

Author to Author with Mindy Friddle

The Author: Ron Rash

The Book: THE WORLD MADE STRAIGHT (Henry Holt, 2006)

While traveling coast-to-coast for a book tour to promote his latest novel, "The World Made Straight," Ron Rash maintains his writing schedule—working on a new manuscript in hotels and airports. "I feel like I wasted a day if I don't write," the South Carolina resident said, adding that he tries to write six days a week.

On a recent stop in Portland, Oregon, Rash manages to squeeze in a telephone interview with me in the morning before a scheduled appearance at the Wordstock Book Festival later that afternoon. While other writers are taking in the sights of the northwest city, or networking at the bar, Rash is happy to hole up in the solitary quiet of his hotel room to spend five hours drafting a novel he's "deep into."

Set in 1970's Madison County, North Carolina, "The World Made Straight" tells the story of Leonard Shuler, a former schoolteacher, who befriends Travis Shelton, a seventeen-year-old who gets in trouble for stealing a marijuana crop. The two protagonists find themselves connected through their ancestors and the legacy of the Shelton Laurel massacre, a local Civil War event that continues, after a century, to divide the Appalachian community. Dorothy Allison, author of "Bastard Out of Carolina" calls the novel, "a wonderful, heartbreaking, heart-healing kind of work, a work of genius--genius and insight and poetry and the kind of language that whispers to me like music coming back off dense wet hills and upturned faces."

Like his previous novels, "Saints at the River" (2004) and "One Foot in Eden" (2002), Rash's third novel has a strong sense of place. A North Carolina native whose family has lived in the southern Appalachian Mountains for more than two hundred years, Rash is known for making the region a focus of his fiction and poetry. "Landscape is destiny," Rash said.

A graduate of Gardner-Webb College and Clemson University, Rash holds the John Parris Chair in Appalachian Studies at Western Carolina University and lives in Clemson, South Carolina with his wife and two children. He is also the author of three books of poetry: *Eureka Mill* (1998), *Among the Believers* (2000) and *Raising the Dead* (2002); and two collections of short stories: *The Night The New Jesus Fell to Earth* (1994), and *Casualties* (2000). He has written one book for children: *The Shark's Tooth*. His poetry and fiction have been published in more journals and magazines than can be listed here, including *Yale Review*, *Georgia Review*, and *Oxford American*. His list of awards include the Academy of American Poets Prize, National Endowment for the Arts poetry fellowship—twice—in poetry and fiction, the Sherwood Anderson Award,

Fellowship of Southern Writers' James Still Award for Writing of the Appalachian South, the O. Henry Prize, the Southeast Booksellers Association Award for Best Work of Fiction, and the Southern Book Critic Circle Award.

But it was the Novello Festival Press Literary Award in 2002, for his first novel, "One Foot in Eden," set in the Jocassee Valley, that dramatically launched Rash's career. The novel had been rejected by a number of New York publishers. After the Charlotte-based independent publisher printed a limited edition of the novel, southern booksellers loved it, and the novel took off like brush fire. National Public Radio heard the buzz, and interviewed Rash. The rest, as they say, is history. Picador bought the paperback rights, and Rash found himself with a two-book deal. Four years later, he has three published novels under his belt; a new collection of stories called, "Waiting for the End of the World" will be out next spring.

"I've been writing a long time, so by the time 'One Foot in Eden' was published, I was backlogged," he said, and nearly finished his second novel, "Saints at the River."

"It's amusing that (fellow writer) George Singleton and I are described sometimes as 'overnight sensations,' " he said, "when we've been writing for years" before being published.

That said, he admits the process of writing novels does not necessarily get easier for the published writer. "There's a confidence-- you know you can do it. Physically. You can come up with 300 typed pages of a draft. You can do it, but not necessarily well. You have to make it good, and that's never easy."

Rash writes up to a dozen drafts of his novels. In between revisions, he writes short stories ("It's satisfying to finish something") and poetry, "to really pay attention to language, focus with care on each word, and hope it carries over to my novel."

"The World Made Straight" grew out of Rash's prize-winning story, "Speckle Trout," which won the O. Henry Award. "In the story, Travis is unlikable but I like him so much. So I decided I'd like to live with these characters a lot longer." The civil war history of atrocities came into play in the novel, he says, because "I've always been horrified and fascinated with the troubling theme of how some of the worst atrocities in history have occurred among people who have coexisted for generations, as in Nazi Germany, Rwanda and Bosnia. I've done a lot of reading about Cambodian genocide under Pol Pot. You see a universal theme in all those particular places."

Tall and thin, regal as a preacher, with a mellifluous southern drawl, Rash regularly transfixes audiences who flock to hear him read. His fine ear for Appalachian speech cadences carry over in his writing, perhaps because he "lets cadence, more than anything else, center my characters' speech in a particular time and place." On the "Southern" or "Appalachian

writer” panels to which he is regularly assigned at national conferences and book festivals, Rash is as likely to quote Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard or South American novelist Gabriel Garcia Marquez, as southern favorites Flannery O’Connor and William Faulkner. “James Joyce’s Dublin—there’s not a more specific place,” he said. “Philip Roth’s New Jersey—those are specific places that speak to the universal” and our humanity, he says. He often reminds his audiences of a favorite quote from southern writer Eudora Welty: "One place understood helps us understand all other places better."

Mindy Friddle is the author of the novel "The Garden Angel" (St. Martin's Press/Picador.) Visit her website, www.mindyfriddle.com, for more information on writing and publishing.

#