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General

My Old True Love
Algonquin Books
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This haunting romance is set in a forgotten pocket of the Civil War. It's the tale of Arty, seen through her eyes and told in straightforward, colloquial language that leaves the skeletons of yesterday's tragedies shining as brightly as if they were out in the afternoon sun.

The novel provides a wonderful glimpse of eighteenth-century daily life in the Appalachian Mountains of North Carolina. Arty is a keen observer of relationships, and much of her narrative concerns the illicit love triangle at the heart of the novel. However, the book goes beyond romance, falling into the tradition of classic American anti-war novels such as *A Farewell to Arms* because it details so well what happens to young men and women caught in a war that is not of their making.

When South Carolina fires on Fort Sumter, most of the citizens of Sodom are attending a debate about the merits of entering the war. War fever strikes the young men regardless, and Sodom's husbands, brothers, and fathers trickle off to the front. Those who do not volunteer are eventually forced to enlist by Confederate conscription troops, and a few men, like Arty's husband, Zeke, slip off to join the Union Army.

The author, who hails from the real town of Sodom, has previously published *Come Go Home With Me*, a collection of short stories based on characters from her childhood in Appalachia. Adams has a strong background in storytelling and in singing her ancestors' old English, Scottish, and Irish ballads. She has also released several musical recordings, and travels the country presenting programs about Appalachian history and culture.

In this novel, death stalks her characters, but the body count doesn't numb the reader. The characters honor each friend or family member in turn, marking each loss as well as they can. Sometimes grieving must wait weeks or months because news travels slowly, or simply because circumstances will not allow the luxury. When one daughter dies from typhoid and another still struggles to live, Arty writes, "I did not have time for the dead. I went right back to bathing Sylvaney. Sometimes you have to set grief down and not carry it right then, but do not

fret. It will squat right there and wait for you to pick it back up."

The plot of *My Old True Love* hangs on the old ballads about love, loss, war, and perseverance. Music hovers in the background of the characters' lives, sustaining them and providing them with words for their deepest feelings. Adams's evocative prose resonates with lyrical allusions, raising her characters' speech from the everyday to the transcendent, imbuing life with meaning, death with hope, and love with the inevitable poignancy of loss.

Elizabeth Breau