

安らぎと再生の地 オザークス

A Place of Restoration, Recreation, and Safety:

The Ozarks in *The Shepherd of the Hills*, *The Bald-Knobbers*, and *The Witness*¹

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要旨

アメリカにおける地域研究は、各分野の大学教授を中心とした学際的な学会を主として展開されている。このうち、ミズーリ州立大学が主催するオザークス・シンポジウムで2015年に文学の領域から口頭発表をする機会があった。本研究ノートは、この内容から発展させて書かれたものである。かの地で優れた純文学が生まれていないことが残念ではあるが、その牧歌的な美しさはロマンス志向の作家達を引きつけてきた。古くは *The Shepherd of the Hills* や *The Bald-Knobbers* の舞台であり、作中の町を逃れた青年は、清い心の乙女に出会い恋をした。研究ノートのうち、この2作品については主にジョン・ハン氏の手によるものであり、*The Witness* については久保田 文が担当した。

●キーワード：アメリカ小説 (American novel) / オザークス (Ozarks) / ロマンス (romance)

Introduction

In *Winter's Bone* (2006), which was later made into a critically acclaimed movie, Daniel Woodrell paints a grim picture of the Ozark back country. This crime novel portrays the world of poverty, hopelessness, violence, and controlled substances in the life of Ozarkians. In the story, seventeen-year-old Ree Dolly is the only strong, self-assured character who persists in putting her family together. Except for her, the novel has few positive elements: families are broken, violence happens frequently, and illegal drug use or trade is common. Woodrell's novel can be considered a work of realism—one that describes the reality of roughness originating in poverty. In his *New York Times* book review, David Bowman identifies the novel's genre as "hillbilly noir," praising the author for his dazzling ability to portray "the hillbilly landscape—its weather, its wilderness, its lack of culture and its primitive tongue," the place where "violence is practiced more often than hope or language."

In contrast to the dinginess in Woodrell's novel, which David Bowman seems to accept as an entirely accurate representation of the Ozarks, many romance

novels set in the area—especially those from the early twentieth century—portray the region in a predominantly positive light. Rural communities have their share of bad apples among residents, yet these novels highlight the unspoiled beauty of the landscape, the peaceful way of life, and the goodwill of people in the highland region of the central United States. These novels typically idealize the natural world and what John Dryden calls "the noble savage" who lives a simple life uncorrupted by urban civilization. Enthusiastic critical reception of *Winter's Bone* shows that readers are captivated by a naturalistic representation of the Ozarks. At the same time, romance novels set in the region illustrate that a romanticized, stylized view of the region holds strong.

This paper examines Harold Bell Wright's *The Shepherd of the Hills* (1907), Clyde Edwin Tuck's *The Bald-Knobbers: A Romantic and Historical Novel* (1910), and Nora Roberts's *The Witness* (2012) with special emphasis on the ways in which the Ozark Plateau appeals to the outsiders. Despite their one-dimensional plots and stereotypical characterizations, these three romance novels show that the Ozarks was and still is

perceived as a place of restoration, recreation, and safety—a safe haven for the weary and burdened. In her essay “The Hillbilly Stereotype and the Modern Ozarker,” Jill Henderson rightly notes, “For generations, Ozarkers have been degraded by historic myths, television sit-coms and modern movies that perpetually portray them as outlaws, meth-heads, backwards clans and simple-minded idjits.” A positive portrayal of the Ozarks in three novels above can serve as a counterpoint to the predominantly negative view of the region, demonstrating that a romantic version of the region is valued by readers as much as a naturalistic one.

In Search of Pastoral Innocence: *The Shepherd of the Hills*

In *The Shepherd of the Hills*, Dad Howitt—a mysterious man who pastored a Chicago church—comes to the Ozark country to escape city life. Mr. Daniel Howitt has come to the Ozarkian village of Mutton Hollow, where his son, Mad Howitt, committed grievous transgressions by impregnating and then abandoning a local girl. The girl died during delivery of a baby boy, and her father, Mr. Matthews, pledges to kill both Mad Howitt and his father. Already knowing the secret story involving his son and the girl, Dad Howitt came to the Ozarks to make amends for the wayward son. Unbeknownst to him, Mad Howitt also lives in a nearby cave trying to expiate his guilt. At the end of the novel, Dad Howitt, who is known among the neighbors as “The Shepherd of the Hills”—decides not to return to Chicago, instead staying in the Ozark Mountains which is what he calls God’s Country.

This story of love and revenge is set against a tranquil, peaceful setting of the Ozarks. The author’s appreciation of the region is reflected on the dedication page, where he reminisces about a “beautiful summer in the Ozark hills” he and his wife encountered. When Dad Howitt appears in chapter 1, he exudes an air of knowledge, refinement, and authority, yet he also looks distressed and sorrowful. In addition to wet and misty weather, the author’s description of Howitt’s physical

characteristics makes it clear that he is fatigued and burdened: “His form stooped a little in the shoulders, perhaps with weariness.... [His face was] was the countenance of one fairly staggering under a burden of disappointment and grief” (Wright 21).

Dad Howitt, who serves as the author’s mouthpiece, repeatedly lauds country life. When a young local man, Jed Holland, asks the stranger whether he came to the Ozarks for wealth, he answers, “No, I’m not looking for mines of lead and zinc; there is greater wealth in these hills and forests, young man” (22). Howitt, who has lost his wife and children and thinks that he has lost Mad Howitt to suicide, considers the country an ideal place for burial. In his conversation with the elder Matthew, he expresses envy of a country cemetery: “I wish that my dear ones had a resting place like that. In the crowded city cemetery the ground is always shaken by the tramping of funeral professions” (28-29). He also explains that he came to Mutton Hollow for restoration of his body and soul: “One could find peace here—surely, sir, one could find it here—peace and strength” (29). Dad Howitt—by extension, Harold Bell Wright—thinks that country is a place where one finds God more easily than urban areas.

In chapter 4, Aunt Mollie tells Dad Howitt that the natural beauty of the countryside is superficial, adding that country life is hard and dangerous. That is why, says Aunt Mollie, girls like Sammy Lane, want to go to the city. In response, Dad Howitt points out that city life entails even more challenges for its inhabitants: “The city has its hardships and its dangers too, Mrs. Matthews; life there demands almost too much at times; I often wonder if it is worth the struggle” (34). While acknowledging that country life is tough, Dad Howitt also notes that it is grounded in honesty and hard work.

The Ozarks the Beautiful: *The Bald-Knobbers*

The Bald-Knobbers, a historical romance, presents a young St. Louis attorney who comes to the hill country in search of natural beauty and becomes a respected leader of the residents. In the first two chapters of the

novel, country life is represented as superior to city life. Boyd Westbrook, a St. Louis attorney disillusioned by his ex-girlfriend, vacations in the Ozark Mountains—a symbol of natural beauty—in search of peace and quiet. The Ozarks is primitive and has yet to be tainted by commercialism and deceptiveness as represented by city life.

At the beginning of chapter 11, the members of the Wessex Club have a camping trip up the White River. The author describes the unadulterated natural beauty and the peaceful way of life it nurtures as follows:

Soon the campers chatted by the cheerful campfire, giving themselves up to the sweetness of that unmeasured solitude, and let the tranquil leisure of the forest enfold them. The strength of the hills seemed to be imparted to them. Some were lounging, relaxed, after a hearty meal, principally of fish just caught from the river. They watched the play of lights and shadows in the heart of the forest, reflecting gleams along the sheltering boughs. Beneath such giant patriarchal trees, beside such crystal waters, such rugged bluffs. What wildness, solitariness, aloofness! In such a region, where over all the far-flung wasteland there lies repose, the world of care and toil seems far away—there the weary find rest. (Tuck 110)

As expected, the pristine beauty the Ozarks soothes Westbrook's soul. Country provides him with "a complete rest" and serves as "a source of inspiration" for him (47, 105). The scenery of the moonlit White River Valley is "one of rare beauty and one of strong appeal to the world weary" (20). He "loved the artistic and the nobler things which life held for the seekers after beauty and truth. And here in the sparsely settled mountains, far from the refined society which he had always known, he believed he had discovered a nature that seemed to harmonize with his own..." (21). It is no wonder that, Angenet Clifton, the country girl with whom he falls in love, possesses "simple unaffected beauty" (21). Whereas his ex-girlfriend in St. Louis is a faithless and deceitful

socialite, Angenet reflects the natural beauty and innocence of the Ozarks. Westbrook's return to nature recalls the European Romantics of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries who sought to recover not only childhood innocence but truths for life in a primitive environment. His return to nature is also in line with Taoist ideals which view nature as a reflection of the Tao—the underlying principle of the universe which provides guidance to human life.

In a natural setting of the Ozarks, Westbrook and Clifton carry out the conventions of courtly love. Westbrook appears as a "well-bred" man (55) and a city attorney who falls in love with an idealized country girl. Like a medieval knight errant, he rescues Angenet twice from dangers. Contrasted with Westbrook's fiancé in St. Louis, Angenet impresses Westbrook with her "simplicity, plainness of dress, and unaffected manner" (47).

Where Life Begins Anew: *The Witness*

In *The Witness*, Elizabeth Fitch witnesses a murder of a man at a Chicago nightclub and runs away to the Ozarks, where she lives as Abigail Lowery. The novel's opening sentence sums up the reason why Elizabeth leaves Chicago and her promising future as a bright student at Harvard: "Elizabeth Fitch's short-lived teenage rebellion began with L'Oréal Pure Black, a pair of scissors and a fake ID. It ended in blood" (Roberts 4). Elizabeth was born of Dr. Susan L. Fitch—the chief of surgery of Chicago's Silva Memorial Hospital—through artificial insemination. Elizabeth, whose IQ is 210, was designed by her overbearing mother to go to Harvard Medical School and become a doctor. In a somewhat implausible plot development, Elizabeth suddenly becomes rebellious, produces a fake ID, dyes her hair, goes to a nightclub, meets a group of Russian gangsters, and become entangled with a murder case.² Although innocent of crimes, she decides to leave the city, carving out her life somewhere on her own: "At some point, she'd take on a new identity, a new life, and find some way to make the best of it. She could study whatever

she wanted” (93). Her final destination turns out to be an isolated wilderness outside a small town in the Arkansas Ozarks, where she lives as a hermit until she draws the attention of the town police chief, Brooks Gleason.

The second section of the book focuses mostly on Brooks, who increasingly becomes interested in Elizabeth-turned-Abigail. Through their conversations, we learn that Abigail works as a freelancer designing computer programs and software and security systems. Her house is heavily secured, she owns nine handguns for self-protection, and she carries a gun on her occasional, brief shopping trips to town. A mysterious person who lives a simple life, she desires no attention from anyone, but in a small town, it is impossible to get unnoticed by others—especially when one remains aloof. Her appearance is characterized by no make-up, simple clothes, no nail polish, and no bright colors (119). As his curiosity about the apparently intelligent recent transplant rises, Brooks wonders why and from where she came to the Ozarks. He strikes up a conversation with her, visits her house, learns more about her, and volunteers to help her, assuring her that he is “a good cop” (115). She dismissively thanks him, but as we find out later in the novel, she will need his help, and he protects her in times of personal danger.

In the novel, the Ozarks appears as a place safe from urban crime and violence. Of course, crime and violence do exist in the Ozarks—the novel tells the reader about wife-beating, shoplifting, and brawls—yet, in this region, one can choose to stay safe most of the time. According to the narrator, Abigail “moved to this pretty corner of the Ozarks precisely because she wanted no neighbors, no people, no interruptions to whatever she set for herself” (111). She loves her log house: “So wonderfully quiet she could hear the creek bubble and sing. So private and secluded, with its deep woods. And secure” (111). Not appreciating Brooks’s suspicion of her, she replies that she moved to the Ozarks “for the quiet, the solitude” (124). She adds, “I like my property, and the land around it. I like this town. I feel comfortable here. I just want to be left alone” (124).

The novel portrays a mostly positive small town life in the Ozarks. The residents are friendly, and they prefer simple rural life to materialistic urban civilization. Good foods always play an important role in the expression of neighborly love. Abigail observes a backyard barbecue party which Sunny hosts: “A backyard barbecue had its points... A casual setting for socialization, a variety of food prepared by a variety of hands... It was a kind of ritual,... somewhat tribal, with adults helping to serve or feed or tend to the children, their own and those belonging to others...” (20). A strong sense of community helps children grow well both physically and spiritually.

Conclusion

The three novels above attempt to make a case why some people are attracted to the Ozarks. In *The Shepherd of the Hills*, the area is a place for spiritual regeneration and ministry, *The Bald-Knobbers* shows that the area has the appeal of natural beauty, and the area represents peace and quiet in *The Witness*. While naturalistic novels—such as Woodrell’s *Winter’s Bone*—debunk romanticized myths about country life by highlighting its challenges and drawbacks, these romance novels portray the Ozarks as a place of refuge from the hustle and bustle of city life; their main characters find something valuable cities fail to provide.

In his classic book *The Country and the City* (1973), Raymond Williams explores how the country and the city are represented in English literature. While acknowledging that the concepts of country and city are not always clearly distinguishable, there are certain characteristics associated with each locality. On the positive side, the country represents “peace, innocence, and simple virtue,” whereas the city represents “of learning, communication, [and] light” (1). Negatively, the country is “a place of backwardness, ignorance, limitation,” whereas the city is “a place of noise, worldliness and ambition” (1). In popular literature, as the three novels we discussed, the stereotypical images of country and city are generally upheld.

Of course, reading between the lines of the three novels reveals that the authors are not always successful in expressing their seeming adoration of country life. Although city life is supposed to represent evil and corruption, there is also an envy of city life among country people. At the beginning of Wright's novel, in which Jed Holland encounters Dan Howitt for the first time, he feels that he is "in the presence of a superior man" based on the elderly man's urbane demeanor (Wright 22). In *The Bald-Knobbers*, Boyd Westbrook—a city attorney—is superior to the mountaineers not only in intelligence and refinement but also in his physical prowess. Angenet is grateful that a cultured person like Westbrook is interested in a country girl like her (47). However, she is not truly a country girl—unlike other girls, she speaks Standard English (53), and her family name is French. Westbrook is attracted to her because of her simplicity, yet he also notices in her a degree of urbane refinement that he does not find in other country girls. Not surprisingly, we learn that Angenet is a woman of an honorable ancestry. Finally, Abigail in *The Witness* appears more self-confident, self-respecting, and intelligent than any of the local women. She is different from Sylbie, the police chief's Ozarks ex-girlfriend, who flaunts her seductive hair and has no qualms about offering her body to him uninvited.

As Nora Roberts's novel shows, times have changed, and the Ozarks does not represent a supposedly naive, backward culture anymore. It is a region where tradition lives but new trends are embraced; cultural changes are taking place thanks to the institutions of higher learning in the area, the proliferation of modern mass media, and the numerous tourists who visit the region. When the police chief Brooks visits Abigail's house for the first time, he tells her what kind of town she lives in: "We're a small town, Abigail. A small resort

town, full of New Agers and old hippies, second-generation hippies, artists. We're friendly" (Roberts 124). Brooks's own mother represents the counterculture of the 1960s. Unlike *The Shepherd of the Hills* and *The Bald-Knobbers*, in which many characters speak a sometimes unintelligible dialect, rural people in *The Witness* speak Standard English. Also, compared with the two earlier novels, *The Witness* is more balanced in its portrayal of the Ozarks, although it still presents the region as a place of peace and quiet. Roberts's work shows that the Ozarks is not an isolated area anymore, and that it is conversant with the outside world.

Notes

- 1 An earlier version of this essay was co-presented by John J. Han and Aya Kubota at the Ninth Annual Ozarks Studies Symposium (Theme: The Lure of the Ozarks), Missouri State University-West Plains, Missouri, USA, 18-19 Sept. 2015.
- 2 Admittedly, before this incident, the heroine knew little about the real world; she was not even allowed to drink Coke. However, it is hard to imagine that a highly intelligent, analytical teenager who attends Harvard is unable to predict the possible consequences of her reckless actions.

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