolen money could have been used for.

JS: You have spoken about your writing process in previous interviews—most notably about *Belle Prater's Boy*, which you noted had started out as a comedy and then went in its own direction. Given your experience with that book (as well as others), would you consider that there are some things which can only be or best be expressed in certain ways, i.e., through fiction, the plastic arts, etc.?

RW: Literature is the only creative art about which I feel qualified to have an opinion. Being a reader and writer most all of my life, I have come to believe that the story is the most important mirror through which we see ourselves and our society. Writing can also be catharsis for the writer, as it has certainly been for me.

JS: You have mentioned that your first book was written to

fill a need—that there was a young black girl in one of your classes who could find nothing "for her." What needs do you see as waiting to be filled now?

RW: I reach out to poor children in our society, because I feel they want and need stories about characters they can identify with. They want role models. They want to see people like themselves overcoming adversity, and succeeding. They want to know what opportunities are out there waiting for them. They want to know about dating, about love and marriage, about making choices for themselves instead of falling into generational patterns.

JS: Where do you see the greatest strengths in children's literature today? The weakest areas? To whom do you turn for examples?

RW: I have read all of Lois Lowry's books and all of Katherine Paterson's. I believe they are the most outstanding writers for children in the last 20-25 years. More contemporary voices are Kate DiCamillo and Laurie Halse Anderson, whose books, I think, are exceptional. But my role models are actually writers for adults—Lee Smith, in particular. I think she is about the finest writer in America today. I suppose I try to emulate Lee Smith, Harper Lee, Carson McCullers and Willa Cather.

I am not sure I am qualified to say what are the weaknesses and strengths in children's literature today. I just know that I see many good books out there, more than ever before, and many talented young writers. Their stories cover a wide range of subjects, and children should have no problem finding literary characters to identify with.

JS: How do you think early exposure to books affected you? What do you think would have been the course of your life without such exposure?

RW: I have always known that books saved me from the typical life of a woman in Appalachia at that time. Without them, I probably would have married a coal miner at a very young age, and had several children. Reading introduced me to a wider world, to bigger ideas and other ways of life. Reading also inspired a longing in me to want to write books myself.

JS: Thank you.



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