

Giles, Janice Holt. *Hill Man*. Foreword by Wade Hall. Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2000. 172 pages.

From the 1940s onward until her death in 1979, Oklahoma-born Janice Holt Giles wrote some twenty-four novels that depict life chiefly in a fictionalized area of south central Kentucky around her husband's native community, Giles Ridge, in Adair County—a locale that she herself adopted as home after her second marriage in 1945. Completing *Hill Man* in 1951 after several other books, Giles found that her previous publishers—Westminster Press and Houghton Mifflin—wouldn't print it, judging it, as Wade Hall says, as "formless, too episodic, and centered around an unattractive character." Harcourt Brace and Harper and Brothers both turned down the work, but Giles was finally able in 1954 to arrange with Pyramid Books of New York for its publication as a paperback attributed to John Garth, a pseudonym aimed at saving Giles' reputation among her established readership. The 300,000-copy press run of *Hill Man* sold for 25 cents a copy. The cover showed a shirtless young farmer eying a handsome female, with a blurb promising "The earthy story of a Kentucky mountaineer and a city woman." Commentators who know Giles *oeuvre* report that the story's candid treatment of sex and violence set it apart.

Though Giles had gained her earlier following by writing more genteel stuff, she liked her "orphan" book when she saw it in proof. She wrote the publisher, "I was struck by its strength. It is the most realistic ridge book we have written, completely honest and presenting the truest picture of most of the ridge men."

The University of Kentucky Press reissue in 2000 now makes *Hill Man* available for the first time in hard cover. Over the years the work has emerged as one of Giles' most popular. Its local color brand of heightened realism now seems not very threatening or shocking. Two of its passages illustrate economically the outer boundaries of its prurience: "He wanted to lay her then and there. Strip her and have her and get rid of his own swollen wanting." And also "The bitch, he thought. The gahdamned, cold-blooded, mean-tempered, frost-bitten bitch!"

The thinker of such impolite thoughts—and the central figure of *Hill Man*—is Rady Cromwell, an amoral preacher's son who combines marksmanship, muscles, music, ambition, and shrewdness to attract women, intrigue men, and work his way up into the landowner class during the 1920s. In episodic fashion Giles' observer-narrator—an unnamed bubba-buddy who's clearly as charmed by Rady as a whole succession of women are, including the narrator's own wife—tells the tale of Rady's local "rise" (through expedient marriages by which he acquires property and status) and of his "fall" (after the outing of his illegitimate offspring, a

debilitating divorce, and a state of financial overextension that intersects disastrously with the 1929 Crash).

Though readers familiar with the grotesquerie in many Southern stories from about 1930 through the 1960s will feel at home when one of Rady's wives dies after being gored by a raging bull, Giles' fictive world is not the absurd construct of a Flannery O'Connor, where a conscientious author sits in judgment of flawed humanity and witnesses its farcical tragedies. Giles' microcosm, rather, is that of the somewhat flattened country tale, where a folk-story yarn-spinner, with as little understanding or conscience as his protagonist, tells us about his bolder buddy's ups and downs. In many respects Giles is heir to the tradition of Old Southwest humor. Mark Twain and many less prominent storytellers from the Appalachians are her near family kin.

While the male narrator's thinly suppressed love for Rady offers an intriguing subtext, Giles' device for getting her story told generates serious limitations and problems, especially because the speaker often reports on incidents he knows about only because Rady has *told* him about them. One upshot is that *Hill Man* most often seems to "tell" rather than "show" readers what's happening. Its narrative tends to lack compelling dramatic scenes, and much of it seems second-hand or generalized. Complicating the problem with point-of-view is the fact that the narrator's report of episodes often tries to render what (or how) Rady "felt." In such situations, the narrow ranges of the narrator's voice and of his own understanding impose irksome limits on the story. Though the dialect is readable and not overly butchered, the cornpone talk of the novel sometimes verges on the hackneyed. Still, the best-buddy situation in *Hill Man* adds foreground interest, giving us a run-of-the-mill ridge-man who frames and foils Rady's extreme-case exploits and failures.

Just after his closing encounter with his personal hero, we hear Giles' storyteller groping for meaning in all he has witnessed:

And it came over me then why I felt so good
Rady was home again. It was because he was
Rady and not hell nor high water could ever
change him or lick him. It gave a man a braver
feeling because he was around and it made you
feel like, because he was your friend, you were a
little something of the same breed of man.

I hoped him well.

Though Wade Hall's foreword calls Rady "a tragic hero with serious flaws," many other readers, I think, will see him as two-dimensional and empty, a kind of warmed-over version of many a backwoods man on the make, one who shoots well, drinks hard, fornicates randomly, and lacks the head or heart to arrive at meaningful recognitions about himself or the petty world that he aims for awhile to control.

The mixed, sometimes farcical tone of the work along with interpolated backwoods clichés also undercuts any tragic impact the novel might have, giving it too often a kitchen-sink character: Boys steal from the collection plate at church; an agitated mule breaks up a tent revival; and large families on the ridge are said to exist partly because "when a guy works up a lather about religion he's got to top it off by going to bed before he's wholly satisfied." Cartoon-like hyperboles describe hills so steep that "a man grew spraddle-legged trying to plow," and so angled that a cabin perched on them might require going *down* steps to get to the front porch and, in the back, might sit so high off the ground "that the old man drove his wagon under it for a shed."

While *Hill Man* certainly catches some of the roguish vigor of back-country folk, and while one might rationalize the book as a disinterested *Bildungsroman* about a country boy who grows up late, if at all, much of the "reality" that Giles depicts seems to have come straight over from the tall tale and other folk materials rampant in the hill culture she purports to capture. All in all, the book is a quick and pleasant read. Its dialect preserves some of the elements of regional speech that since 1951 (and, more certainly, since the 1920s) have been lost, even in the backwash regions of the New South—now uniformly Wal-Mart ridden.

Giles is a competent regional chronicler whose work is worth preserving. The fact that she was a female who once worked at the Louisville Presbyterian Seminary adds an intriguing overlay to a gutsy little pre-feminist tale, where a woman's take on masculine life finds non-judgmental expression in the words of an infatuated male persona blinded by Cupid's arrow to the faults of a philandering adventurer.

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