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Of Snakes and Men

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FEATURED AUTHOR—RON RASH

Of Snakes and Men

Reneé Critcher

As a young girl, I admired two things about my first cousin, Ron Rash: his height and his wonderful name. Ron always stood in the back with my older brother Jeffrey during grandkid picture-taking-time at Christmas and Easter, both donning the glorious height provided by maternal genes. As the camera clicked, I felt protected under their shadow. Even as a young girl, their height somehow foreshadowed the significance of their life's purpose.

Today, despite his early death in an automobile accident at the unthinkable age of seventeen, my brother Jeffrey continues to tower not only within my memory, and consequently my daily behavior, but also as a precious character within the hearts and souls of Ron's readers.

I told a friend just the other day that writing was in our family's blood. The love of language, in whatever form, begins early-on. Even before I knew what a consonant was, I loved the sound of Ron's name, especially since the name used to gain my attention also began with a "R." When I learned the term "alliteration" in high school, I thought back to my love for Ron's name and understood the childhood delight. What an intuitive name my Aunt Sue instinctively bestowed upon her first born, poetry-filled son!

When a child, Ron loved to explore and be surrounded by the people and places he now writes about. During the summer months, he spent weeks with the grandmother we shared, Ethel Mae, the embodiment of the Appalachian lifestyle. She definitely rubbed off on Ron. I see her patience, never-give-up persistence, humor, gentle nature and intellect inside Ron whenever we are fortunate enough to spend time together during our busy adult lives. While Ron was usually back home with his mother and father by the time I visited Granny on the weekend, it seems funny to us that we were interchangeably delving into Granny's journal of times past, people known and paths trod. Her expert calligraphy (once actually taught in school) invited us into the world of words, as did her everyday language and stories, filled with great detail, description and delight for living. And I'm sure we both remember the biographical books which lined Granny's living room bookshelf, biographies of such diverse characters as Zelda Fitzgerald, Harry Truman and Eleanor Roosevelt.

Her curiosity about the human condition, and the achievement that prevails despite that condition, also rubbed off on Ron.

Ron loved to fish and catch snakes when he was young. He was quite famous for being the family fisherman and snake catcher. He caught all types of water snakes and ground snakes during daily fishing trips to the creek below Granny's house. He brought them home in jars and sat them on the front porch for all to see. He did this so frequently at his home in Boiling Springs that his first notoriety came in the form of a newspaper article in which Aunt Sue spoke about one certain snake crawling from the jar and into the depths of their home! Of course, eventually, the snake silently slithered away.

When I first thought about writing this piece, I realized that I always associate Ron not only with his wonderful height, his beautiful name and a kindred love for our dear grandmother, but also with snakes! I pondered Ron's childhood adventures and fascination and realized that he prepared both himself and those around him for the snakes that crawl into our midst from time to time. He learned, and made others learn, that if you look into the eye of a snake long enough, the fear will pass.

During his early years, Ron, like myself and my family, experienced and overcame a great deal of the pain, despair and catastrophe associated with the human condition: the death of my brother and his first cousin, the death of our precious grandmother, the death of his brilliant father. He now presents these snakes to you, his readers, through the jar of his literary voice. Each poem, every short story invites you into an intrinsic museum, providing an education as to the strength and courage which prompts snakes to silently slither away, in order that the fish may bite. This lesson, ultimately, is my wise cousin's gift to you.