ForeWord Reviews
Clarion Review

GENERAL

An Appalachian Summer
Carol A. Collier
978-1-4259-5242-6
Four Stars (out of Five)

…all private property is now vulnerable to being taken and transferred to another private citizen so long as it is to be upgraded…in the process.—Justice Sandra Day O'Connor dissent opinion in Kelo vs. New London 2005

An Appalachian Summer takes on the controversial issue of eminent domain and delivers a sturdy realistic story about isolated mountain communities. Bitter Creek Virginia is a played-out mining town with a hunger for steady employers. An elderly woods-hermit Berta Ronski and her visiting niece Anna Wall a chef on leave from a San Francisco catering service are the only holdouts in the path of developers. Evangelistic theme park planners want a route to the main road without dynamiting a mountain. Intimidation and outright violence are overlooked by Bitter Creek citizens. Pastors name Aunt Berta in sermons inciting their followers against her.

Anna originally aims to collect down-home recipes for a cookbook. She rents a room from the sheriff who is either an incompetent moron or a financially motivated stalker. Her high school sweetheart Bill Collins is doing photo-shoots nearby. His work appears in National Geographic but he's also done side projects for the developers. Wary of relationships Anna looks to maintain a cautious friendship with Bill though he would prefer to pick up where they left off. When Anna mentions her interest in ancestry Bill demurs: "'People put too much stock in family trees'" he told her "'You look too far back you might find somebody swinging from one.'"

A cafe owner asks Anna to fill in during an absence. With her ear at the source of the local buzz the protagonist learns how few in Bitter Creek side with her and Aunt Berta. Former friends tell her to put her aunt in assisted living and sell the homestead. Watchers lurk outside Anna's window figures creep into Aunt Berta's house at night. Trouble ramps up from grumbly neighbors to vicious crime in an effective escalation:

'Somebody put that snake in my car Bobby Lee. There's no way it

could have crawled in there. I never leave my doors open.'

'Oh come on. Who's do a thing like that?'

'The same creep who left a dead goat in my shower probably. Got any leads on that?'

No. Not yet.'

The writing demonstrates a solid grip on what makes fiction function. Mountain customs such as divination by scrying and the use of herbal medicines are mixed in without the information seeming intrusive or didactic. Melungeon Gypsy and redneck cultures are addressed. This mostly inspired novel does miss good dramatic opportunities in the resolution. To be more specific would be a spoiler violation.

Carol Collier was transplanted from southern Appalachia to the wine country of California. Her previous novel *Touched by the Gods* won the California Writers' Club's Jack London Prize. *An Appalachian Summer*'s central conflict is in the vein of Lana Witt's *Slow Dancing on Dinosaur Bones*. Fans of Collier's very talented fellow Virginian Lee Smith may be generally reminded of *Fair and Tender Ladies*. This novel the winner of the Next Great Book Contest is likely to appeal to a fairly broad audience.