

Book Review: 'A Land More Kind Than Home'

By Brett Yates

Greystone, NC, has produced two novelists of note: Lionel Shriver (of "We Need to Talk About Kevin" fame) and, more recently, Wiley Cash, the author of "A Land More Kind Than Home," a novel set in the countryside near Asheville. If we judge by Cash's debut, he and Shriver are polar opposites, and one senses that they may simply have reacted to the indignity of growing up in a non-descript suburb of Charlotte in contrasting ways: Shriver by becoming untraceably cosmopolitan, and Cash by becoming more intensely, more poetically Southern than his provenance perhaps requires.

A determinedly regional thriller, "A Land More Kind Than Home" centers on an evangelical church in Madison County, NC, where a Southern Gothic-style pastor presides over an increasingly fanatical flock. The cultish atmosphere of the congregation ultimately begets tragedy as a faith-healing attempt goes wrong, smothering a boy to death. When a sheriff still grieving over the loss of his own child takes on the case, we have all the makings of a typical page-turner, but Cash eschews the straightforward police procedural, broadening his narrative to include the perspectives of the victim's 9-year-old brother, Jess, and of the local octogenarian, Adelaide, who recalls the church's better days and awaits their return.

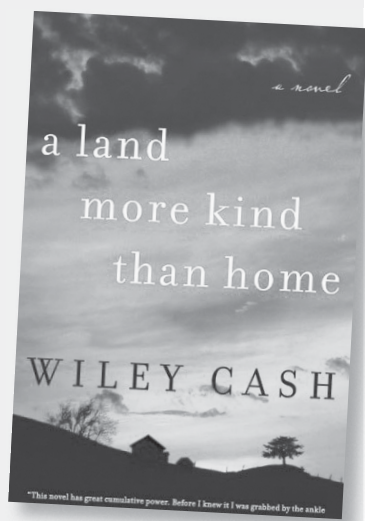
Cash's age-diverse trio of narrators tells this sad tale in a downhome diction that every reader of Southern literature knows well: they belong to that common fictional type that doesn't know enough about grammar to avoid double negatives but does, somehow, know enough to hyphenate its evocative compound adjectives. Likewise, the main characters all share an earthy fondness for reminiscence — even the 9-year-old, though mostly he's given to describing physical phenomena in staggering, somewhat inexplicable detail. Rarely do they allow a chapter to pass without divagating from the novel's action, presenting the reader, through extensive flashbacks, with a portrait of the Land of the Sky stretching back to the end of World War I.

In some ways, the novel is richer for this, but Cash's reliance upon folksy anecdotes and somber, protracted back-story can also push his characters aside: for example, the mute boy, Stump, strikes me merely as a Benjy-derived Southern prop, and the all-important villain, Carson Chambliss, so lacks specificity — is he a lunatic, an opportunist, or Satan incarnate? — as to remain strictly archetypal, bringing vaguely to mind Robert Mitchum's manipulative preacher in "The Night of the Hunter." (Adelaide, meanwhile, is his Lillian Gish, the human face of Christianity and protector of children.)

"A Land More Kind Than Home" is a violent book — one of those gruesome Southern novels in which, nevertheless, the author is always implicitly declaring his love for "these green fields where farms line the ridges and the spaces in between hide dark hollows and deep coves where the sunlight might not ever reach." The reader doesn't learn till midway through when the story takes place — roughly 1986 — but it doesn't matter much because, in literature, the South will always be the same: a debased paradise of barefoot children, corrupt men, Bibles, and sweat.

The grammatical oddity of the book's title — why not "A Land Kinder Than Home"? — owes to Thomas Wolfe, from whose work it borrows: further proof that Wolfe somehow couldn't ever write a totally sensible line. Happily, Cash's own work is fully readable, his story mechanically sound. Yet the overall impression is that one might actually get a more accurate picture of Appalachia from a thriller less committed to a Faulknerian sense of place, with all its insistent lushness. Does Wiley Cash love the South, or does he mostly just love Southern lit?

Brett Yates moved to North Carolina from Vermont in 2011. He lives in Durham and works in Chapel Hill.



WALMART

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AESTHETICS AND DESIGN

Large retail stores are generally not models of good design or reflective of community character. Consider architecturally attractive appropriate store design.

While the design and site plans for the Walmart incorporate some environmentally friendly features, the façade design could be more attractive. The Chatham County Appearance Commission has requested plantings to screen the building from the street and reduction of signs in keeping with the location's gateway status but more, much more can be done.

Good design, architecture and aesthetics are key to differentiate a community. Chatham County is in a great position to co-create a store design that reflects its image, so eloquently expressed in the 2011 branding statement. Design elements like color, murals by local artists and even Chatham County's logo can be incorporated into the store design to reflect the County's folklore, fine arts heritage, rural character and natural beauty.

IMPACT ON EXISTING BUSINESSES AND DOWNTOWNS

Typically, large retail stores like Walmart have a negative impact on adjacent local businesses that offer a similar range of goods and services and are located close by.

A one-stop-shop Walmart will certainly capture more of the retail dollars Chatham County residents spend outside the county, but what of the dollars they were spending on existing businesses in Chatham County? Research indicates that general merchandise and restaurants benefit from proximity to a Walmart while specialty stores, clothing stores and grocery stores lose business to Walmart.

Given this scenario, how are area shopping centers preparing for Walmart? To find out, I talked with a representative of Weingarten Realty who said while some competition is expected, Cole Park Plaza and Chatham Crossing are neighborhood shopping centers where people shop a few times a week whereas Walmart is a regional destination that will attract bi-monthly trips. People will continue to shop at Lowes Food, which may lose strictly discount shoppers to Walmart. Overall, Walmart will add to the commercial activity of the area and solidify 15-501 as a good commercial corridor.

While Shopping Centers will face some competition from Walmart, should Chapel Hill, Carrboro and Pittsboro downtown businesses worry? Traditional downtowns provide a different experience than found in a Walmart but it may be necessary for them to continue to differentiate their products and services to remain vibrant and they may even benefit from partnership with Walmart.

Oakland, a small rural town in Western Maryland, is an example of a town that did both. I talked with the Director of the Garrett County Community Action

Coalition about the town's efforts to compete and collaborate with Walmart and his comments are summarized below:

The Oakland Main Street Manager worked with retailers to develop unique product lines and to create marketing strategies to bring foot traffic from Walmart to Main Street. Walmart also offered an annual, \$2,000 grant program for downtown events. Walmart has made this area a regional attraction. Overall, a positive experience.

CAN WALMART BE A CATALYST FOR GOOD DEVELOPMENT AND CROSS-COUNTY COLLABORATION?

How would you develop an adjacent commercial property to capture customer traffic to a Walmart? Is it possible to balance retail with non-shopping experiences and yet get the needed tax dollars?

More development is coming to U.S.15-501 South. Chapel Hill's goals for 15-501 South include encouraging clustered, compact development, including retail, toward the County line while also promoting greenways and preserving open space.

Can Walmart be a catalyst for good development on both sides of the County line? What would be the ideal mix of uses that would capture tax dollars but also give people a quality of life experiences not exclusively related to shopping? Some options to consider are:

- Retailers that provide unique products and services to capture sales from customers that are already attracted to the area by Walmart.

- Retailers with a huge selection in a single category to pick up on customers that don't find the item at Walmart.

- Connected sites to "capture" the Walmart customer before he/she gets in the car and back on the highway.

- Human scale, bike/pedestrian/transit oriented development with a mix of residential, entertainment, professional office, manufacturing, public facilities, nonprofits, parks, open spaces.

Research has shown that adjacent, mixed use, connected developments reduces traffic and provides significantly higher returns to local governments through property and sales taxes. Parks and open space create a sense of well being that also attracts tax-paying businesses and residents to communities.

NEXT STEPS

Walmart is just part of the development that is coming to 15-501 South. I would like to see community residents and stakeholder come together to discuss ensuing development's form, values and impacts on quality of life and community character. The issues presented in this article are a starting point to get the dialog started.

Deepa Sanyal, Ph.D., a Chatham resident, is a planning consultant for sustainable communities. She can be reached at deepasanyal@gmail.com

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