

Johnson City Press

Story published in the *Johnson City Press* on 4/3/2005

Out of My Head - For we sinners, our 'St. Dale' came to save us just in time

By Jan Hearne
Press Tempo Editor
jhearne@johnsoncitypress.com

They came, copies of "St. Dale" in hand, to hear author Sharyn McCrumb speak at the Johnson City Public Library Wednesday evening.

The standing-room-only crowd was made up mostly of women of a certain age (my age or older). I thought it was a little odd; they didn't fit my image of racegoers.

"Ahh, these are McCrumb fans, not NASCAR fans," I said to myself.

But once McCrumb began speaking about her book — a modern retelling of the Canterbury Tales with Dale Earnhardt at its center — the women laughed knowingly at her racing references.

Turns out, they were NASCAR fans, and I had been misled by the stereotype of the beer-swilling guy with no shirt. (In my defense, a photo I saw taken at BMS didn't help: It was a shot of a shirtless man who had shaved the hair on his back into the number 3.)

The audience laughed knowingly, and I struggled to keep up. As best I can tell, Jeff Gordon is not a lovable guy. To be honest, I got the impression, he's not even likable.

Ward Burton is, however. Well, at least McCrumb loves him. He's "her driver," she explained, and she showed off her tote bag embroidered with the words: "Whatever he drives, wherever he drives it."

The audience laughed mightily.

There was a lot of talk about restrictor plates that I didn't understand. A Google search the next day explained everything. Now I think I'm against them. I think McCrumb might be, too.

It's evident the novelist is a born-again NASCAR fan. At times, I got the feeling I was at a tent revival, and she was witnessing to the wonders racing had worked in her life.

I have to admit that before Wednesday if you'd asked me who Geoff Bodine was, I might have answered uncertainly, "Is that Jethro's brother?"

Now I know better — he's Brett and Todd's brother — and like Derrick Cope, the Bodines' rides are questionable.

“(They are) like the crew of the Hunley,” McCrumb said. “Whether it’s Charleston Bay or Talladega, you know you’re going out there in substandard equipment, and you know you’re going down.”

McCrumb has had to defend her newly acquired NASCAR devotion. A snooty New York editor asked her why she wanted to do a book on racing. “It’s just a bunch of cars going around and around in circles,” she sniffed.

“Yeah, and writing isn’t hard either,” McCrumb shot back. “It’s just the same 26 letters over and over.”

McCrumb piqued my interest in the sport, I must say, and I don’t think this is a good thing. When the literati, like McCrumb, latch onto something, it’s only a matter of time before the glitterati follow. And where the glitterati go, so go the tabloid media.

If “St. Dale” sells well enough, and it looks as if it will, the “purity” of Cup racing will be compromised. I can’t help think this book may be to NASCAR what “O Brother, Where Art Thou?” was to bluegrass. It sent it into the stratosphere making it not only acceptable but cool to people who once condemned it as lowbrow.

For the faithful, it must feel like watching a lifelong sinner get saved five minutes before the Rapture.