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## **Mary Lee Settle: The Mother Jones of West Virginia Literature**

by Phyllis Wilson Moore

When I think of Mary Lee Settle, a writer's writer, I often think of Mother Jones, the Miner's Angel. Their voices could fill a room; both were larger than life, and neither doffed their hat to power or privilege.

Jones, born in the 1830s in Cork, Ireland, is a legend in West Virginia for risking her life in the fight for unionization of West Virginia's coal miners. Lovely to look at, and noted for salty language, she inspired and rallied miners and their families and left an indelible mark on the labor movement. Settle captured Jones's essence in her novel *The Scapegoat* (1950), set in 1912 during the West Virginia mine wars, and tells of her Grandmother Addie's 1902 assistance to Jones, and thus local miners, in *Addie: A Memoir* (1998).

Settle, born July 29, 1918, in Charleston, West Virginia, is the Mother Jones of West Virginia literature. Lovely to look at, and noted for salty language, she was an outspoken political activist and a writer willing to take risk and defy expectations. She left an indelible mark on literature, both here and abroad.

In 1991, eager to meet the creator of the mythical West Virginia estate she called Beulah, I arranged a journey to Charleston, West Virginia, Settle's home town (the model

for Canona in the Beulah Quintet) to hear her read and see her receive a Lifetime Achievement Award from the State of West Virginia. A fellow reader cautioned me not to ask Settle to autograph my cache of her works and not to ask to take her photograph. She explained Settle did not suffer fools gladly and had a history of being at odds with several members of the local country club set. Under these circumstances she could bristle about autographs and photographs.

Nevertheless, I packed Settle's books in my tote bag, threw in my camera and headed with trepidation to the Cultural Center Theater. The on-stage Settle, dressed in her favored earth tones, had a commanding presence and statuesque good looks to match. As she spoke, her gnarled voice and training in drama added shading to her characters. Her eyes flashed through large brown-rimmed glasses while her graceful hands punctuated words.

After the reading, I hesitantly approached her with *Prisons* (1973), my favorite of her novels (tote bag and camera stuck in a corner of a near wall), and struck up a conversation about her work. When she asked which works I liked best, I said her World War II experiences in England (*All the Brave Promises: Memoirs of Aircraft Woman 2<sup>ND</sup> Class 2146391*) (1966) and *Prisons*. She asked why *All the Brave Promises*? I mentioned specific sections plus the gutsy dedication, "to the wartime other ranks of the Women's Auxiliary Air Force, Royal Air Force—below the rank of sergeant."

Next she asked which character in *Prisons* I liked best. At my answer of Johnny Church for refusing to doff his hat to despots, she smiled broadly and said Johnny was the character most like her. Without realizing it, I "passed muster." Not only had I read the memoir and novel, I had an opinion.

Still smiling, she said Charles Dickens referred to his novel *David Copperfield* as his favorite child because he related to the character and experiences of Copperfield. She then inscribed *Prisons* with an eight-word quote from Dickens followed by five words of her own, “I have in my heart a favorite child’ his name is Johnny Church.” Nodding toward my rather obvious tote bag she asked, “What’s in there?” “More of your books,” I replied. “Don’t you want them autographed?” Then without waiting for a reply, “Get `em up here.”

As she went through the stacks she mentioned how seldom she saw a copy of her first children’s book *The Story of Flight* (1967) or her novel *Pride’s Promise* (1976), first published as *Know Nothing* (1960), and inscribed both, “very rare copy.”

True to the spirit of the crusty Mother Jones, Settle autographed her ill-fated novel *Fight Night on a Sweet Saturday* (1964) with, “I did not write this damned book.” *Fight Night*, written to conclude what she called the Beulah Trilogy, received harsh criticism for being truncated. She concurred and set out to expand the trilogy.

After years of research the Beulah Quintet was born. Portions of *Fight Night* found their way into *The Killing Ground* (1982), but the novel itself is no longer included in the quintet. *The Killing Ground*, the last novel in the quintet and in my stack, awaited her autograph. With a flourish she inscribed it in large bold letters, “Good Lord-you have a lot of my books. I’m delighted.” She next delighted me by permitting photographs of her and the stack of books.

We wrapped up our meeting discussing George Garrett’s scholarly work, *Understanding Mary Lee Settle* (1988) and she quipped, “My husband bought the first ten

copies, but it didn't help him one bit." I left the event eager to read more of her work and to hear more interviews and readings.

No one read Settle's work like Settle, especially *Addie*. Her dramatic style made the humor more obvious, and her husky voice was like no other. A convert to Catholicism, she saw humor in Addie's denouncement of the Catholic Church as "the Whore of Babylon" and evoked the cadence of a fundamentalist sermon to portray her. She preached out Addie's fiery pronouncements, such as her decision to permit Mother Jones to use a Cedar Grove bull field to rally miners, and this during the Mine Wars and to the utter dismay of the entire family. Addie was no stranger to clashes with family or society.

Addie's clashes aren't the only ones in the memoir. Settle records her own first clash with the publishing world at age nine. Without her knowledge, a mentor changed "chiffon pie" to "punkin' pie" in her poem and sent it to the highly regarded *West Virginia Review*. When the magazine arrived at Cedar Grove, complete with published poem, an irate (then) red-haired Settle stood on the stair landing stamping her foot vowing never to write another word as long as she lived. As she later wrote, she didn't like punkin' and she didn't like cute. Fortunately, she did like to write.

She mastered many genres, and recorded numerous audio and video interviews about her work. Even her minor characters have telling traits. A good example is crotchety Old Man Tremble in *The Killing Ground*. Settle presents him to listeners in Kay Bonetti's American Audio Prose Library tape "Mary Lee Settle Reads the Beulah Quintet (excerpts)" (1982).

Through Tremble, Settle shows the nuances of West Virginia speech and compresses truth, humor, and history into his pithy comments about women, poverty, health care, politics, strip mining, and a disabled miner's lot in West Virginia. In Kate Long's fourteen West Virginia author interview series *In their Own Country* (2003), the gentle Settle surfaces, and she reveals her attachment to what she dubbed "my little country," West Virginia. She ends the interview with a husky heartfelt rendition of one of her favorite hymns "Beulah Land."

In the fall of 2002, while concluding research on the literary map of West Virginia, I visited Cedar Grove. The stately brick house with its manicured lawn and vegetable garden, and the family-built Virginia's Chapel, just a stone's throw down the road, were just as pictured in *Addie*. No longer a Tompkins' family residence, the owner didn't know the specific field Mother Jones used for the miners' rally, but the presence of Addie, Settle, and Jones was palpable.

In April of 2003 Settle received the first Life Time Achievement Award: Literary Arts from the West Virginia Folklife Center at Fairmont State College (now University) and told me the bull field's location. That evening she read Mother Jones's rousing speech from *The Scapegoat*, and to a standing ovation.

I sent her photographs of the evening and of Cedar Grove. The packet included a copy of the first official literary map of West Virginia, "From a Place Called Solid" (2004) with her accomplishments front and center.

At her death on September 27, 2005, Settle closed rank with a long line of significant women authors from this place she called the Endless Mountains. Like Mother Jones, Addie, and Settle, they just didn't know how to be mediocre or ordinary. Days before her

death, she requested that portions of the Gospel of St. John be read at her memorial service. John 1:1 opens with “In the beginning was the word...” a fitting tribute to a woman known for her words.

Settle’s extraordinary voice is not silenced. With perfect pitch, it resonates both in this place and in the halls of literature. We will miss her presence but she is with us in her own way...words.