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Meredith Sue Willis: Writing Her Own Dispatch

by Phyllis Wilson Moore

Meredith Sue Willis editor—editor, teacher, community activist, wife and mother---is first and foremost a writer. She is the author of five novels for adults, two collections of short stories, three children's books, a young adult science fiction novel, essays, three books on writing and more.

South Orange, New Jersey, population 16,000 plus, is her residence. It is a loved place, as is nearby New York. However, Shinnston, West Virginia, population less than 2,500, is the place she calls home and the place she returns to in person as well as in her imagination.

Located 35 miles below the Mason Dixon line and an equal distance from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and Sago, West Virginia, it is a bustling town straddling the West Fork River. A town where folks still plant gardens out back and a nearby electricity power station generates plumes of smoke, its tall gray towers as much a part of the environment as the river or surrounding hills.

The town has changed since Willis's birth on May 31, 1964. Shinnston High School, her beloved alma mater, is no more. School consolidation resulted in the new Lincoln High School, where she has served as a consultant in creative writing. *Blazing Pencils: a Guide to Writing Fiction and Essays* (Teachers and Writers Collaborative, 1990) incorporates Lincoln students' examples of how to write from life's experiences.

Shinnston High School played a significant role in Willis's life. An honor student, Willis completed two years of French and Latin, three years of higher level math, attended journalism camp at West Virginia University, published a story in a national publication, *The Student Writer*, and earned the Bausch & Lomb Science Award. She was sophomore Homecoming Princess, and the class of 1964 voted her Most Likely to Succeed and Best Leader. It might surprise classmates to learn she, too, experienced angst and was not all that comfortable trying to fit in.

Reared with her younger sister, Christine, in a modest home on East Avenue, she was keenly aware of the town's religious, ethnic and socio-economic mix and polyglot of languages. The town's early residents were of English/Welch/Scotch-Irish parentage or German farmers and cattle ranchers, with a few Irish railroad workers and descendants of slaves in the lot.

Shinnston experienced an influx of European immigrants from early 1900 to 1930. The new arrivals reacted to derogatory nicknames by retaliated with their own version of an ethnic-epithet, perhaps unique to Shinnston, and called their antagonists "Snuffies." It is likely this name came from Snuffy Smith, a do-less moonshine-making mountain man in a syndicated comic strip that is still in print. The Shinnston Snuffies and the immigrants labored together in the oil fields, zinc plants, coal mines and glass industries of the county while their children developed friendships and romances. It was a town of problems and promises.

"My Father's Stories: An Essay," introduces Willis's short story collection, *In the Mountains of America* (Mercury House, 1994) and illustrates the point: "To my father, Shinnston, West Virginia, represented grand new vistas. This was the great world to him

in a way city people can hardly imagine. Shinnston had folks from Syria and Spain and Yugoslavia. Shinnston had a mansion on a hill built by an Italian immigrant and a dark little shop in town where an elderly Jew repaired shoes. My father says the first day he was in Shinnston he met Dave Hardesty, who told him: `We have a real tall man here in town named Short, and we have a little short man named Long. There's a black man named White and a white man named Black.' A town of wonder: everything was possible.”

Her father, Glenn Willis, earned an undergraduate degree from nearby Fairmont State College (now a university) and a Master of Arts from West Virginia University by working in the mines between semesters. He managed a Shinnston Dairy King during the summer with Meredith Sue as his helper. According to Meredith Sue, “he was my teacher and my boss and my dad.” He was the family story teller and taught Sunday school at the Baptist church, the family's social hub.

The possibilities of work and advancement brought others of Willis's ancestors to Virginia, Kentucky and West Virginia. Her mother-- Lucille Meredith, born within thirty miles of Shinnston at Cook Camp, a Harrison County mining camp--was a coal miner's daughter and a college graduate. She taught English part-time at Shinnston High School and substitute occasionally in Meredith Sue's geometry class.

No one speaks more eloquently than Willis of the joys and woes of life in a small town, where even a hair cut is noticed. She recalls entertaining herself in the backyard by circling a tree repeatedly as she created magical worlds in her head. Later in her childhood, she wrote and designed covers for the Black Horsey Books, stories of imaginary adventures, which her mother still has today.

Willis family dinner conversations often revolved around issues of equality, moral values, fairness and the importance of faith. The Willis girls were taught not to “get above their raising” or be overly concerned with possessions.

Willis calls these factors part of her “genetic cocktail.” Her strong sense of values accompanied her to Bucknell University’s campus in Lewisburg, Pennsylvania. After two years, somewhat to her parent’s dismay, she left school to work for Volunteers in Service to America (VISTA). Thus, one of West Virginia’s brightest fought poverty in a neighborhood of mostly low-income African Americans in Norfolk, Virginia, just shortly after one of New York’s brightest, John J. (Jay) Rockefeller III, completed his 1964 VISTA assignment fighting poverty in Emmons, West Virginia.

In VISTA, Willis says she saw “poverty and the results of racism up close at the same time the Vietnam War was heating up.” This led her to change direction. Seeking a more politically active environment, she entered Barnard College in New York and involved herself with the Students for a Democratic Society and the Vietnam War protest movement. Her activist and VISTA experiences are fictionalized in her novel *Only Great Changes* (Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1985), and surface in other work such as *Dwight’s House & Other Stories* (Hamilton Stone Editions, 2004) and in the award winning story “The Two Lindas.” (*The Chaffin Journal*, 2001)

While at Barnard, she participated in a work-study program with senior citizens at the Goddard-Riverside Community Center and stored some events as grist for her fiction mill. One of the poignant and humorous stories she later created was “Elvissa Did Not Become a Rabbi” (*Kimera: Journal of Fine Writing*, Volume 5, Fall 2000). She was graduated Phi Beta Kappa and Magna Cum Laude (1969), and she was hired at the

Recreation Department of Bellevue Hospital. During the hospital's orientation session, she met a young medical student from her Barnard days, Andrew (Andy) B. Weinberger. Weinberger and Willis dated, committed to each other, and eventually married. They settled in Brooklyn where their only child, Joel Howard Willis Weinberger, now at Brown University, was born in 1985.

After a year at Bellevue, she entered Columbia University and immersed herself in the peace movement, participating in the 1968 anti-war-sit-ins. During this period, her story "The Baby Sitters," won a student contest and appeared in *Mademoiselle* (1969). She received a Master of Fine Arts from Columbia (1972) and focused on novel writing while Andy completed medical school with a specialty in rheumatology.

A Space Apart (Charles Scribner's Sons, 1979), the novel she calls "a book I had to write," is the story of a West Virginia Baptist preacher and his family, living under a small town's daily scrutiny. Preacher John Scarlin has problems such as how to deal with Vera, a less than docile wife, and how to discipline their daughter Tonie, a feisty ten-year old.

A Space Apart met with success, and Willis completed *Higher Ground* (Charles Scribner's Sons, 1981) with support from a Creative Writing Fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts. Dedicated to her parents and sister, the novel introduces readers to chess-playing, book-absorbed Blair Ellen Morgan, the child of West Virginia school teachers. The novel captures Blair Ellen's experiences from childhood through high school, from her escape to the big city and marriage, and back to West Virginia for her class's tenth reunion. The dialogue is pitch perfect, and the people and

settings are depicted authentically. While not autobiographical, Willis feels the novel reflects selected emotions of her youth.

Willis incorporates her own experiences into the next two books of the series, as well. *Only Great Changes* (Charles Scribner's Sons, 1985), focuses on Blair Ellen and her newfound VISTA companions. Assigned to a poor, mostly African American section of urban Norfolk, Virginia, she experiences intimacies, new freedoms and a life far different from her past. *Trespassers: A Novel* (Hamilton Stone Editions, 1997), takes place in New York, in the incendiary days of the 1960s. Now calling herself just Blair, the protagonist works at Bellevue, attends Columbia University and ends up in jail for participating in a sit-in. Energetic idealist Blair does not limit her activism to campus. She wants to organize Bellevue patients to "take charge of their own lives and stop being pushed around," even though they have not asked her to do so. The trilogy ends with Blair frightened by the jail experience but determined to continue her role as an activist and go wherever activism takes her.

Willis's latest adult novel *Oradell at Sea* (West Virginia University Press, 2002), is the story of another feisty West Virginia character from a mining and union background. Oradell is cut in the mold of a wealthy Mother Jones with a drinking problem.

Willis also is the author of children's/youth literature: *The Super Secret Powers of Marco* (Harper Collins, 1994), *Marco's Monster* (Harper Collins, 1996), *Billie of Fish House Lane* (Montemayor Press, 2006), and a young adult science fiction novel *The City Built of Star Ships* (Montemayor Press, 2004). The themes of her juvenile fiction relate to freedom, equality and how to live peacefully in a shared world.

A respected teacher with the New Jersey Council on the Arts, she serves as a writer-in-the-schools of New York City and as an adjunct faculty member in New York University's School of Continuing Professional Studies where she originated and designed courses on beginning a novel and how to structure a novel. She serves as a presenter at how-to workshops for writers in venues including the Appalachian Writers Workshop and the annual conference of West Virginia Writers, Inc.

Her writing about the Appalachian region was the subject of the Fourteen Annual Emory and Henry Literary Festival in Emory, Virginia (1995). The Meredith Sue Willis Issue of the *Iron Mountain Review* is available from Emory and Henry College, as well.

This Shinnston "Snuffy," as she enjoys calling herself, receives numerous honors. Some are from the home place: Non-Italian Woman of the Year at the West Virginia Italian Heritage Festival (1990); Shinnston High Schools Hall of Fame (1996); Honorary Doctorate of Humane Letters from West Virginia University (2004); recognition on the first official literary map of West Virginia "From a Place Called Solid," published by the West Virginia Folklife Center at Fairmont State University (2004).

Her self-produced website (<http://www.meredithsuewillis.com>) has a front-porch, conversational style with spiritual and ethical issues discussed as freely as literary topics. The site offers a personal blog, newsletter, information about the author-run publishing house Hamilton Stone Editions, links to Willis's online stories and to sites of other authors (many of whom are West Virginians), book reviews, workshop dates and information about activities of the Essex Ethical Culture Society and various social projects in South Orange. Visitor can find news of Andy, Joel, the family parakeet, and

her backyard organic garden and also read an occasional haiku. And there is always news from Shinnston.