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## JAMES STILL

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### Daring to Look in the Well

Born in Lafayette, Alabama, in 1906, James Still came to be known, along with Jesse Stuart, his classmate at Lincoln Memorial University, and Harriette Arnow, as one of Kentucky's greatest Appalachian writers. For nearly seventy years, from 1932 until his death in 2001, Still lived in Knott County, Kentucky, where he was associated with the Hindman Settlement School, first as its librarian and later as its writer in residence. He earned his B.A. at Lincoln Memorial in 1929, his M.A. at Vanderbilt in 1930, and his M.S. in library science from the University of Illinois in 1931. Drafted into the military during World War II at the age of thirty-six, he served in the U.S. Army Air Force from 1942 through 1945.

From the beginning of his literary career Still established himself as a master of a variety of genres. His early poems and stories were printed in such prestigious national magazines and journals as *Saturday Review*, *Poetry*, *Sewanee Review*, *New*

*Republic, Atlantic, Yale Review, and Saturday Evening Post.* His first book, a collection of poems titled *Hounds on the Mountain*, was published by the Viking Press in 1937. His best-known novel, *River of Earth*, which shared the Southern Authors Award with Thomas Wolfe's *You Can't Go Home Again*, appeared in 1940, to be followed the next year by his first collection of short stories, *On Troublesome Creek*. "Bat Flight" won an O. Henry Memorial Award in 1939, and Still received Guggenheim fellowships in 1941 and 1946, as well as a National Institute and American Academy of Arts and Letters Award in 1947. Despite such early success he did not publish another book between 1941 and 1974, though he continued to place stories and poems in major periodicals, with three stories reprinted in *Best American Short Stories* for 1946, 1950, and 1952.

The 1970s brought renewed attention to Still's writing, though that attention was more regional than national. In 1974 and 1975 he published two children's books, first *Way Down Yonder on Troublesome Creek: Appalachian Riddles and Rusties* and then *The Wolfpen Rusties: Appalachian Riddles and Gee-Haw Whimmy-Diddles*. A collection of stories, *Pattern of a Man and Other Stories*, appeared in 1976 from Gnomon Press. *Jack and the Wonder Beans*, a children's book based on a Jack tale, and *Sporty Creek*, a novel presented as a cycle of stories, followed in 1977, the latter winning the Weatherford Award in 1978. A third collection of stories, *The Run for the Elbertas*, mainly reprinted material that had appeared in earlier books.

Still's reputation as one of the most revered twentieth-century Appalachian writers grew throughout the 1980s and 1990s with the appearance of *The Wolfpen Poems* (1986) and *The Wolfpen Notebooks* (1991); with his appointment as Kentucky's poet laureate from 1995 to 1997; and with his receipt of a Special Achievement Award from the Fellowship of Southern Writers in 1997. The posthumous publication of *From the Mountain, from the Valley: New and Collected Poems* (2001) has ensured that interest in Still's work will be sustained well into the twenty-first century.

## PUBLICATIONS

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**Poetry:** *From the Mountain, from the Valley: New and Collected Poems* (2001), *The Wolfpen Poems* (1986), *Hounds on the Mountain* (1937). **Short Story Collections:** *The Run for the Elbertas* (1980), *Pattern of a Man and Other Stories* (1976), *On Troublesome Creek* (1941). **Novels:** *Sporty Creek: A Novel about an Appalachian Boyhood* (1977), *River of Earth* (1940). **Books for Children:** *An Appalachian Mother Goose* (1998), *Jack and the Wonder Beans* (1977), *The Wolfpen Rusties: Appalachian Riddles and Gee-Haw Whimmy-Diddles* (1975), *Way Down Yonder on Troublesome Creek: Appalachian Riddles and Rusties* (1974). **Nonfiction:** *The Wolfpen Notebooks: A Record of Appalachian Life* (1991).

## Jim Wayne Miller Interviews James Still (1983)

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**JWM:** During the month of August 1983 at Yaddo I had the opportunity to converse with James Still on a daily basis, so what I'm doing here this evening is a continuation of that conversation. I recently came across an interesting statement by Saul Bellow, Jim. He said that "a writer is a reader who has been moved to emulation." How did you begin writing?

**JS:** I wish I remembered and could tell you. I don't think I began exactly. I never had any thought of being a writer. I didn't know what it meant, to tell the truth. I do recall writing a little poem once, which, honestly, is not too bad. I was fourteen. I pitched a little tent—you know you have to have romantic associations with the poem—I pitched a little tent in the yard, and I went into that tent and wrote this little verse. I still know the poem now—I won't say it, I assure you. But I'm still astonished when I see this little verse. I do intend to publish it some day to show how far you can come from something of that sort.

**JWM:** Well, that Bellow statement suggests that there's some kind of connection between reading and writing. What sort of things did you read?

**JS:** We had no books in our home. Well, there was the Bible, of course, which nobody was reading. I tried to read it once, but I got stopped in the "begats." My father was a veterinarian, that is, a horse doctor, a man with no formal training at all. We had one volume called *The Anatomy of the*

*Horse*, which wasn't very entertaining. And we had another one which was called *The Palaces of Sin, or The Devil in Society* and which had to do with a man inheriting a million dollars and going to Washington, D.C., where he observed the wicked life that was being led by the congressmen and senators. It seemed that these people played cards and they also drank gin. Now I didn't know what gin was. I knew all about liquor, but I thought gin must be pretty bad. Then there was one more book. It was called *The Cyclopedia of Universal Knowledge*. It was a very large book. I remember that one of the backs was torn off. But it had a great many things in it, including how to play all kinds of games, even the game of hoyle. There were about twenty poems—great poems by Keats, Shelley, and so on. I memorized those. And I knew I was surely the only person in my area who knew twenty words of Arabic when I was eight years old. I also knew maybe twenty-five words from various languages, how to say hello, good morning, and so on. I learned from that book how to prune fruit trees, how to write business letters. And there was a little bit on physics and on the chemistry of that day.

**JWM:** Did you get any urgings or guidance from your parents as to what you ought to be?

**JS:** None. Well, my father wanted me to be a lawyer. I'm sure he did, though he never said it, because he dragged me around to every lawyer in the county and anywhere else. I was always being introduced to lawyers and judges. And when the governor came to town, he pushed me through the crowd to shake hands with him. But I never thought of being a lawyer. That was nothing I wanted to do. My father never urged me toward anything. In fact, I don't recall my parents ever asking me if my homework was done. I don't think we did homework in those days. I carried my books home every night and then carried them back to school, but I don't think I ever opened them. I don't recall that I did. Anyway, they were sort of dull. However, in time I came across other books—Tom Swift books and Tom Slade books. I didn't care for them really. We subscribed to the *Country Gentleman*, and Zane Grey had serialized novels in it. But I didn't like them. I don't know how I learned so early, but anyway I didn't care for them at all. But one day we moved at last to a little town called Shawmut, and in one corner of a building there was a small library. There was an elderly lady who took care of the library, but she would never let you touch the books; she would go bring you one. And one day she kept bringing books and I didn't want to read them—I didn't like them—so she told me to go look for myself. So I went back, and I found a book called *Father Goriot* by Balzac—I'd never heard of him. It had no pictures in it

and had very small print and looked very unpromising, but I took it home. And that night I read this book. I don't know that I read all night, but I read a long time. That was my first approach to literature. And I never turned back. After that I read adult books when I could get them. I think the only other book I read about that time was *Treasure Island*, which is a children's book and an adult book as well. I looked at it again not long ago, and I think it is still a classic, a very fine book.

**JWM:** Now this town you mentioned, Shawmut, where you encountered the library and the works of Balzac, was in Alabama?

**JS:** Yes, it was.

**JWM:** From there you came up to Lincoln Memorial University in Tennessee.

**JS:** Well, not from there. We moved again.

**JWM:** But from the state of Alabama you came to Lincoln Memorial?

**JS:** I did. I graduated from high school there in Fairfax, Alabama, and then I went up to LMU. The way I happened to get there was we had a substitute teacher, or rather, one of the teachers left school and they hired a man through a teachers' agency. All my teachers were women—well, I recall one who wasn't—all the way through school until this man. And one day he said his father was dean of a school in Tennessee and he left some catalogues on his desk if anybody wanted one. I seemed to be the only person who wanted one. So I saw in reading it that they had work programs. And when I graduated, I went there. I didn't have any money, but I went. They didn't know what to do with me, but they kept me. I was very small—you wouldn't believe it. So they signed me up in the academy; they couldn't imagine I was college age.

**JWM:** Now, we're sitting here at a literary event. There's a writer here to be interviewed. What kind of literary events or literary influences did you encounter at Lincoln Memorial?

**JS:** None.

**JWM:** Well, you had access to a library there, I'm sure.

**JS:** Oh, yes, that was the main thing about that school, and it's the main thing about any school as far as I'm concerned. If you've got a good library, that's about all you need. Oh, it's good to have a few teachers to lead you and to direct you to the library where the information is. I think a teacher should just crack the door open. That's all you can hope to do. That's all I ever hoped to do when I tried to teach. I worked in the rock quarry in the afternoons and then in the evening as a janitor in the library. I was always

too tired to study. I didn't have time to study. I don't suppose I did very much. But I did have that library. As soon as it closed at nine o'clock, I locked the door, swept the floors, emptied the wastebaskets quickly. And then I had this marvelous library all to myself. Some nights I never left. I slept in the magazine room. Anyway, I was like a child in a candy store: I didn't know where to start eating. It was frustrating.

**JWM:** That was not your only college campus experience. What about the situation as you found it at Vanderbilt or later at Illinois?

**JS:** I think I should mention, before I go on, Harry Harrison Kroll, who was there at LMU as a teacher. I did have a couple of classes under him. I sat in his classes anyway. One was called the teaching of composition. We just wrote compositions: that's all we did, one a day. And I had a Shakespeare class. We would read the parts in class. I usually would sit back with my book and another book inside of it. Anyway, I tried to make up for that later.

**JWM:** There were some connections, of course, between Harry Harrison Kroll and some of those teachers at Vanderbilt. Did you encounter any different kind of literary scene at Vanderbilt when you were there?

**JS:** Oh, yes, it was quite different. Well, I don't want to give the wrong idea about Lincoln Memorial. I'm sure it's greatly improved since my day: they had nowhere else to go. I think it's a standard school nowadays, like any other. And I appreciated the chance to be there. I went with nothing and came away with a little bit more than that. But anyway, I went to Vanderbilt to graduate school. I don't know why they let me in, because I didn't know anything except what I'd read. I had read madly for four years. As I look back, they were pretty good books. Even there, I wanted to write. I thought, then, I wanted to write things, and I did. There used to be Sunday School magazines—many of them that they gave out in church for children on Sundays. Many denominations had them. And so I wrote and, as we say, sold—for a dollar, two dollars, three dollars—little articles on various subjects. I don't know what they were about, but I do remember that I did it.

**JWM:** So you were already at that time behaving very much like a writer. How do you work now?

**JS:** I could say now that I don't. I will do anything to keep out of writing. I want to with all my heart, really, but it's very difficult to go to that desk, except when I get to working on something, say, a long piece. Some nights I can hardly wait for day so I can go back to work. But once it's finished, that's it. I'm through with it.