

Speedway Saint The Intimidator takes his place as an American Icon

BY ANN WICKER , Creative Loafing, Charlotte, 2/2/05

You don't have to know much about NASCAR or Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* to enjoy Sharyn McCrumb's latest novel. But if you do, you'll have more fun with the in-jokes on both subjects. If you don't, you'll learn a thing or two about 'em.

St. Dale is a rollicking tale about a group of people on a bus embarking on a Dale Earnhardt Memorial Tour to leave a wreath at every track between Bristol and Daytona in memory of The Intimidator. Leading the tour is Harley Claymore, a driver who has "lost his ride" — and is trying, as drivers put it, "to get back into the show." He wasn't an Earnhardt fan particularly and is reluctant to travel in a bus with "The Number 3 Pilgrimage" emblazoned on the side. But Harley thinks the tour will give him an opportunity to visit the tracks and make some connections.

For the two or three of you who might *not* know who Dale Earnhardt was, here's a quick lesson: Earnhardt was a legendary NASCAR driver who was born and raised just north of Charlotte. He died in a wreck just before the end of the Daytona 500 on February 18, 2001. He was a high school dropout who went on to be a seven-time Winston Cup champion. His nickname was The Intimidator, partly because of his driving style — he often bumped, or "rubbed," cars out of his way — and partly because of his personal style of doing things his own way. Earnhardt's "ride" was a black Chevrolet Monte Carlo — No. 3 — and he had and still has legions of extremely loyal fans. His legacy lives on in a racing empire (Dale Earnhardt, Inc. or DEI) based in Mooresville and now run by his widow, Teresa. His son, Dale Jr. (or Little E), drives for DEI and is on the way to becoming a legend in his own right.

The Canterbury Tales, written in medieval England by Geoffrey Chaucer, involve a group of pilgrims going to the shrine of the martyr St. Thomas Becket. McCrumb studied the tales in grad school. She explains, "I thought you could update this story if you could just decide who the saint would be. And I thought, right, if you had the Canterbury pilgrims in the Southeast US heading for a shrine, the homeboy saint would be Dale." Some might argue for Elvis, but hey, it's McCrumb's book.

In *The Canterbury Tales*, the pilgrims tell each other stories to pass the time on the slow journey. *St. Dale* moves at a much faster pace, which is fitting considering it's about NASCAR. The Number Three Pilgrims include an overly enthusiastic female Earnhardt fan who's been married a number of times (in *Canterbury* terms, The Wife of Bath), her sister who is a judge and doesn't like NASCAR, their cousin whose Dale miracle opens the book, and an Episcopal priest new to the sport, escorting a dying orphan who is a huge Earnhardt fan.

Sharyn McCrumb says she wasn't a NASCAR aficionado when she started writing this book. "I actually studied NASCAR the way an anthropologist would study the Comanche," she says. Her previous work in the best-selling "Ballad" series, including *The Ballad of Frankie Silver* and most recently, *Ghost Riders*, mined the folklore of the Appalachian Mountains and combined tales of the history of the area with contemporary storylines, often with just a touch of the supernatural. Here, she uses the journey framework to introduce readers to a group of more contemporary characters and uses the Earnhardt and NASCAR elements as the "glue" that holds it all together.

St. Dale might not be for every Intimidator fan. It's not a down and dirty racing story or an "in-the-pits-with-the-crew" kind of thing. This is a story about personal relationships and how those friendships make little everyday miracles we sometimes take for granted.

St. Dale is also about the cult of celebrity and as McCrumb puts it, "the canonization of a secular figure." The Number Three pilgrims aren't all Earnhardt fans. Some are along because their spouse or another relative is a fan. "So you've got a nice mixture of believers and unbelievers," McCrumb explains. "But by the end of the book, everybody gets a miracle."

An interesting element in the book is observing the range of personalities who consider Earnhardt to be "their" driver. In the NASCAR world, you can tell a lot about fans by which driver they consider "theirs." A discussion between two of the characters illustrates this phenomenon. Terrance, one of the pilgrims whose father has just died, is talking to Harley the tour guide, and says, "My dad was an Earnhardt man, though. Funny, that's almost all I know about him."

"Well, it might tell you more than you think. Different drivers attract different types of fans. The Earnhardt anthem would be 'I did it my way.' Mark Martin is big with older, serious guys who don't like flashiness. The Labontes are family-friendly. The characters on *Friends* would root for Jeff Gordon, if NASCAR was on their radar screen at all. Find out which driver a person supports, and you learn a lot about him."

"Who do you root for, Harley?"

"Back in the day, I was a Darrell Waltrip fan."

"And what does that say about you?"

"Damned if I know," said Harley.

As McCrumb was studying NASCAR, from racing stats to how people decide which driver to support, an interesting thing happened. She became a big fan of the sport. "Somebody could do a dissertation quite easily on NASCAR as a culture," she says. "But then I got hooked on the sport. I just absolutely loved it. For the longest time I didn't care who won. I was sort of treating it like ballet." Then she found "her" driver, Ward Burton, a driver from Virginia who has invested some of his winnings in land for a nature preserve. "I think what clinched it for me was the paradox of a race care driver who is an environmentalist. Writers love complexity, and he breaks every stereotype in the world," she writes in an essay about how fans find their drivers. Burton also figures in the Number Three Pilgrims' story, but she didn't get a chance to meet him until after the book was finished. Now they're doing book signings together, and Burton is using the book as a fundraiser for his wildlife foundation.

With her "Ballad" series, McCrumb gave us a window on a past rich with characters whose stories resonate today. With *St. Dale*, she delves into the present, and into a culture — while it's not so foreign to us in Charlotte — that offers hope, solace and companionship along with competition and the roar of the engines. In the hands of a lesser writer, this pilgrimage tale might wear thin, become maudlin or just plain silly, but I found myself laughing out loud and shedding a tear or two as the pilgrims' stories unfolded.

Dale Earnhardt's legacy shows no signs of waning. Like other "secular saints" — Elvis, Marilyn, JFK and James Dean, for instance — he still inspires, comforts, and in his particular case, goads his fans. After all, one of his favorite expressions, as any Number Three Pilgrim could tell you, was "Rubbin' is racin'."