H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Ted Olson, ed. *The Hills Remember: The Complete Short Stories of James Still.* Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2012. 406 pp. $29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8131-3623-3.

Reviewed by Becky L. Meadows (St. Catharine College)
Published on H-Kentucky (March, 2013)
Commissioned by Richard C. Smoot

When Ted Olson tasked himself with gathering the short stories of Kentucky author James Still into one collection and organizing them by date of publication from earliest to latest, he probably had no idea what a treasure he had produced for those interested in Kentucky writers, Appalachian literature, or, more specifically, Mr. Still's work.

Indeed, Olson's collection of Still's work is complete, but it is so much more than that–it is a tribute to one of Kentucky's finest writing minds, and in particular a showcase for how the "Dean of Appalachian Literature" arrived at a level to which so many aspire.

The Hills Remember: The Complete Short Stories of James Still, edited by Olson and published by University Press of Kentucky, begins with Still's earliest stories and ends at the point where he had completely matured as a writer. This may indeed be the greatest strength of this work–it provides a roadmap for Still's progress as a writer. That progress is marked with evidence of increased richness of expression and maturity of language, in addition to increasingly strong character and plot development.

For example, the first story in the book, "Sweet Asylum," addresses the plight of a man, Caesar Middleton, who is on the verge of losing everything. In fact, Middleton eventually must rely on the aid of a former lover to rescue him from his impending financial ruin, but a deus-ex- machina ending jolts the reader. A few stories later, in "All Their Ways Are Dark," Still has progressed to fuller characters such as a woman simply named "Mother" who, unable to persuade her husband that his relatives are mentally and physically torturing their family with disrespect and freeloading, burns down their house to be rid of the vermin. It is apparent Still toyed with the idea of the twist ending but wasn't immediately successful with it, and this illustrates the greatest strength of this collection: Still's maturation as a writer of short stories. In this, Olson has provided a valuable service to creative writers everywhere. In addition, two of the stories back-to-back in the collection, "Bare Bones" and "One Leg Gone to Judgment," are the same story with revisions.

This collection also traces Still's experience and depiction of Appalachia, its people, and their values, one of the primary aspects of the work for which Still became known. At times the characters seem remote, wrapping themselves in the shroud of their own identities with no reflection upon their values or behavior, and yet, this is a common experience for Still and many who live or have lived in Appalachia and is a tribute to the writer's sense of realism in his work. At times the dialect used is bumpy, at best, but scenes of description erase it from the reader's mind. There is also a wonderful sense of time passing in the stories, such as, "The flat fruit of the locust fell, lying like curved blades in the grass. August ripened the sedge clumps, and the days lengthened," which opens the story, "Bat Flight."

For those interested in Still's work or even in seeing the development of an excellent creative writer, *The Hills Remember: The Complete Short Stories of James Still* is a fantastic tribute to the progression of the creative-writing mind, as well as a lasting tribute to one of Kentucky's own. As Olson points out, Still has become well known in regard to novels and poems, but his short stories have sometimes been overlooked. This volume should bridge the gap between those genres in the writer's work.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl.

Citation: Becky L. Meadows. Review of Olson, Ted, ed., *The Hills Remember: The Complete Short Stories of James Still.* H-Kentucky, H-Net Reviews. March, 2013.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=38236

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.