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## These pilgrims walk in Dale's tire tracks

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Special to the Observer

### ST. DALE

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*By Sharyn McCrumb.*

*Kensington.*

*320 pages. \$25.*

I was a relative newcomer to Charlotte when one morning I found myself unable to take my usual route past Calvary Church on Rea Road. A funeral was going on -- Dale Earnhardt's -- and traffic was backed up clear to Interstate 485. That was when I got my first inkling of the region's obsession with the eponymous saint of Sharyn McCrumb's latest novel.

McCrumb has devised an unusual and ambitious approach to the world of NASCAR. Since she is a renowned southern writer, McCrumb's journey into the world of stock car racing seems a natural detour from her "ballad" novels, honoring the people and the land of Appalachia.

The premise of "St. Dale" is that, following his death, the legendary driver has become a secular saint who makes appearances when necessary and performs minor miracles. Similar to the fans who regularly spot Elvis, McCrumb's characters occasionally have Dale encounters. As McCrumb says in an author's note: "I wanted to do a book on the canonization of a secular figure -- a Canterbury Tales with a modern saint..."

To explore the effect of NASCAR and its heroes on our collective psyche, McCrumb creates a cast of characters known as the Number Three Pilgrims, thrown together for the first-ever Dale Earnhardt Memorial Tour. Like Chaucer's pilgrims in the Canterbury Tales, each character comes with his or her own story and reason for being on the tour. Some of McCrumb's pilgrims are veritable encyclopedias of racing. Others are greenhorns.

Harley Claymore, a has-been NASCAR driver, is the put-upon tour guide. The tour includes several major NASCAR venues, including our own Lowe's Motor Speedway, Daytona and others. In addition to seeing races, the tourists plan to leave a wreath in Dale's honor at appropriate spots.

Among the pilgrims is an Episcopal priest named Bill Knight accompanying a young boy named Matthew, who is dying of cancer and whose last wish is to go on this tour. The priest knows next to nothing about racing. But, in deference to his NASCAR-loving congregation, he watched the race where Earnhardt lost his life. He noticed a shooting star in the sky just before the race, a portent he had thought at the time, though he never mentioned it to anyone.

In addition to the priest and Matt, two sisters, Justine and Bekasu, serve to help the less-informed reader understand the fascination with Earnhardt and with racing in general. Bekasu, a no-nonsense Charlotte judge, claims she is a hostage to her sister on the tour. Justine, an aging floozy with a passion for NASCAR, knows every piece of racing trivia and relishes her assumed role as the tour educator.

Joining the tour are a young couple named Karen and Shane who are scheduled to be part of a mass wedding at Bristol Motor Speedway. Karen's mother has brought along a Wiccan Friends of the Goddess contingent. Karen has to share a tent with the Wiccans the night before the ceremony because every motel for 50 miles is booked with race fans.

That's bad enough, and the wedding itself is nearly ruined when the groom realizes that the expected Earnhardt impersonator won't be there to add the "spirit of Dale." Then, miraculously, he sees Dale himself in the stands.

In this sweet and humorous tale, other prayers also get their due, and everyone leaves the tour with some unexpected revelation.

Those who know racing should thoroughly enjoy this literary tribute to Earnhardt, and interested outsiders will find the book an entertaining entrée into NASCAR culture. For those who don't care diddly-squat about racing, "St. Dale" might not be the best introduction to this fine writer. For them, McCrumb's Appalachian novels await.