“That Sense of Wonder”:
A Conversation with Ron Rash

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Ron Rash, the Parris Distinguished Professor in Appalachian Cultural Studies at Western Carolina University (WCU), North Carolina, is among the most celebrated authors of the Southeastern United States, well known for his poetry, short stories, and novels. Born in Chester, South Carolina (September 25, 1953), Rash spent a large part of his summers as a child and youth at his grandparents’ farm in Aho, North Carolina, in the high Southern Appalachians, a place where his family has roots that go back over a century. After attaining his BA at Gardner-Webb University and his MA at Clemson University (both in English), Rash taught at the community college and university levels before coming to WCU in 2003.

His first book, *The Night the New Jesus Fell to Earth and Other Stories from Cliffside, North Carolina* (1994), is a collection of short stories (the first of seven collections). His first book of poetry, *Eureka Mill* (1998), has been followed by three more. His first novel, *One Foot in Eden* (2002), won the Novelo Literary Prize, ForeWord Magazine’s Gold Medal in Literary Fiction, and was selected as the 2002 Appalachian Book of the Year. He has published seven more novels, the most recent being *The Caretaker* (2023).

His work has won numerous prestigious awards, including the James Still Award from the Fellowship of Southern Writers (2005), the O. Henry Prize for short stories in 2005, 2010, and 2019, and the Frank O’Connor International Short Story Award for his collection, *Burning Bright* (2010). Three of his works have made *The New York Times Book Review* bestseller list: *Serena* (novel, 2008), *The Cove* (novel, 2012), and *Nothing Gold Can Stay* (short story collection, 2013). In 2024, Rash was inducted into the North Carolina Literary Hall of Fame, where he was recognized as a writer of the culture and history of rural Appalachia who sensitively portrays the region’s dilemmas of economic stress, social upheaval,

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and environmental degradation. His work has been translated into several languages; he enjoys a significant following in France, where his novel, *The Cove* (2012), won the 2014 Grand Prix de Littérature Policière.

The following interview was recorded on Zoom at WCU on October 16, 2024, three weeks after western North Carolina was devastated by flooding from the remnants of Hurricane Helene on September 27.

The interview was transcribed by Lottie Lannigan (WCU professional writing intern) and edited for clarity and concision by Brian Railsback and Ron Rash.

Brian Railsback: From your first novel, *One Foot in Eden*, and before that with your poetry, how have environmental issues been introduced in your work?

Ron Rash: It is important to show that nature exists, and while doing so I hope to evoke a sense of wonder that connects with the reader. I get more into this in the fiction, but I think in any genre, it's more poetry—trying to describe in a way that opens up a real sense of connectedness with nature for the reader.

My novel, *Serena*, deals with how easily something can be lost, particularly wild environmental spaces. But I don't want to write mere propaganda. When I wrote what I think is my most overt novel about ecological issues, *Saints at the River* (2004), I created the most morally complex situation that I could. I did not want a black and white situation, you know, where it's only about these noble people protecting this river. You can't simply write for the people you want, those who already believe what you're saying.

[J. M.] Coetzee, the South African writer, says that the battle pitched should be on the highest plain. And I like that idea because I think you're really getting to where it's the most morally complex situation. When I write about environmental issues, I do not want to simplify them. Even in *Serena*, I think my depiction of the loggers shows the tragedy of people destroying their own environment to survive. And I felt like not to acknowledge the cost of creating the park [the Great Smoky Mountains National Park] and how the people would be driven from their homes would be too easy.

Brian Railsback: Please tell me about your own background, your personal experience with the environment, and how place shaped the way you write about it.

Ron Rash: Well, I think I was always aware, even as a child, that my family had very deep roots in the Appalachian Mountains. I was very fortunate growing up in that I was able to spend so much time on my grandmother's farm [at Aho, North Carolina] in the higher mountains near Boone. The Blue Ridge Parkway was there so I could go into wild places. I was comfortable there and found a great deal of

solace. I learned not to sentimentalize nature; I could slip and break an ankle or be bitten by a rattlesnake. But I felt a kind of connectedness. And I saw that with my relatives too, because several of them were farmers, and there was that interaction with place, certainly, in the sense of protecting the land. How does one keep soil healthy year after year—that kind of ecology, and what the writer, Wendell Berry, talks about a lot. I think I've really come to be more and more fascinated with how the landscape that people grow up in affects their psychology.

Brian Railsback: Could you talk a bit more about Aho, a foundational place for you as a writer, and what it meant to you when you were younger?

Ron Rash: I spent so much time with just my grandmother on that farm, and with my older relatives, some older than my grandmother. There was a sense of these stories in that region being passed down, some that were from before the Civil War. There was a connection of time and place. I would see it in the cemetery [adjacent to the family farm] where there were the graves of my great-great-grandmother's family and, you know, in America that tends to be rare. We are a very mobile country, except for a few areas, as in northern New England, where people have stayed in one place for generations. I thought the presence of my ancestors there was a gift, I really did. And it allowed a kind of view that I have found helpful in my writing.

Brian Railsback: You mentioned *Serena*, and that is a story about a logging operation that by the end of the novel, and this is right out of our regional history, ends in total devastation of the landscape. However, your novel, *Above the Waterfall* (2015), leaves a different impression—a consideration of the environment that is quite different from the dark vision of *Serena*.

Ron Rash: I would absolutely agree. I never want to repeat myself in a novel. I think *Above the Waterfall* is about what we can gain by being attentive to the world. If you are attentive to nature, you're going to care about its destruction. This is not a sentimental idea—we know that physiologically and psychologically, we need a certain amount of connection to the environment. I'm fascinated by how this works in different cultures. For example, from my reading I've learned that in India, when people are very disturbed or perhaps grieving, even to the point where they almost have to be bound, they would be set beside a river and brought back to themselves by the sound of the water.

What struck me the other day, I was with my young grandson and we were walking in the woods and he looked up at a tree and told me that it was as tall as heaven. And I thought that was just magical and, I mean, I'm going to use that some day.

That kind of connection is wonderful. In *Above the Waterfall*, you see that [the schoolteacher] Becky is trying to give children in her class that sense of wonder.

Brian Railsback: This is that notion of inscape that is so important in the novel.

Ron Rash: Well, yeah, Becky's favorite poet is [Gerard Manley] Hopkins. He's one of mine, too. Regarding nature, he gives one this sense of the sacredness, the connectedness, that something can be both individual and connected and that we're all part of that. And I mean, that's just the truth. If we don't recognize our connectedness to nature, we're doomed. This disconnection is why we're in such bad shape right now.

Brian Railsback: In your work, considerations of the environment are often intertwined with culture and spirituality as well.

Ron Rash: There definitely is a spiritual aspect to my work. Growing up the way I did, there was always a sense, particularly among the older relatives, that the world is more mysterious than we can comprehend. Francis Bacon said the role of the artist is to deepen the mystery. To me, there's that mystery of existence, even on a spiritual plane. There is something beyond mere materialism. And I think I was fortunate that I grew up in a culture that I believe embraced that. I think if you spend a lot of time in the woods, out by yourself, you start to sense a kind of connectedness that really is fascinating. I would sense things that there was no way I could know. One time I was ready to step over a log and it was as if my leg involuntarily jerked back. I didn't know what had happened, but then I looked over the log and there was a huge copperhead. I could not have seen it. I've had friends who spend a lot of time out in the woods and they have very similar experiences. I love the mystery of such moments; they evoke further religious dimensions, which, you know, I'm open to.

Brian Railsback: And Appalachian culture, and how it is deeply rooted in the mountains, seems to be another important aspect throughout your work.

Ron Rash: It is. I'm very interested in cultural geography and the connectedness of mountain cultures around the world. Regarding my readers, I've received letters from the Andes, the Himalayas, and mountain regions across Europe. My Italian and French publishers have said that my audience seems to connect most strongly with my work in the mountainous regions. These readers seem interested in how the landscape of the mountains affects the way they perceive the world. Mountain regions can be both intimidating, with the sense of smallness as you see the peaks

surrounding you, but also they can be almost womb-like. My novels have dealt with both of those things.

Brian Railsback: Playing off what you said earlier—that because of our treatment of the environment we might be doomed—we have just gone through this terrible storm and a lot of commentators have observed that people thought western North Carolina would be almost immune to climate change. It couldn't happen here as it does in California or Florida. And yet it just did with the remnants of Hurricane Helene. So, from your point of view, where might there be hope after all? Or is there?

Ron Rash: I have hope in human beings. I will go back to what [William] Faulkner said, that he believed most people were a little bit better than their circumstances ought to allow. I believe that, and I think it's true of Appalachian culture traditionally. People of all mountain cultures, because often they are so spaced apart, they have to be resilient, able to fend for themselves. There can be some problems culturally, such as the idea that you don't have to obey the law, but there's always a certain stoicism. I've seen that in my family. I'm not saying that's true of everyone in mountain cultures, but I have experienced neighbors helping each other in crisis, taking people in and so on. I think sometimes it takes the worst of circumstances for us to get past our differences and get to the core of what's best in us.

But there are also the realities. You've read my work, and my story [in the 2020 collection, *In the Valley*], "The Belt," is about the 1916 flood here. If you know enough about the history of this region, you know that the mountains funnel water into deadly flash flooding, just as we saw last month. But I do think this is different. What's happening now is becoming more frequent and we really are in a rough situation.

Brian Railsback: I doubt we are going to do what's necessary to avert what we just experienced here—that kind of climate disaster, coming on with more frequency.

Ron Rash: If we're being completely honest, any solution is going to have to be worldwide. And I don't know how we're going to manage all of the political complexities. But we do what we can in our own spaces. As Voltaire says, we have to cultivate our gardens. And I'm certainly capable of great feats of hypocrisy about this, you know, as I drive my car around—

Brian Railsback: My Fiat Abarth has two tailpipes.

Ron Rash: We have to make a better effort. This illusion that we can escape into our laptops, you know—sorry, Elon Musk—it's not going to save us.

Brian Railsback: Thinking beyond your work, are there other writers who you believe are moving us in the right direction?

Ron Rash: If we have a prophet in the United States, it's Wendell Berry. And I know he's a real prophet, because when I read him, I find myself knowing I failed. That's what a prophet does, making you go to that deep place of your own lacking. Poetry is very important, particularly how it presents the environment so that nature makes its own kind of statement about honoring the world. The poetry of Mary Oliver comes to mind, and that of Seamus Heaney.

I've really grown attached to the work of the French novelist, Jean Giono. His sense of the natural world is amazing. He's a writer I don't think people have recognized for his connection to the environmental movement. As he wrote as far back as the 1930s and 40s, I doubt he would have called himself an environmentalist, but when you read him, it's there. And I would add another one to this list; you should read the Swiss writer, Charles Ferdinand Ramuz.