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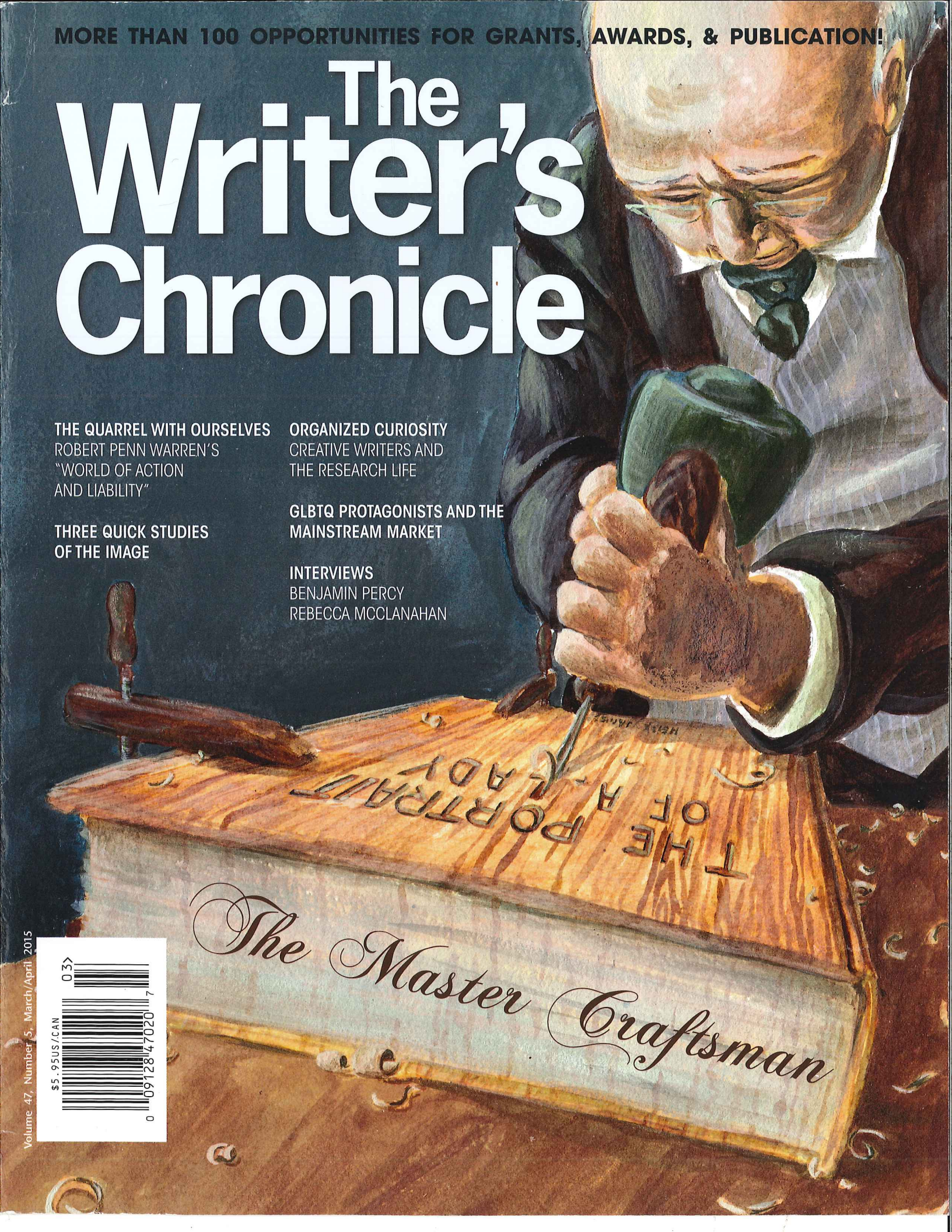

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features

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An Interview with Rebecca McClanahan

by Sharon DeBartolo Carmack

The more attention we pay—"pay" suggesting that it will cost us something—the more complex and extraordinary those designs become.

Rebecca McClanahan has published ten books—of poetry, essays, writing instruction, and nonfiction, most recently *The Tribal Knot: A Memoir of Family, Community, and a Century of Change* (2013) and a revised edition of *Word Painting: The Fine Art of Writing Descriptively* (2014). Her suite of essays, *The Riddle Song and Other Rememberings* (2002), won the Glasgow prize from *Shenandoah*; other awards include the J. Howard and Barbara M.J. Wood Prize from *Poetry*, the Carter prize for the essay from *Shenandoah*, literature fellowships from the New York Foundation for the Arts and the North Carolina Arts Council, and the Governor's Award for Excellence in Education for her leadership in the Poetry-in-the-Schools program in North Carolina. Her poems, essays, and fiction, which have been selected for *The Best American Poetry*, *The Best American Essays*, and the *Pushcart Prize* series, also appear in anthologies published by Beacon Press, Norton, Doubleday, St. Martin's, Putnam, Penguin, Simon & Schuster, and numerous other literary publications. McClanahan teaches in the MFA programs of Queens University (Charlotte) and Rainier Writing Workshop as well as the *Kenyon Review* Writers Workshop. She is the 2015 Louis D. Rubin, Jr. Writer-in-Residence at Hollins University.

Sharon DeBartolo Carmack: Most of your readers know you through your books of essays and poems, or through your writing craft texts, especially *Word Painting*, which has recently been released in a revised edition. With *The Tribal Knot*, you've embarked on yet another genre, a multi-generational memoir based on hundreds of documents.

Rebecca McClanahan: Sounds like I can't claim my country of origin, doesn't it? I've always written whatever claims me at any particular time, in whatever genre. Maybe that's because I was a Marine Corps brat, moving so often that I learned to make a home wherever I landed. In some ways, though, writing *The Tribal Knot* allowed me to live in several literary places at once.

Carmack: You seem to do that well in this memoir. Along with the driving narrative prose, letter and diary excerpts, and the essay quality of some chapters, you also include some poetry. Does writing poetry improve your literary nonfiction writing? Do you feel a literary nonfiction writer can write with the same quality of imagery without having a background in poetry?

McClanahan: I'm sure that many prose writers—perhaps some of my favorite writers of fiction and nonfiction—have little background or interest in poetry, though their works contain memorable images. I read, write, and memorize poems because they feed me in ways that other literature doesn't. I'm not sure if imagery is what I'm so hungry for; I suspect it's the music. Ever since I was a child, I've been drawn to rhythms and sound echoes, and later to the turn of a line of poetry, which to me is a physical pleasure, like dancing. I trained in voice and piano, and never relinquished my hunger for the musical arts. Poetry is in my blood like music is in my blood. I can't imagine life without it. Remember that wonderful essay by Ray Bradbury, "How to Keep and Feed a Muse," when he suggests that all writers should read poetry every day of their lives? "It flexes muscles you don't use often enough," he says. I agree, which is why I begin every workshop I teach—whether it's poetry, fiction, or nonfiction—by reciting a poem that I admire. It's a form of exercise: calisentences, I call it.

Carmack: Tell me about the origins of the title, *The Tribal Knot*.

McClanahan: Several years ago, after I had already drafted many chapters of the book, I interviewed a distant relative, trying to clear up some details about the family murder-suicide that occurred in Wisconsin in the 1930s—most of my ancestors lived in Indiana, but others migrated to Wisconsin. During our conversation, she mentioned a "hair picture" that some local residents reported as being an important element in the father-son killings. The picture—a form of Victorian hair art, based on what I could surmise from her description—was said to contain strands from several members of the Mounts family, one of my ancestral lines. Even as she spoke, I knew that

Shrink it down, I tell myself. Any way you can. Look through the smallest keyhole… It's the small things that break our hearts. The small keys that open the door into the large rooms.

I was receiving one of those rare gifts that writers receive: exactly what we need at exactly the right time. The image of the hair art held within it all the major themes and questions I'd been struggling with: Where do we leave off and others begin? What must we sacrifice to belong to a family, a neighborhood, a community? Whether or not the informants' stories were accurate—that the father and son argued about who would keep the artifact—we may never know for sure. But the image itself vibrated with such power that I could not refuse it. Created from the individual strands of all those family members, each with its own distinctive qualities, the weaving was larger and more intricate than any one of its individual elements. It was the family itself, the design of the tribe.

Carmack: I'm a professional genealogist, and when most genealogists write their family histories, they seem to be slaves to the hard facts—the exact dates something happened or all the details they find in records. They feel they must include all these details. When you're writing a literary family history memoir, how do you avoid that kind of minutiae of detail, which can give the story a history textbook feel, while still keeping true to the facts?

McClanahan: I'm not a historian or a genealogist, but I respect both professions. I also respect amateur historians and genealogists, *amateur* springing as it does from *amare*; an amateur proceeds solely out of love for his subject. And I understand the genealogist's desire to search out every possible record, to leave no gravestone unturned. But the genealogist and the literary writer have different purposes. They might seem to be doing the same thing during the gathering stage, but then their paths diverge. Though I spent many years poring over ancestral documents, I've never claimed to be our family's historian. I don't want that job. If I were to pay a genealogist to compile our family's history, I'd be upset if a single name were left out, or an important event or record. I left so many family members' names out of *The Tribal Knot*. The genealogist's job is to *include* everything, and to record it. The literary nonfictionist's job is the opposite: to select, which translates to *exclude*, and then not to record but rather to shape an

artful text informed by fact but not confined to it. A literary writer cannot live by fact alone. Nor can a reader, at least the kind of reader I am. I don't want to read, and I didn't want to write, the equivalent of a family's Congressional Record. Though I labored to stay true to fact—by citing precise dates, census records, historical events, interview responses, specific documents, or artifacts—my first allegiance was always to the larger story, the journey of the family tribe, which I suspect is the journey of other families, other communities. To stay true to the larger story, I had to exclude most of the facts I'd gathered.

Carmack: Genealogists also feel the need to search for every possible record an ancestor created in his or her lifetime, such as censuses, vital records, military service records, land deeds, immigration sources, in order to be able to craft an accurate life story. Did you dig that deeply, or was there sufficient material in your family collection?

McClanahan: As my Midwestern relatives used to say after a big meal, "I had a sufficiency." More than enough to tempt me into the center of their lives. Hundreds and hundreds of documents, going back to the Civil War. Once I started to sniff out the tracks the characters were leaving, I sensed what I didn't know, some fact or document or background information that would help fill in the who, what, where, and when so that I could focus attention on the why. Which, of course, I will never fully answer—the why, I mean. Mysteries abound. The mysteries of the human heart. These particular hearts just happened to be the hearts of my ancestors and family members.

Carmack: You say that no life is ordinary. When you write literary biography, as you have done in sections of *The Tribal Knot*, how do you craft what might seem to be an ordinary life into an extraordinary one?

McClanahan: Oh, you're quoting from the author's note on my website. I think I added to that statement, "If so, then all lives are ordinary." I've often wondered why we accept so-called ordinary characters in fiction and poetry but rarely in nonfiction. Why is that? To suggest that a life is extraordinary simply because that person became famous, or happened to be at a certain place at a certain time, or survived unspeakable atrocities, is unfair to the uncountable—and uncounted—flesh-and-blood people whose lives we could learn from. So often, these lives are hidden from us; they are not considered worthy of literary attention. Yet if you scratch any life,

real or imagined, a design begins to emerge. I think about Rilke's advice in *Letters To a Young Poet*: "If your daily life seems poor, do not blame it; blame yourself, tell yourself that you are not poet enough to call forth its riches." To call forth the riches of ordinary lives, nonfiction writers start the way any literary writer starts: by close attention. The more attention we pay—"pay" suggesting that it will cost us something—the more complex and extraordinary those designs become.

Carmack: What form does this attention take? What are some specific techniques for calling forth the riches of these otherwise ordinary lives?

McClanahan: I usually start with questions: Why am I drawn to this particular life? Does it echo any of my own obsessions, desires, and fears? What do I already know about this person? Not just the facts—though the facts are essential routes into the life—but also what I've overheard, what I suspect, what I hope to find, what I hope I won't find. What objects did this person touch? What touched her? I ransack archives, photographs, memories, and interviews. Sometimes I ransack my own work—early drafts, failed or incomplete work that relates in any way to the big questions I see emerging in the life. If possible, I visit the places these people visited, drive the same roads, or stare out at the same creek. I make lists of their multiple identities. For instance, Bessie was my great-aunt, a mentor of sorts. But not always, and not only. She was also the mother of a stillborn child, the daughter of a woman whose own mother had died when she was a child, the eldest sibling, a cousin, niece, farmer, landowner, wife, widow, traveler, factory worker, suffragette, musician, dancer, voracious reader, birder, naturalist. And an almost-centenarian, the last occupant of the Indiana "home place."

Acknowledging these characters' multiple identities leads me to imagine their befores and afters, what occurred on the edges of the facts. What were their unlived lives? Their unrealized desires? When I get lost in all the documents, I stop. Shrink it down, I tell myself. Any way you can. Look through the smallest keyhole: One sixty-second event that changed his life forever. Three cars that he owned. Four poems that she clipped from newspapers and saved. What items ended up in the auction while others were hoarded, saved for future generations? Why did she keep this pocket watch, this lock of hair? It's the small things that break our hearts. The small keys that open the door into the large rooms.

> The themes jump out at you, generation after generation, history repeating itself. The endless search for home… played itself out in dozens of letters spanning more than a century.

Carmack: You mentioned your great-aunt Bessie, whom you credit with your love of reading. She's the central character in *The Tribal Knot*, as well as in some of your essays in *The Riddle Song*. How did you "use" her to ground your story in *The Tribal Knot*?

McClanahan: In my mind, the main character is the family itself, in all its ragged glory. Or perhaps the idea of family and community, of allegiances forged then broken then forged again in different forms. But if "main character" refers only to a person, then you're probably right that Bessie is the main character. At any rate, I did use her life, in part to situate the reader in the long timeline and in the large cast of characters. Since she lived for nearly a century, it seemed natural to use her life span and her relationship to other characters to help structure the book. Her father was born before the Civil War, and she remembered stories her grandparents had told. Also, she was the oldest relative I knew intimately, seventy years my senior; she lived with our family for many years while I was growing up. Bessie was a living, breathing incarnation of our ancestral history. An eccentric incarnation, to be sure, but an incarnation all the same. Living, breathing, right there in the room we shared, the shared double bed. As a child, I considered her a nuisance, even an embarrassment. Now I see what a great gift my parents gave, not to Bessie, but to their six children, allowing us access to her long history.

I didn't originally intend to make Bessie a central character; in fact, I fought against the idea. But the more I fought, the harder she pushed, poking her nose into everyone's story, even wrestling her way into my dreams, a Character with a capital "C." She'd appear as the conductor on my downtown subway route, the lead actress in a Broadway play, and once, even nestled on the saucer of a teacup. The more I worked with the hundreds of letters, photos, and

documents, the more I saw that Bessie, more than any other family member, lived and breathed many of the competing themes of the book: independence vs. interdependence; solitude vs. community; the inner, secret life vs. the outer, public life.

Carmack: Every writer of family history has to include historical information to set the story into context. How do you know when you've included just enough history so that the reader won't skip over that part?

McClanahan: There are many kinds of readers, and you can't please every kind. I weighed all the segments of historical fact or straight information. Were they essential? Some, I decided, were necessary to keep the reader situated in the timeline, which is quite long, about 125 years. Other segments were essential to an understanding of the characters—their motives, desires, and actions. In some segments, especially the 1920s Indiana Ku Klux Klan segments, their actions could be understood only in light of the historical and cultural context of their lives. Without that context, the characters could not be fully drawn. Or as fully drawn as any real life character can ever be once he's landed on the page.

Carmack: You bring your characters to life through their written documents, but there are instances when you didn't have a relative's own words, where you speculated on their thoughts and emotions. What literary techniques did you use?

McClanahan: I speculate a lot in these pages. When I'm working with documents, what isn't said is as important to me as what is said; what isn't recorded, as powerful as what is. So, I moved between the two worlds—the known and the unknown—trying to tease out the story that lay between the two worlds. Yes, much of *The Tribal Knot* is written as straightforward narrative, reporting the characters' actions based on the evidence of the documents they kept. But sometimes I move directly into characters' thoughts, imagining how they felt during key events, based on the cues I'd taken from their letters or diaries, or what they'd said in interviews, or in my memory of conversations I had with them. Sometimes these thoughts take the form of internal monologue; sometimes I use substitutionary narration, telling the story in third person but supplying clues of diction, syntax, or other linguistic markers to suggest the flavor of their conversations or what I imagine to be their thought

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landscape. Occasionally, I use reconstructed, fully rendered scenes, complete with direct dialogue, though these scenes appear mostly in the memoir sections of the book rather than the historical sections.

In a few sections of *The Tribal Knot*, I use omniscient viewpoint—or as close to omniscient viewpoint as I've ever used in nonfiction. One morning while I was reading one of the letters, I realized that at this point in the narrative timeline, I knew more than the real life characters knew. The letter writers knew only what had happened in the past or in the present-tense, pulsing *now*. I knew their futures, in the form of characters they'd not yet met, whose lives would intersect with theirs in important ways. More disturbing, I knew how all these lives would turn out. I knew that the boy who was about to run to mail his mother's letter—the lighthearted letter I was reading—would be dead in a year. I wanted to reach through time and warn his mother. I knew that the KKK would re-emerge in the 1920s, insinuating itself into certain characters' lives. I knew my grandmother was pregnant before she did. And I knew that the uncle writing the flowery postcard to his sister—"all is well will rite soon as I can"—was *not* all right, but would end up killing his son and himself. This was an emotional experience for me, working with the letters, becoming more and more intimately connected to these people's lives without the power to affect the outcomes of the lives.

Carmack: I'm curious about this feeling of intimate connection to your relatives' and ancestors' lives. Tell me more about that.

McClanahan: Reading someone else's mail is a form of trespass. Apart from half a dozen letters, the words hadn't been addressed to me. They were intimate correspondences—signed, sealed, and delivered with no thought that some nosy descendant would one day sift through the letters, searching for answers to her own questions. But it wasn't so much the content of the letters that affected me; it was the letters themselves, their physical presence. And the physical presence of the other artifacts. I was touching the objects themselves, the personal effects. I love the word *effects*, used in that context. *Effects* that affect us, how we come to know a person. So you must handle these effects, if not with reverence then at least with the kind of respect you'd give animal bones you encounter on a trail. For me, the physicality of the objects was extremely powerful, the realization that this artifact had lasted, that human hands—hands that contained my own DNA—had touched this diary page 120 years ago, had wound this pocket watch, placed these eyeglasses beside the feather bed each night. I'd never known my great-grandfather Robert in life, and there are no letters from him in the cache, but I came to love him through the letters others had written about him, and through his *effects*. One day I took his eyeglasses out of the case—very carefully. I was amazed at how small they were, how fragile. I wanted to put them on, to look through them and imagine seeing the world through his eyes. It was the small things that got to me. The "sniff of my new perfume" on the century-old letter. The smear of jam on the auction list. The 1904 scrawl of a child's drawing—a child who would grow up to be my great-uncle. These documents aren't like emails, where the physical, bodily evidence of the transaction is missing. Each artifact is weighted with a human touch.

Carmack: You had a vast amount of these artifacts and family documents, such as letters, diaries, postcards, and other ephemera. How did you organize them all, then decide what to include and what to leave out, so that your book didn't become a published collection of letters?

McClanahan: There was no method to my madness, at least for the first few years. When the documents started landing on my desk, courtesy of a mother who recognized my passion for family stories even before I did, I figured I would just skim some of the letters and postcards, sort through the artifacts, and maybe organize them to share with other family members. But I got hooked pretty early on, drawn into the inner lives of relatives and ancestors, some of whom I had known in the flesh. But not *really* known, I discovered as I kept reading.

Apart from the shoebox of love letters from my grandparents' courtship days, the letters were in no

particular order. So I read them in no particular order. Also, I didn't receive the letters all at once; every now and then my mother would discover another stash, and she'd send it on to me. It was like reading a serial novel, except of course the timeline was all out of whack. Many of the letters were difficult to decipher, but once I'd read several from the same person, I figured out the idiosyncrasies of handwriting, spelling, pet phrases, syntax. Some letters were so revealing of character that I did what I often do with literary texts: I typed them up, to get a sense of the voices and rhythms. I do this with poems I want to memorize, too, though I usually write out poems by hand. I ended up transcribing almost every letter from every main character and a few minor characters as well—hundreds of transcriptions.

At that point, organization became a challenge, like the challenge of organizing thousands of photographs: Do you sort by year, by locale, by main character, by subject matter? I organized and re-organized the documents many times, starting with folders or boxes for each person. The personal effects were easy to organize: G. E. Sanders's carpentry records, his membership card for The Improved Order of Red Men, his bank accounts and IOUs, etc. The letters were more difficult. Should I sort by writer or recipient? But these are recordkeeping details that every writer will figure out for herself. What's more important is discovering the patterns, the themes that rise out of the particulars. Those patterns will dictate what to include and what to exclude.

Carmack: What sort of patterns did you find? When genealogists write family history narratives, many don't think in terms of universal themes around which to frame their ancestors' lives. How did you find themes?

McClanahan: Sometimes you don't have to search. The themes jump out at you, generation after generation, history repeating itself. At least that's what happened with *The Tribal Knot.* The endless search for home, for instance, played itself out in dozens of letters spanning more than a century. Almost everyone, it seemed, was homesick.

Carmack: Including you, as I recall from the memoir segments of the book. Your father was a military pilot, so your family moved often. You talk in the book about the loneliness you felt.

McClanahan: Yes, I was often lonely. But in a way I carried my home with me, in the form of my siblings and parents. Whenever I arrived at a new school, someone would invariably ask me where I was from. Sometimes I'd get so tired of the question that I'd just answer, "From my mom and dad." I'm sure that many people—not just military brats—experience homesickness, or at least spend time and energy searching for a place that feels like home. But does home reside in a place, or in people, or in a particular

place in time? And if a golden time and place did exist in our lives, why didn't we recognize it as golden while it was occurring? Those are some of the questions I uncovered in writing the book.

Carmack: The theme of close bonds is another strong thread in *The Tribal Knot*.

Listen to *how* the facts mean, not just what. Find your own stakes in the telling. Lose yourself in the material until a pattern emerges. Be willing to relinquish your original intentions...

McClanahan: Yes. The bonds of parents and children, mostly, but also sibling connections. And not only blood connections. The longing for brotherhood and sisterhood showed itself in many forms: fraternal organizations, neighborhoods, church congregations, temporary bonds forged in war or through travel, and even in exclusionary, extremist groups, like the KKK. Close bonds can certainly save people's lives—I know for a fact that they saved mine. But can bonds bind too tightly? When does a community shift from being a source of comfort and support to being insular, hostile to outside influences and to necessary change? At what point do shared values and like-mindedness become dangerous forces? Does individualism trump community? Should it? Well, you can see that I still have no answers to these questions; only more complicated questions.

Carmack: Some writers feel they have to have all their research complete in order to begin writing. At what point in your research and gathering did you begin writing?

McClanahan: Research is a time-honored, respectable way to avoid writing. At least for writers like me. Once, for an essay I was writing, I spent four days in the library reading about roosters, justifying to myself that I was just trying to make sure those paragraphs about the henhouse were accurate. Yeah, right. So, knowing my own strength in this area—avoiding writing, I mean, not stalking roosters—when I began to see the larger design the letters were suggesting, I tried to write as much as I could, holes and all, before I went searching outside sources, and even before I'd read everything within the family archives. I knew enough at that point to form questions. And questions, for me, are always the beginning of meaningful research.

Carmack: Did the writing of drafts help you see holes? If so, how did you fill them? Can you give an example?

McClanahan: Once I sensed the main tracks of the book, I knew how to focus my research, and where I needed to go next either to find answers to my questions or to find more interesting questions. For instance, one of the tracks is the twinned theme of mothering and childlessness—that theme, I sensed fairly early on. So, when I learned that my grandmother Sylvia was given "twilight sleep" to help ease her second delivery in 1915, I knew I had to research that drug in relation to the history of childbirth and also in relation to Sylvia's mother, a self-taught midwife who would never have administered such a drug to the neighbors whose bedsides she attended.

Carmack: You mentioned the theme of childlessness, which is interesting to me as a genealogist. In the world of professional and scholarly genealogy, many of the well-respected genealogists, both past and present, never had children. I know you don't have any children, nor did your Aunt Bessie have surviving children. Do you feel it's often these aunts and uncles who are the keepers of the family history, that preserving the family history becomes their "offspring," their legacy?

McClanahan: I hadn't known that, about childless genealogists. And it's an interesting theory—that their preservation of family history becomes, in a sense, their offspring. Certainly the histories and stories in *The Tribal Knot* did "spring" off me, as have my poems and essays, but I've never imagined I could preserve anything. Certainly not our family's history, given how much I've excluded. Still, there's something about the word "legacy" that attracts me. A legacy is a gift. In the case of *The Tribal Knot*, a gift to myself that I hope others might appreciate.

Carmack: What kinds of outside research did you do to put the generations into historical context?

McClanahan: Besides reviewing basic history texts to keep me fastened on the timeline, I searched out sources related to the biggest

questions and concerns of the book. I studied the history of fraternal organizations, birth control laws, women's suffrage, Victorian hair art, the 1920s KKK, immigration policies, early agrarian communities, trapping, the flora and fauna of Indiana, and other odds and ends. But what helped me most was studying the books, magazines, newspaper articles, and clippings that my ancestors had mentioned in their letters or that I found in the cache of artifacts. I wanted to get inside their lives however I could, to touch the books they touched, enter the worlds they'd entered. Besides providing a window into their contemporary culture, the forces that affected their lives, the texts suggested the characters' desires and obsessions, especially when they committed marginalia in the books or quoted from the books in their letters. For instance, while my grandparents were courting in 1910, they were both reading *John Halifax, Gentleman,* using John and Ursula's love affair as a kind of tutorial for their upcoming marriage. And though I suspect that many of my ancestors were illiterate, for the ones who did read, books were precious commodities. They reread them, passed them on to other family members, or gave them as special gifts. Who gave what to whom, and for what occasion, is another angle into their lives. Of course the conservative, churchgoing Vena would give a Bible to her future sister-in-law Sylvia, who would rather stay home and build a chicken coop than attend Sunday morning services. And what better Christmas gift could my great-grandmother Hattie receive from her new son-in-law than a copy of *The Glorious Mother*? Arthur's mother had died when he was twelve; Hattie's mother, when Hattie was eleven. So the book was the perfect gift from one motherless child to another, hinting at their common sorrow, their shared history. And his inscription—to Mother from Arthur—predicted their future together, the new roles they would learn to fill. There are hundreds of character hints like these embedded in the artifacts, and I welcomed every hint.

Carmack: What family history memoirs had you read before you wrote *The Tribal Knot*?

McClanahan: I couldn't begin to name them all—I've read so many books, nonfiction and fiction, that focus on ancestral and family connections. Ian Frazier's *Family* was an important model. I love how he stacks fact upon fact to reveal a region's character, and how one family's extended history becomes

the history of a whole nation. For their emphasis on place and regional cultures, I studied memoirs by Ivan Doig and Mary Clearman Blew and essays by Scott Russell Sanders and Wendell Berry, along with Jung Chang's *Wild Swans: Three Daughters of China* and Alice Munro's standout book of stories, *The View from Castle Rock*. I admire Glenway Westcott's *The Grandmothers: A Family Portrait*, though his is a fictional account. Most of my book centers on Indiana, but Westcott's background information about Wisconsin's pioneer families informed some of the Wisconsin scenes in *The Tribal Knot*; *Wisconsin Death Trip*, too, the collage book of photos and texts. As for handling a long timeline and a huge cast of characters, I reread Edward P. Jones's *The Known World*, one of my favorite novels of all time. I also studied Ernest J. Gaines's *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* and Alex Haley's *Roots*. I learned a lot from Lee Smith's epistolary novels—oh, yes, and Robin Hemley's *Nola*. And I can't forget Rita Dove's *Thomas and Beulah*, one of several poetry collections that inspired me. I read dozens of books—but I'll just stop there.

Carmack: How did you decide upon the structure of *The Tribal Knot*?

McClanahan: Because the book combines several modes and subgenres, and because the cast of characters is so large, I thought it unfair to require readers to untangle the long timeline on top of everything else. Chronology has worked pretty well for the universe thus far. Didn't Woody Allen say that time is "what keeps things from happening all at once"? So I used a fairly straightforward chronology as my baseline, monitoring it every now and then to keep the reader grounded. Within that structure, I found a great deal of freedom to make the kind of literary moves I enjoy, moves that I felt the book called for.

Carmack: How long did it take you to write *The Tribal Knot*, and how many revisions would you guess you went through?

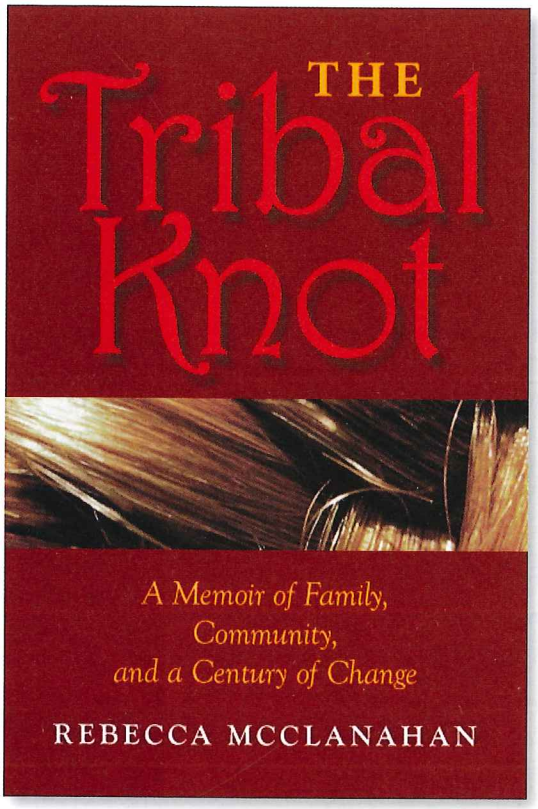
McClanahan: Many years. Many revisions. That's as accurate an answer as I can give. Some of the same characters, situations, obsessions, and questions have risen up in various forms throughout my writing life. Recently, while I was cleaning out some old files, I found some persona poems that I'd drafted back in the '80s, based on some of my great-grandmother's letters. I'd only received a few of the ancestral letters at this point, but already I must have been hooked on the voices and on the inner lives that were opening up to me.

Carmack: Is there anything you wish someone had told you before you tackled this project that would have made it a little easier?

McClanahan: I never saw *The Tribal Knot* as a project. I don't think I've ever considered writing as a project to be completed, except maybe for academic writing. For me, the whole process—of reading the letters, studying the photos and documents, interviewing sources, visiting sites, dreaming, drafting, imagining, questioning, giving up, starting again, giving up again, swearing to find some other line of work, then starting again—was so consuming that I can't tell you when that process began or when it ended, if indeed it has ended, which I doubt. Maybe if I'd approached *The Tribal Knot* as a project, I could have proceeded more efficiently, used a literary GPS instead of bumping along on all those side roads. But I try to never look back, or to second guess what might have gone differently—in the writing of a poem, an essay, or a book. It's like second guessing your life. All those side trips, the blind alleys, the failures and the

excerpt

from **"The Tribal Knot: A Memoir of Family, Community, and a Century of Change"**



Excerpted and adapted from Chapter 6

I retrieve another envelope from where I've stored it, remove the photograph, and step through time: 1903, the Sanders Hotel. The screen door unhinges on its own. I walk inside. Across the vestibule, behind the closed door of the front bedroom that comprises half of the family's living quarters, a double bed is positioned near the window. The Wedding Ring quilt on the bed is rumpled on one side, as if its single occupant had fallen into an exhausted sleep. The other side of the bed is smooth, undisturbed.

Beside the bed is a mahogany highboy with an oval-framed mirror, a small cardboard plaque propped against it:

IN LOVING REMEMBRANCE OF MRS. G.E. SANDERS
BORN NOV. 15, 1871 DIED JAN. 22, 1903
AGE 31 YRS. 2 MO. 7 DAYS
GONE BUT NOT FORGOTTEN

If we were to open the top drawer of the highboy, we would find three copies of an obituary column, one copy neatly trimmed with pinking shears, and a stack of cards and letters whose envelopes have been carefully eased open—with a kitchen knife, it appears--so that their contents might be slid in and out and in again without defacing one single word. All are welcome to the grief-numbed widower. Even the meddling ones from his dead wife's sisters, who seem to think that Arthur and Vena would be better off living with them, now that their mother is gone. The most formal letter is from G. E.'s uncle in Illinois. Every time G. E. reads it, something seizes up inside him.

Dear Nephew,

We deeply sympathize with you in your bereavement and hope you will find strength to bare it. You have the consolation of having done all you could for her, and your children are not as helpless as if they were younger. And yet bereft of a good Mother it will require great care on your part in forming their character that your son may grow to be a good man and your daughter a nice lady. You will no doubt feel greatly broken down for a while but time assuages all griefs and it will be yours to plan and to do the best you can for yourself and the children. With good wishes for your welfare I am
Sincerely Your Uncle

Time assuages all griefs. Six months now, G. E. thinks. Does six months count as Time? And this work my hands busy themselves with, the endless repetition of tasks. Is this the best? The best I can do for myself and the children? This rising from bed each morning, this stacking and counting and clerking, the customers staring past my eyes as if nothing has changed, does this count as Strength? The strength to bear it?

Bereft. The word looks strange to G. E, no matter how many times he's studied it. It looks incomplete, unfinished. And just try to say it: *Bereft.* It sucks the air right out of your lungs.

surprises are necessary to the making of one's particular life or work.

Carmack: Family history memoirs are usually a tough sell to agents and publishers. What publishing advice would you give to writers who are writing about family history?

Yes, accuracy matters; facts matter. But *how* do they matter? That is the key question for me.

McClanahan: If recording a particular family's history is the sole motivation a writer has, then the audience for the writing will probably be quite small. But when that history collides with something larger than the facts themselves—whatever that something is—the chances for connecting with your reader grow. That something might be language, or it might be characterization, structure, voice, theme, research or I-search, anything that helps the writer to escape the given, those facts that already exist outside of the writer's experience with them. Yes, accuracy matters; facts matter. But *how* do they matter? That is the key question for me. Let's say that you discover a particular event, historical fact, letter, photo, or a string of census data. The next question becomes not "What does it mean?" but "*How* does it mean?" How does this fact lock into the deeper story, that question that keeps hammering away at you, the thing that, in the words of Samuel Butler "refuses to go away"?

As for being a tough sell, yes, a family history memoir is a very tough sell. But isn't most literary writing these days? We have to write what we have to write, period. Those of us who go through Door Number Three—or whatever door opens into the ancestral memoir—have to do what any other writer has to do. Struggle to write the best book we can. After that, the question of who might want to publish it or how it will be received is, as Auden wrote, "not our business." Our business is to write the next word, the next sentence.

Carmack: Is there anything that ended up on the cutting room floor that you might develop into another book?

McClanahan: I like the way you phrased that, as if there is hope for all the material I killed off. A resurrection, of sorts? So much ended up on that floor—nearly 600 manuscript pages at one point. Of course, what hurts the writer often helps the reader. I decided at some point that the killing off of entire episodes, relationships, even characters (it's hard to think of family members and ancestors as characters, but on the page that's what they must become) was a form of mercy. For the reader, I mean. And perhaps mercy for the book as well. If the book could live longer and breathe easier without those episodes or characters or relationships, I figured I could live without them, too. I'm not saying that some of the excised pages might not be resurrected in another form. Knowing the way I work, they probably will.

Carmack: What advice would you give someone attempting to write a literary family history?

McClanahan: My grandmother Goldie used to say, "Take my advice. It's perfectly good, it's never been used." Experience is not transferable, and what worked for me might not work for the next writer. But for what it's worth, here's what I learned, what I am still learning: Listen to *how* the facts mean, not just what. Find your own stakes in the telling. Lose yourself in the material until a pattern emerges. Be willing to relinquish your original intentions when a more intriguing or deeper "other" appears. And be patient; it's not a horse race.

Carmack: Are you working on another book?

McClanahan: I'm always lying in wait for new poems to show themselves. They're like shy animals hiding in the brush. Meanwhile, the essays keep coming. Whether they will come together to form another book, I'm not yet sure, but the New York essays—about the eleven years my husband and I lived there—seem to be talking to each other in promising ways. Some are shouting, some whispering; one is trying to start an argument. Which makes me think they're related. I can imagine them sitting at the same table together, under the same roof. And if their conversation continues, I might have a book on my hands. When we're lucky, the words and sentences start talking to each other in ways we could never have planned. Isn't that why we keep writing, to hear what they have to say? AWP

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