

# GREAT SMOKY MOUNTAINS Colloquy

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## Mary Noailles Murfree: The Prophetess of the Great Smoky Mountains

To genteel 19<sup>th</sup> century readers of the *Atlantic Monthly*, *Harper's*, *Century*, and the *Christian Union*, the name Charles Egbert Craddock evoked instant recognition and pleasurable anticipation. Favorably compared to Bret Harte and Sarah Orne Jewett, "that man Craddock" rode the crest of popular, post-Civil War American local-color literature.



Mary Noailles Murfree

No editor, especially Thomas Bailey Aldrich of the *Atlantic Monthly*, suspected that the "M." in correspondence ascetically signed "M. N. Murfree" that accompanied the handwritten stories stood for Mary. Imagine Aldrich's surprise in May, 1885, when a slight, gentle, and bookishly witty woman named Mary Noailles Murfree abruptly divulged that *she* was Charles Egbert Craddock. As the story goes, Aldrich pledged Mary to silence until the next evening, when her identity was revealed at a dinner for Boston's elite.

Murfree is Appalachia's first significant female writer. Over a fifty-year career, Mary Noailles Murfree (1850-1922) published fourteen novels and forty-five short stories set in the Appalachian Mountains, all but four of them set in her home state of Tennessee. No study of Appalachian literature nor bibliography of the Great Smoky Mountains is complete without examining Murfree's work, popularity, and widespread influence.

Murfree was born in 1850 near Murfreesboro, a town in middle Tennessee named for her great-grandfather. For fifteen years, from 1855 to 1870, the family spent summers at Beersheeba Springs, a popular resort for affluent southerners in the Cumberland Mountains. It was here that she gained firsthand knowledge of the characteristics, dress, speech, and customs of mountain people.

Mary and her sister Fanny also spent time in the Great Smoky Mountains, beginning with an extended visit to Montvale Springs in Blount County in the

(continued on page 2)



"Old Joel Quimbey," from  
*The Phantoms of Footbridge, and  
Other Stories*

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(Mary Noailles Murfree, continued)

fall of 1885. The grandeur of the landscape, the independence and self-sufficiency of the natives, and their rarified local dialect deeply impressed her.

In 1876, she sold two mountain stories to *Appleton's Weekly*, but the magazine ceased publication before they appeared. In May, 1878, *Atlantic Monthly* introduced Charles Egbert Craddock to readers with "The Dancin' Party at Harrison's Cove."

Murfree's first Smoky Mountains story, "Panther of Jolton's Ridge," was written and sold in 1876 but not published until 1885. The action unfolds in "a certain wild chasm, cut deep into the very heart of a spur of the Great Smoky Mountains." The story revolves around two fundamental preoccupations of the region—religion and moonshining. Mark Yates, an engaging mountain lad, enjoys visiting the still of the Brice brothers, not so much to sample the product but to take in stories of hunting, feuds, and Indians. One evening John Brice, nicknamed "the panther," vows revenge on the local preacher for ousting the Brices from church

### Mary Noailles Murfree's Great Smoky Mountains Fiction

The following Murfree stories and novels have specific references to the Great Smoky Mountains. If you are aware of other Murfree writings with significant GSM content, please contact *Colloquy*.

"The Harnt' That Walks Chilhowee." *Atlantic Monthly* 51:307 (May 1883): 660-74. Collected in *In the Tennessee Mountains* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1884). Reprint: Knoxville, University of Tennessee Press, 1970.

*The Prophet of the Great Smoky Mountains* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1885). Reprint: NY: AMS Press, 1970.

*In the Clouds* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1886).

"The Panther of Jolton's Ridge." *Christian Union* 32 (24 and 31 Dec. 1885):10-1; 10-1. Collected in *The Bushwackers, and Other Stories* (Chicago: Herbert S. Stone, 1899).

*The Windfall* (NY: Duffield, 1907).

"His 'Day in Court,'" "The Moonshiners at Hoho-hebee Falls," and "The Riddle of the Rocks," in *The Phantoms of the Footbridge, and Other Stories* (NY: Harper & Brothers, 1895). Reprint: NY: Garrett Press, 1969.

*In the "Stranger People's" Country: A Novel* (NY: Harper & Brothers, 1891)



"Why'n't ye gin Dad them messages?" (*The Phantoms of Footbridge, and Other Stories*)

membership. Yates warns him against drastic action and they part in anger. The church burns that night and Brice is apprehended. He escapes via a railroad bridge, encounters a train midway, plunges into the waters below, and is never found.

Eight of Murfree's mountain stories, all previously published in the *Atlantic Monthly*, were collected in her first book-length publication, *In the Tennessee Mountains*. Labeled "the granddaddy of all mountaineer tales," one critic maintained that they "gave great impetus to the rise of the genre. For the period in which it was written, this collection of short stories set a good example of all the mountaineer fiction that followed. The stories are stately in style and language but are an honest attempt to show the humor and the beauty in the lives of the isolated Smoky Mountains folk."

Although she sets one of the stories in the Cumberlands, another in the Alleghenies, and a third in the Great Smoky Mountains, these are purely nominal designations. Her stories from *In the Tennessee Mountains* blend cohesively through homogeneity of landscape, language, folklore, names of people and places, morals, tone, and point of view. The overwhelming presence of the mountains is sensed throughout.

Men dominate her fiction. They hunt, fish, fight, loaf, and disport themselves with primal disregard for



From:  
*The Phantoms  
of Footbridge,  
and Other  
Stories*

domestic obligations and civilized manners. They exhibit a fierce independence and contempt for the law. Three ranks of women populate this masculine realm: the young maiden or mountain-flower, the young wife, and the older woman.

Mountain dialects, idioms, similes, and other peculiarities of local speech also unite her fiction. For modern readers, Murfree's greatest fault as a writer lies in cacography—the inelegant misspellings accepted in her day as both genuine transcriptions of colloquial speech and as legitimate humor. The dialect grows tiresome and tends to nullify its value as a characterizing device.

Between 1885 and 1897, Murfree published six mountain novels for adults. Her first and finest novel of mountain life is *The Prophet of the Great Smoky Mountains*. The title is a misnomer, for Hiram Kelsey, the prophet/preacher wracked by guilt over the inadvertent deaths of his wife and child, does not dominate the book. Rather, this is the story of Rick Tyler's run-in with the law and his unsuccessful courtship of Dorinda Cayce. Kelsey, an intense if intermittent figure, proves the more interesting character, and the church meeting scene is a masterpiece.

Other Murfree novels with Great Smoky Mountains settings include *In the Clouds* (1886), which is rated her most authentic portrayal of the region, and *The Windfall* (1907), her seventh novel. The central figure in *The Windfall* is Hilary Lloyd, part owner of a traveling circus stranded in the Smoky Mountains.

Murfree's reputation and popularity declined in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, as literary tastes changed and local color lost out to harsher realism and novelistic experimentation. In 1907, the Dean of American letters, William Dean Howells, described how:

There seems in the dust and smoke of recent literary explosions an eclipse of that fine talent... but I hope that when the vaporous reputations blow away, her clear light will show the stronger for its momentary obscuration. She was the first to express a true Southern quality in fiction....”

Despite stylistic weaknesses, stereotypical mountaineers, intrusive editorializing, tedious dialect, and affective descriptions, Murfree's fiction reveals and preserves a unique segment of historic American life. Her stories and novels present a special world and time.

Sources consulted for this article include Richard Cary, *Mary N. Murfree* (NY: Twayne, 1967) and Edd Winfield Parks, *Charles Egbert Craddock (Mary Noailles Murfree)* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1941).



Left and below: from *The Phantoms of Footbridge, and Other Stories*. Right: from *In the “Stranger People’s” Country*.



### The Great Smoky Mountains in the Words of Mary Noailles Murfree

“Always enwrapped in the illusory mists, always touching the evasive clouds, the peaks of the Great Smoky Mountains are like some barren ideal, that has bartered for the vague isolation of a higher atmosphere the material values of the warm world below. Upon those mighty and majestic domes no tree strikes root, no hearth is alight; humanity is an alien thing, and utility set at naught. Below, dense forests cover the massive, precipitous slopes of the range, and in the midst of the wilderness a clearing shows, here and there, and the roof of a humble log cabin....”

(*The Prophet of the Great Smoky Mountains*, p. 1)

### Peter Giles Describes his Daughter, Clarissa: The Character Dialect of Mary Noailles Murfree

“Clarsie air a likely enough gal. But she air mightily sot ter hev’in’ her own way. An’ ef ‘t ain’t give ter her peaceable-like, she jes’ takes it, whether or no.”

Later, same page:

“She air a toler’ble hard-headed gale. That air a true word. Ye mought ez well try ter hender the sun from shining ez ter make that thar Clarsie Giles do what she don’t want ter do.”

(“The ‘Hart’ That Walks Chilhowee,” p. 286)

## The Great Smoky Mountains as Place: RECENT FICTION SET IN THE SMOKIES

From Murfree's time to the present, the Smokies have provided the backdrop for fiction from mysteries to romance novels. Here is selection of recent Smokies fiction titles:

Baldwin, Juanitta. *The Callico Tree*. Kodak, TN: Suntop Press, 1992.

Brooks, Skip. *Monteith's Mountains*. Boone, NC: High Country Publications, 2002.

Camp, Delayne. *Taming the Wild Man*. NY: Harlequin Books, 1995.

Clifford, Emmett. *Night Whispers: A Story of Evil*. Nashville: Cumberland House, 1998.

Conley, Robert. *Cherokee Dragon: A Novel of the Real People*. NY: St. Martin's, 2000.

Connor, Beverly. *Airtight Case: A Lindsay Chamberlain Novel*. Nashville: Cumberland House, 2000.

Darty, Peggy. *Spirits*. Sisters, OR: Palisades, 1998.

Dengler, Sandy. *The Quick and the Dead: A Jack Pressler Mystery*. Chicago: Moody Press, 1995.

Evans, Ron. *Caverns of the Blue Smoke: A Novel*. Cosby, TN: Creek Sound Publications, 1995.

Godwin, Gail. *Evensong*. NY: Ballantine Books, 1999.

Holmes, Oliver W. *Incident on Jubal Mountain*. Alexandria, VA: Sensory Publications, 2001.

Jarrold, Sara. *Heavenly Bliss*. NY: Jove Books, 1997.

Leigh, Elizabeth. *Mountain Moonlight*. NY: Kensington, 1997.

Long, Anne. *The Windwalker: A Happening in the Smokies*. Sevierville: Covenant House Books, 1991.

Raye, Kimberly. *Something Wild*. NY: Love Spell Books, 1998.

Searce, Flora Ann. *Singer of an Empty Day*. Mt. Olive, NC: Mt. Olive College Press, 1997.



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