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BOOK FARE

THOMAS' HILLS ALIVE WITH BACK-ROADS CHARACTERS, CUSTOMS

Nancy McAllister, For The Dispatch

Knucklebones, a collection of 27 stories by Ohio native Annabel Thomas, overflows with the characters, customs and colloquialisms of the Appalachian hill country.

Reminiscent of Flannery O'Connor, Thomas has produced a notable collection of stories. The pages are filled with characters struggling to understand their own lives and often the loss of those they have loved.

Knucklebones won the 1994 Willa Cather Fiction Prize, which is awarded every year to a previously unpublished manuscript. Her first book, *The Phototropic Woman*, won the Iowa Fiction Award, the Ernest Hemingway Foundation Award and the Great Lakes Colleges Association New Writer's Award.

In *The Girls*, Thomas brings to life the 84-year-old Mab, fated to live the last years of her life with her son and his insensitive family. Mab fades in and out of the present, luxuriating in the memories of the sisters she helped raise after her mother's death. Mab passes magically from the brutality of her old age to the joys of her younger life: "She saw them at once off in the corner by the curtain where the sun was full of notes. Hair like rich furs: reds, browns, yellows all pinned up above the small pink ears. Frances, Nellie, Elizabeth and Blanche in shantung and organdies, blues and greens, sprigs and red checks, ready for company."

But her daughter-in-law, Ruth, tells her: "Mother Riggs, they've all of 'em been dead as doornails these 15 years and more. You've outlived 'em all. You ought to be proud you done it and that you're here with us instead of always and forever harking back."

The Right Way To Look at a Lion is one of those childhood rumors that turns into a tall tale. Young Raggy Karol's family steals, has lice and keeps a junky yard. The neighborhood children were forbidden to play with Karol because his family's trashy house brought down the value of other houses on the street. Karol believes the old story that there is a lion, long ago escaped from a zoo, living in a ravine. He entices a group of neighborhood children to help him conduct a search and build a trap for the lion. The story captures the charm of a childhood adventure, complete with a neighborhood grouch who yells at the kids for walking on his lawn. Karol believes so intensely in the lion that the other children begin to believe the story.

Thomas' stories feature people and settings that draw on old ways and the language of the past. They describe places that are fast disappearing as America becomes more homogenous - through television, shopping malls and nondescript architecture. Thomas' regionalist point of view is all the more welcome.

Her stories ring with the sounds of place and time, something this country could use more of in this age of assimilation.

Columbus writer **Nancy McAllister** is a member of the National Book Critics Circle.