

An Interview with *New York Times* Bestselling Author **Sharyn McCrumb**

You are the successful author of the popular Ballad novels, many of which have become New York Times bestsellers. Did you ever expect your books to be bestsellers? Do you allow yourself to dream about such goals as you write? Or is the story more important?

Oh, dear. I know the answer to this question is supposed to be “No.” Women, and Southern women in particular, are supposed to say things like, “Laws! I never in the world expected anybody else to like my little old stories,” but really that’s like asking a doctor if he’s surprised when his patients don’t die or a lawyer if she’s amazed when her client is acquitted. I took many, many writing courses, and I’ve read one book a day since third grade, and I’ve written easily ten million words, perfecting my craft, so yes: I expected to be successful. I worked very hard, not only in the writing but also in promoting, touring, and public speaking to ensure that my work would be read and appreciated. A literary career takes talent, but it also takes every bit as much work as a career in medicine or law.



Why do you think the Ballad novels are so popular with your readers?

Judging from the messages I get from readers, the Ballad novels strike a chord with people who are from the mountains or whose ancestors came from there. Sometimes, too, the setting resonates with people of Scots-Irish descent. I think people long for a simpler time, for connection with the land, and a sense of peace. It seems odd to say that people find those things in novels that often deal with violence and war, but that does seem to be the attraction: a connection to the past, to old ways, lost stores of folkways... as Thomas Wolfe put it, “The long lane-end into heaven.”



Fan-favorite character Nora Bonesteel has made many appearances in your novels. She’s back as the central character in *Nora Bonesteel’s Christmas Past*. Why did you decide to write this book about her?

Nora is more real to a great many people than I am. My later Ballad novels were set in earlier times altogether: the Civil War, the American Revolution, and there was no easy way to insert Nora into those narratives. I didn’t want to do it anyway because I had other important points to make, and I didn’t want readers to be distracted by a chance to visit with their imaginary friend. Finally, I decided to give her a book of her own so that her friends could visit her.



Tell us about the real Nora Bonesteel. Are your other characters based on real people? Have you met them?

Characterization is seldom a matter of pure invention. A writer is always observing the world, ready to salvage it for parts. Garrison Keillor said, “Writers are vacuum cleaners who suck up other people’s lives

and weave them into stories like a sparrow builds a nest from scraps.” Almost all major characters are to some extent embellishments upon the personality of a real person known to the author—though not necessarily well-known. One might build a character on a face seen in a magazine or on a scrap of overheard conversation.

In my work the most direct translation from life is Nora Bonesteel, who, after twenty years of novels, has taken on a life of her own, but originally she was inspired by a folklore professor at Appalachian State University, Charlotte Ross. Here’s how that came about:

When *If Ever I Return Pretty Peggy-O* was published in 1990, Scribners hosted a publication party for the book at that year’s Appalachian Studies Conference at Unicoi State Park, near Helen, Georgia. The publisher sent my editor, Susanne Kirk, down from New York to host the festivities. The magic realism probably began for Susanne when she was picked up at the Atlanta airport by Major Sue, an elfin army intelligence officer from Wisconsin, and driven up several hours north into the hills of Georgia to be set down in Helen, a Bavarian theme-park-style alpine village that has made many an unsuspecting traveler believe in magic realism—or at least in Oz.

The conference book party ended in the early afternoon, and that evening Susanne and I invited some of the conference attendees to a get-together in the cabin we had rented for the weekend at Unicoi State Park. The party consisted of eighteen professors, two bottles of wine, a bag full of whatever the convenience store had in the way of snacks, and Susanne, the major, and me. After an hour or so of pretzels and shop talk, the talk turned to the supernatural, and one by one we began to tell the family ghost story. These weren’t “Give me back my golden arm” stories. Nothing that Stephen King would buy you a cup of coffee for. They were little stories of supernatural happenings that occurred in the family. Nobody made much of them. They were just there. Most of them went something like this: “My grandmother was in the kitchen when she looked out the window over the sink and she saw my Uncle John walking across the yard. Now Uncle John lives in Cincinnati, so she wasn’t expecting to see him, but she thought he might have driven in to surprise her. She hurried out into the yard, but she didn’t see him. No car was in the driveway, and when she called out to Uncle John, there was no answer. Finally she gave up, and as she was coming in the back door, the phone was ringing. It was the family in Cincinnati calling to say that Uncle John had died—just when she saw him in the yard.”

It isn’t an earth-shaking story, but when you hear more than a dozen similar stories at an academic party, it gives you pause.

We had PhDs in English and Appalachian studies and mining engineering, people from Georgia and New York and everywhere in-between, and everyone there had a ghost story—everyone except Susanne and the two male professors.

Charlotte Ross, the folklore scholar from Appalachian State wasn’t surprised. “These stories tend to get passed down in the family by the womenfolk,” she said. “Men don’t hear about them.” Wait until a multigenerational family holiday like Thanksgiving, she advised. After the meal is over, the men go out to watch television or talk among themselves while the women congregate in the kitchen to do the dishes and put away the leftovers. Now, first the women tell childbirth

horror stories. That will get any rookies out of the kitchen. After the uninitiated have fled, then they get down to it.

“I don’t have any family ghost stories, either,” said Susanne. “I grew up in Tucson.”

Charlotte Ross looked at her for a long moment and said, “Well...ghosts don’t have call-waiting.”

But the rest of us had a swarm of tales: about a host of invisible beings who ford the Little Santeetlah River at twilight, speaking Cherokee and smelling of bear grease; about the girl who dropped a knife setting the table for a dumb supper and was stabbed by her husband years later...with the same knife; or the weary Confederate soldier who asks the reenactors how to get back to his regiment.

“I left that thread out of the book,” I said wistfully. “This streak of the supernatural runs deep through mountain families, and I left it out.”

“You had to,” said Charlotte Ross, who later became the model for Nora Bonesteel. “*Peggy-O* is told from the male point of view. The element of magic didn’t belong in the narrative.”

“Maybe not,” I said, “But it belongs in stories about Appalachia.”



You are known for writing about Appalachia. Did this begin with your own love for the culture, a special interest in a specific town, a personal experience, or something else?

The dark and troubled world of the Ballad novels is the *other South*, drawn on my father’s Appalachian heritage. My father’s family—the Arrowoods and the McCourrys—settled in the Smoky Mountains of western North Carolina in 1790, when the wilderness was still Indian country. They came from the north of England and from Scotland, and they seemed to want mountains, land, and as few neighbors as possible. The first of the McCourrys to settle in America was my great-great-great grandfather Malcolm McCourry, whose story I tell in my novel *The Songcatcher*. Malcolm McCourry was kidnapped as a child from the Scottish island of Islay in the Hebrides in 1750 and made to serve as a crewman on a sailing ship. He later became an attorney in Morristown, New Jersey; fought with the Morris Militia in the American Revolution; and finally settled in what is now Mitchell County in western North Carolina in 1794.

Another (distant) relative, an Arrowood killed in the Battle of Waynesville in May 1865, was the last man to die in the Civil War east of the Mississippi. I recount the search for him in my novel *Ghost Riders*, which won the Wilma Dykeman Award for Historical Fiction from the East Tennessee historical Society. (Through the Honeycutts, I am also a cousin of Wilma Dykeman.)

Yet another “connection” (we are cousins-in-law through the Howell family) is the convicted murderess Frankie Silver, the subject of my 1998 novel, *The Ballad of Frankie Silver*. Frances Stewart Silver (1813–

1833) was the first woman hanged for murder in the state of North Carolina. I did not discover the family tie that links us until I began the two years of research prior to writing the novel. I wasn't surprised, though. Since both our families had been in Mitchell County for more than two hundred years, and both produced large numbers of children to intermarry with other families, I knew the connection had to be there. These same bloodlines link both Frankie Silver and me to Appalachian writer Wilma Dykeman (*The French Broad*) and also to the famous bluegrass musician Del McCoury.

The namesake of my character Spencer Arrowood, my paternal grandfather, worked in the machine shop of the Clinchfield Railroad. He was present on that September day in 1916 at the railroad yard in Erwin, Tennessee, when a circus elephant called Mary was hanged for murder: she had killed her trainer in Kingsport. (I used this last story as a theme in *She Walks These Hills*, in which an elderly escaped convict is the object of a manhunt in the Cherokee National Forest. In the novel the radio disc jockey Hank the Yank, reminds his listeners of that story as a prayer for mercy for the hunted fugitive.)

I grew up listening to my father's tales of World War II in the Pacific and to older family stories of duels and escapades in Model A Fords. With such adventurers in my background, I grew up seeing the world as a wild and exciting place; the quiet tales of suburban angst so popular in modern fiction are Martian to me.

Two of my great-grandfathers were circuit preachers in the North Carolina mountains a hundred years ago, riding horseback over the ridges to preach in a different community each week. Perhaps they are an indication of our family's regard for books, our gift of storytelling and public speaking, and our love of the Appalachian mountains, all traits that I acquired as a child.



Some would say that the setting of your novels is just as important as the story or the characters. Do you believe this is true?

Yes, I think that the setting of the Ballad novels is almost a character in itself. The heritage from Celtic Britain and the folkways of the ancestors of the current residents influence the events and actions of the narrative in ways that make the story unfold here as it would nowhere else.



This story is specifically set at Christmas and it's your first novella. Did you set out to write both? Will there be more of the same in the future?

I did set out to write both. Nora has so many eager fans that I thought of this book as a Christmas present to them. Will there be another one? Ask Nora.



You are a storyteller. Is storytelling an art or a science? Is it a formula or craft? What advice do you have for others pursuing storytelling (written or told)?

I compare storytelling to basketball. It takes an enormous amount of practice and effort to perfect your skills at either, and if you put in the time and effort, you will get better at it. But no one can give you a talent for storytelling any more than someone can teach you to be tall. You can improve what you have, though.

Advice to writers: George Washington Carver said, “Anything will give up its secrets if you love it enough.” You have to really care about the story you’re telling in order for it to become real and heartfelt for the reader.



Your readers are eager for more. What’s next for you?

I am spending the summer writing a novel inspired by true events in 1936, but Nora is not featured in it. She may be back someday, though, if readers really like her Christmas adventure.