TITLE OF REVIEW GOES IN THIS BOX USE SOFT RETURN TO CREATE LOGICAL LINE BREAKS

a review by Reviewer Name

First Name Last Name. ***Book Title.*** City: Publisher, Year.

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The **REVIEWER'S NAME** bio will go first. Don't forget to go in and Use Bio Name Caps character style for his/her name and bio ital white for italicizing book and journal titles.

The **BOOK AUTHOR'S** bio goes second. If there's more than one, they might have to go in the black boxes under the review's subsequent pages.

WRITING WOMEN OF WESTERN NORTH CAROLINA

a review by Jessica Cory

Dale Neal. *Kings of Coweetsee*: Regal House Publishing, 2024.

—. *The Woman with the Stone Knife:* Histria Fiction, 2024.

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After decades as an award-winning journalist, Asheville-based writer Dale Neal has turned his pen toward fiction, captivating readers with his well-researched, place-based novels. Both released this year with different presses, *Kings of Coweetsee* and *The Woman with the Stone Knife* highlight how Neal's curiosity and investigative spirit move beyond his journalism. *Kings of Coweetsee* is somewhat of a murder mystery that dredges up the many conflicting narratives quietly populating the small town of Coweetsee, which seems modeled on many of the rural communities located deep in western North Carolina where politics and familial silences can have serious implications. Neal returns, to some degree, to this same landscape in *The Woman with the Stone Knife,* though this time in a much earlier timeframe, the eighteenth century. Transporting the reader between The Overhills in Cherokee territory and England in the late 1700s, Neal imagines (or perhaps, reimagines) the life of Cherokee protagonist Skitty, later known as Helena Ostenaco Timberlake, who finds herself exiled in England for twenty years through a series of unfortunate personal and procedural circumstances, including the death of her British husband, Lieutenant Henry Timberlake.

While these novels certainly differ in timescape and context, they share a few aspects in common, including pacing. The *Kings of Coweetsee* weaves a suspenseful tale involving political misdeeds, complicated relationships, and the notion that secrets never stay secret in a small town. The novel primarily follows Birdie Price, the ex-wife of sheriff-hopeful Roy Barker as she begins to uncover decades-long political misdeeds that have present-day consequences for many of her friends and neighbors. *The Woman with the Stone Knife* presents the reader with shocking yet believable scenarios that Helena Ostenaco Timberlake experiences as she attempts to find a way back to her homeland and son from England's unwelcome shores. Together, these books showcase Neal's ability to keep the reader engaged through suspense and impeccable timing. At no point do either of these novels feel predictable.

Turning first to ***Kings of Coweetsee***, Neal's protagonist, Birdie Price, does not seem to be the type to stir the neighborhood rumor mill. Birdie is a pot-smoking, middle-aged widow who has recently lost her second husband, an "outsider" hippie named Talmadge who had a hobby of documenting aging barns. Birdie wants to work through her grief and loss and be left alone, which her job as the sole employee of the county's historical museum seems to allow her. However,

OPPOSITE **The 1762 Cherokee and British Delegations, the Emissaries of Peace**

DALE NEAL, a lifelong native of North Carolina, was a prize-winning writer for the *Asheville Citizen-Times*. His short fiction and essays have appeared in various literary journals, including *NCLR*. His previous novels include *Appalachian Book of the Dead* (Sfk Press, 2019; reviewed in *NCLR Online* 2021), *The Half-Life of Home* (Casperian Books, 2013; reviewed in *NCLR Online* 2014), and *Cow Across America* (Novello Festival Press, 2009). A graduate of the MFA Program for Writers at Warren Wilson College, he has been awarded fellowships to the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts, Hambidge Center, and the Knight Center for Specialized Journalism at the University of Maryland. He currently teaches fiction at the Lenoir-Rhyne University Graduate Center.

after an antique voting box with old ballots shows up at her doorstep around the same time convicted felon Charlie Clyde Harmon returns to town, Birdie is thrust into investigative mode. Birdie's only family is her aunt Zip, who serves as a dear confidante and fellow ballad singer as Birdie navigates the challenges of her new super-sleuth identity. Amid this chaos, her first husband, Roy, is running for sheriff and what she finds, some worry, can either cost him the election or force him to uphold Coweetsee's legacy of secrets.

Despite the many twists and turns of the plot, I was pleasantly surprised that Neal, perhaps due to his background in journalism, didn't shy away from tough discussions on Appalachian stereotypes and the legacy of Southern racism. I was even more impressed that engaging with these topics did not take me out of the story; rather, they were gentle yet noticeable nudges. It can be easy for writers to be heavy-handed when discussing these issues, yet Neal's introduction of them put me in mind of how other talented North Carolina writers like Randall Kenan, David Joy, and Charles Frazier approach such delicate subjects. For example, in a flashback, Birdie recalls her mother observing the neighbor's property and wondering aloud, "Why those people can't pick up after themselves, I'll never know. . . . They act like a bunch of hillbillies," in response to which young Birdie asks, "Aren't we hillbillies?" Her mother replies, "No, that's a trashy word. You need to have standards" (116). Her mother's response leaves Birdie reeling:

> They laughed at hillbillies on the TV they watched in their '60s brick rancher. Birdie was mortified at how Andy Griffith wore the cuffs of his khaki pants half tucked into his black boots, so sloppy and uncool, or how Jed Clampett struck oil and moved as a millionaire to California, all the silly hillbillies that Americans thought safe to laugh at, the rubes and rustics. Birdie swore she would not be the dimwitted girl with a country accent and wide hips in cutoff blue jeans, though that's exactly how she grew up. (116)

Birdie goes on to explain how her father's work "as the county extension agent" adds to her family's, particularly her mother's, embarrassment at their "homespun cloth" roots (117), highlighting the nuances and judgements that can pervade a rural upbringing in the Mountain South.

Later, in discussing the antique ballot box and decades-earlier election with her African American friend Shawanda (who also sells her marijuana and whose daughter cares for Aunt Zip in the nursing home), Birdie laments a local white politician's choice to engage in election fraud. Shawanda, however, stops her: "Everybody thinks he stole the election. Nobody remembers he got Black folk to vote for him" (181). While having the Black woman as Birdie's dealer does lean into potentially problematic stereotypes, in this scene and others, Neal works hard to highlight the presence and reality of Affrilachia and how often stories like Shawanda's get lost in the whitewashing of history.

Neal continues to highlight non-white history in ***The Woman with the Stone Knife***, taking inspiration from

> a footnote in the exhibit "Emissaries of Peace" curated by the Museum of the Cherokee [now the Museum of the Cherokee People] and based on the *Memoirs of Lt. Henry Timberlake*. A young Virginian soldier, Timberlake led a remarkable life, visiting the Cherokee people in 1762 and escorting the tribe's chiefs on two voyages to the court of King George III. In 1786, years after Timberlake's

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> death in debtor's prison, a woman who called herself Helena Ostenaco Timberlake came forward, claiming both the names of the white soldier and the Cherokee chief. Who was this mystery woman? I had to write a novel to imagine her life in the cracks of history. (212)

Excerpts from Timberlake's *Memoirs* appear throughout the novel, most notably in the first half of the book before Timberlake's death. At times, these excerpts come at the beginning of a chapter and read a bit like a lengthy epigraph. However, at other points, these excerpts appear amid the narrative appealing to those readers who enjoy additional historical information within a narrative.

The details Neal includes about Cherokee life clearly demonstrate the amount of research he's done for the book. This dedication is echoed in the acknowledgements, in which he lists his sources, including the people who helped him along the novel's journey, such as several EBCI citizens with whom he worked closely. The texts he cites, however, are works exclusively by white anthropologists, and it should be noted that several collections of stories by Cherokee storytellers have been published, such as work by Christopher Teuton and Hasting Shade, as well as Cherokee scholarship.

Likely due to his research and relationships within the EBCI community, Neal avoids falling into easy stereotypes when crafting a female Cherokee protagonist and additional Cherokee supporting characters. He also acknowledges the many tensions between European colonizers, the Cherokee, and other Peoples in this timeframe. For example, as Helena, then known as Skitty, traverses the lands with Timberlake and another settler named M'Cormick as an interpreter, she observes, "no interpretation was needed to follow the shift in a man's eyes or his hand itching on the trigger of the lowered gun to know we were not welcome on this stolen land" (53). This acknowledgement that the whites have "stolen" the land works to create an accurate historical timeline and, more broadly, novel. This perspective is amplified elsewhere in the novel, such as when Skitty, referring to her father, notes, "He had seen a people who could call themselves the Nation killers" (46). This emphasis does not try to sweep the colonizing act of genocide under the rug, which might be more comfortable for contemporary white writers.

Neal's use of Tsalagi terms throughout the novel, like *yoneg* for the settlers and *"agitsihi"* for mother, helps to both craft an authentic narrator and create a strong sense of place. Additional references to Cherokee beings and stories, such as when Skitty recounts her grandmother, Cat Walker, standing on the shoreline holding "U'lunsuti, the crystal diadem pried from the severed head of an Uk'tena" (42), contribute to this verisimility as well. Further, Neal's use of the Cherokee language helps remind readers that entire societies with languages, governance forms, family systems, trade relationships, and shared customs were present in the lands many of us call Appalachia and, perhaps more importantly, continue to thrive here. Similar to his discussions of Appalachian stereotypes and race in *Kings of Coweetsee*, this is Neal's semi-subtle way of reminding readers that they are on stolen Native land.

Like *Kings of Coweestee*, *The Woman with the Stone Knife*, nudges readers rather than preaches at them, and the storyline is suspenseful and captivating. However, Neal also manages through ample research to make *The Woman with the Stone Knife* historically accurate, from the languages and dialogues used to descriptions of travels to details of clothing and hairstyles. While the reality of Skitty/Helena's stone knife, an object given to her by Cat Walker that is of great importance throughout the novel, is not mentioned in Timberlake's *Memoirs* or the influential footnote Neal mentions, the knife and other particulars seem real, which is always a mark of excellent craftmanship of a novel.

Throughout both stories, Neal's character development, especially his finesse in creating complicated characters, leave the door open for readers to imagine a plethora of endings. Readers will find themselves wondering if the neighbor recently sprung from prison is at fault for older misdeeds, and if Helena will find a way to free herself from the grips of those who wish to exploit her. While I don't want to spoil their endings, Neal's novels, while often dark, provide readers with satisfying endings, even if the conclusions are not what we anticipate. ■