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Homesick for the Past: An Interview with Rebecca McClanahan

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Homesick for the Past

an interview with **Rebecca McClanahan**

WE TEND TO VIEW FAMILY HISTORY from our particular place in the family tree. Yet peruse an album of old family photographs, and you will see that your relatives were once young and had existences independent of you, perhaps decades or centuries before you were born. Rebecca McClanahan's new book, *The Tribal Knot: A Memoir of Family, Community, and a Century of Change* (Indiana University Press, \$22) inhabits this shift from the first person to an omniscient view of a family. As it excavates and reconstructs the lives of several generations of her ancestors, the book not only recounts their births and deaths, their joys and heartaches, but drawing upon McClanahan's

intensive research and intimate knowledge of primary source documents, it depicts life as it was lived over the past century in the rural Midwest. Along the way, it considers the value and the dangers of communal bonds.

Rebecca McClanahan has published five books of poetry and a collection of essays, *The Riddle Song and Other Rememberings*. She has also written several writing guidebooks, including *Word Painting: A Guide to Writing More Descriptively*. Her work has appeared in The Pushcart Prize series, *Best American Essays*, *Best American Poetry*, as well as numerous literary journals.

by Justin Wadland

JUSTIN WADLAND: A mood pervades *The Tribal Knot* that can be summed up in this sentence, which appears early in the book: "Then why this present-tense loneliness, a palpable homesickness for lives I never lived, for places that bloomed and faded so long ago?" What do you mean by this "homesickness"?

REBECCA MCCLANAHAN: I think that this longing is universal for people of a certain age. For me, my childhood felt like a golden age, a golden time. When you're a child you assume that the people and places of your childhood will always be there. As they begin disappearing, you naturally want to hold on to them. You get homesick for your past. At least I did. Maybe this feeling is stronger in military brats like me. We moved around so much and "home" was always changing, so those few places that did remain constant for a while—for me, these were the ancestral homes of Briarwood and the Circle S Farm—grew in mythological power.

JW: Did writing this book provide answers to this question about "homesickness for the past"? And how did it change your relationship to this question?

RM: It's too early to tell. The effect is ongoing. This process began twenty years ago when I started collecting family documents and absorbing and diving into them. This did begin to change my memories and sense of my relatives' lives, but at that point I didn't consider

writing about them, except to transcribe and organize the materials. This process opened my eyes not just to my ancestors as people but to the culture they moved through and how it shaped their idea of community. I definitely recognized the sweep of history swiftly moving through their lives.

But I will also say that once the last letter was transcribed, the last home movie watched, the last tape recording listened to, the last site research completed, I was surprised at how much I didn't want to let go of these long-lost lives. After living with these artifacts and documents for so many years, I'd grown to know people and places in a much fuller way than I had before. These lives were richer, more finely textured, than I'd ever imagined.

JW: As a literary writer working in a nonfiction genre that dwells upon history and the historical record, how does your approach to the past differ from a historian's?

RM: These people were my people, for better or worse. I share their DNA. So my emotional attachment to the material was stronger than a historian's to begin with, and only increased as the process continued. Also, a historian aims to *include*, to leave no gravestone unturned, no record unrecorded. I never claimed to be the family historian—I don't want the job. Though I ended up doing an enormous amount of historical research, it was never the facts themselves that

propelled the search. It wasn't the who, what, where, and when, so much as the how. *How* do these documents mean? How do these lives connect to form a pattern of meaning? So my task became what to leave out of all that was given to me—hundreds of documents, artifacts, oral histories, memories. What to clear away, so that I could begin to see the design, the forest in all those trees.

JW: What were some of the patterns you found?

RM: People yearn for family in whatever form it takes. Something in us wants to connect, even if it's not to blood relatives. Reading my ancestors' letters, I encountered many different attempts to create tribes: the church "family" which uses terms like "brother" and "sister," military organizations, neighborhoods, fraternities and sororities such as the Improved Order of Red Men and the Grange. Even the Klan can be seen as a fraternal organization, an extension of family. Communities, of course, can be both nurturing and destructive, when carried to extremes. The extremes of insularity, of exclusion of "the other." How do we form communities that are composed of like-minded citizens, or at least like-minded goals, while also allowing for differences and diversity? These are ongoing, contemporary questions. My ancestors' struggle with these questions provides a historical context, yes, but

many of the same questions remain with us today, being very much a part of our political and cultural debates.

Another pattern, which we've already discussed, was the search for home—where does it exist? For my siblings and me, it was whatever our mother made for us, even if it was in temporary quarters. Yet my mother always thought of the Circle S, where she spent her childhood, as home. My grandmother, who created the Circle S, considered Briarwood (where she spent her childhood) as home. And on and on, down through the centuries. We all carried these idealized feelings of what home was, yet no matter how golden the past seemed to us, there was always another home that preceded it in memory.

JW: Your work seems heavily influenced by Ian Frazier's *Family*. Were there other literary works that guided your approach to your family's history?

RM: Thanks for the compliment. Yes, Ian Frazier was a model in the structure, starting with distant ancestors and moving through time into the nuclear family. He's practically my contemporary, but he went back a little farther in history than I did. Other models were Ivan Doig and Mary Clearman Blew, with their emphasis on regional cultures. Scott Russell Sanders's exploration of the land and culture of Indiana, and Wendell Berry's Kentucky-based texts, also provided good models. Another book I studied was Robin Hemley's *Nola* because of how he used documents. I also read a lot of fiction that used an epistolary structure, such as Lee Smith's work. I also drew upon works set in the historic past: Edward Jones's *The Known World*, Alex Haley's *Roots*, Rita Dove's book of poems *Thomas and Beulah*. I read all over the place, anything to do with intertwining lives or autobiographical movement through time. Also Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio* had a big influence.

JW: Several times throughout the book, the narrative enters the mind of family members, shifts to the present tense, and speaks directly from a perspective that seems too personal to come from sources. For example the reader directly experiences your great-aunt Bessie's thoughts as a schoolgirl in the 1890s. I found myself repeatedly asking: How does the author know this? Where does this come from?

RM: This approach seemed a natural outgrowth of the material. Many of these sections draw from fact, from personal papers, letters, diaries, collections of books and artifacts that contained a re-

cord of their inner lives. In the example you asked about, I had not only Bessie's 1897 diary, written when she was that schoolgirl, but also decades of letters, site research I conducted, tape recordings of her voice relating many of these details,



and my own memories of her storytelling regarding these years. After absorbing all this material, I had a sense of where her mind went and began to catch the rhythms of her thoughts. Of course no one can ever know the inner workings of another's mind or heart, but I made these leaps partly in an attempt to bring the reader as close to these characters as I had felt when I was studying their lives.

JW: You uncover some unsettling things from your family's past: membership in the 1920s Ku Klux Klan, the murder of a son, the suicide of a father, struggles with alcoholism, the terrors and fears of war at home and abroad. How much of this was known to you beforehand? How much did it change what your family knows? How did your family take it?

RM: I have been writing about family, in one way or another, for more than thirty years, so my immediate family has more or less accepted that this is a big subject for me, perhaps my biggest subject. This isn't to say that they are always happy about the work I produce. One of my sisters suggested that I just leave the 1920s KKK segment out of the book, as she didn't want her Jewish daughters-in-law to be hurt by the knowledge. (The 1920s Klan was fueled, in part, not only by issues of immigration and prohibition and what I think of as rabid patriotism, but also by

anti-Catholic and anti-Jewish sentiment, along with other racist and xenophobic notions.) Still, nearly one hundred years have passed since then. And this chapter of my ancestors' lives is only one very short chapter in their long and complicated lives. In the book, I try hard to open the multiple selves of these characters in as many ways as possible.

Certainly everything I've written in *The Tribal Knot* will not be welcome news to members of my extended family, who may know little about the events I discovered in my research. But I trust that they will accept the work in the spirit in which it was intended. In all my life-based writing, I consider and reconsider the costs of revelations, and I try to interrogate my motives. Sometimes I decide not to publish certain work, for various reasons. But what I always strive for is Faulkner's idea of "the human heart in conflict with itself." We are all flawed individuals, even our most respected—and often mythologized—ancestors. But our flaws make us human. They make us who we are.

JW: The title of your book comes from a "hair picture," which was woven out of locks from your family and was apparently lost after a violent conflict between a father and son. Where did this tradition begin? Why were you drawn to this image?

RM: The tradition of hair art goes back a long way—in our nation, at least to the Civil War, though it reached its peak during the Victorian period. Sometimes hair art took the form of accessories or ornamentation, like bracelets or brooches, woven from strands of hair. Often, these strands were taken from several members of a family or a community and then woven together to form designs. If the Mounts family hair picture did exist, as some of my sources suggested, it would have contained strands from thirteen members of my ancestral tribe—two parents and their eleven children. One source reported that the father and son argued about the hair picture on that fateful day in Wisconsin, and that this dispute was an important contributor to the murder-suicide. Whether or not this is true, no one knows for sure. But the hair art image, as an image, vibrated with a lot of power for me. Each family member has a strand of individuality, unlike anyone else's, yet when all of these individual strands are woven together, the design that it forms is more intricate, and potentially more beautiful, than any individual design could be. ♦