Through Young Girls’ Eyes: Children’s Literature Captures Memories of the Industrial Past

by Ann A. Fortescue

No Star Nights
By Anna Egan Smucker, illustrations by Steve Johnson

When I Was Young In The Mountains
By Diane Goode

In Coal Country
By Judith Hendershot, illustrations by Thomas B. Allen

In many well-known children’s books, the setting is integral to the story’s identity. One thinks of the city buildings in Ezra Jack Keats’s work, or Robert McCloskey’s New England; however, stories about the Ohio River Valley have not been represented much in children’s literature. Childhood memories were usually preserved as “oral tradition” only, bits and pieces passing from parents (or grandparents) to their children. But today we see the emergence and recognition of authors for our region, and

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As the industrial past that shaped the Ohio Valley becomes a dimmer and dimmer memory it is important that “the way things were” be set down on paper for future generations of children and parents to discover and wonder over. The three stories reviewed below fit into this category of regional children’s literature and they are made even more intriguing as they are industrial history told from the perspective of a young girl, a viewpoint not much encountered to date.

I was able to read aloud No Star Nights and In Coal Country to the third grade students at Pittsburgh Public School’s Liberty International Studies Academy. Their questions and reflections about the two stories are included in this review.

Anna Egan Smucker evokes her experience growing up in Weirton, West Virginia so well that I almost feel I grew up there too. The young narrator provides a multi-sensory picture of what it was like in the 1950s growing up in the shadow of a glowing, fiery hot steel mill that lit up the night sky and thus obscured the stars.

Her family’s routine revolved around the schedule set by the steel mill. When her father worked the overnight shift, she and her brother and sister had to play quietly; when he worked from 3 to 11 p.m. during the summer, her mother made dinner early so their family could eat together. That was simply the way it was, and the only overtly negative comments about mill work from this child’s perspective were about her father’s “grumpy times” as he adjusted between night- and daytime shifts, and the whole weeks of not seeing him during the school year because he was at work or sleeping. This routine makes the rare, summer afternoon treat of going to a doubleheader Pirates game at Forbes Field, and sitting in the bleachers, even more special. And driving home along the river past Pittsburgh’s steel mills “with their great heavy clouds of smoke billowing from endless rows of smokestacks,” is undoubtedly a memory many area residents share. Smucker’s observation of the road following the river, with the steel mills wedged between and the hills rising up on the other side of the road captures the rapidly disappearing geography of Pittsburgh’s recent past.

July was the best month of the year because the mill workers received their vacation pay and children were often given presents. Fourth of July activities were an important part of a Weirton childhood and contribute to the buoyant, effervescent tone the story gives this time of year, from covering a Girl Scout float with Kleenex tissue flowers to watching the girls who belonged to the Steel Town Strutters baton and marching unit performing in shiny black and gold spangled leotards. One third grade boy in the International Studies Academy wondered how they could march in a parade and ride on floats, if the air was always filled with whirling smoke and dust. He was answered by a classmate who figured out that the steel mill was probably closed on the Fourth of July so there wouldn’t be
any smoke and dust that day.

Memories of school days can often run together in a blur with a few isolated events sticking out like road signs to guide us back to the past. Anna Egan Smucker's school memories draw on different senses and hinge together some of the activities that children in some areas of the Ohio Valley can no longer imagine. The school's location across the street from the mill brings the smell and grittiness of the smoke that turned everything rust-colored into the classroom and made dusting the classroom a daily job. The narrator and her classmates wonder how the nuns who were their teachers kept the white part of habits clean amidst all the soot and dust, though she never finds an answer. This question, like many others in Smucker's text, is one of those thousand or so wonderings children have everyday, only a small fraction of which get turned into openly voiced questions. It is this wondering that defines "being a child" in some way, and the narrator of *No Star Nights* reflects it well.

One of the first questions the third graders at Liberty School asked was, "What was it like to play outside in the swirling smoke?" Smucker describes how she and the other girls had a difficult time when the wind whipped up the silvery little bits of graphite in the smoke. They had to crouch down with their skirts over their legs so bits of graphite wouldn't sting bare legs. After hearing about the narrator's experience of having a piece of graphite caught in her eye, one third grade girl wondered how they kept the bits of graphite and gritty smoke from getting in their eyes over and over again. Today's third graders listened to the description of dodgeball and other games the narrator and her friends played on the side street going up the hill next to the school building. Their faces had an understanding look when the narrator mentioned the everyday hazard of losing a ball that goes along with street games.

The walk home from school — right through part of the mill — illustrates another memory that many have tried to capture for their children since it's just barely still a reality. Tall cement walls with barbed wire on top kept the children out of the mill. Only the bridge over the railroad let them look down into the works, and there was always something wonderful to watch:

"A giant ladle would tilt to give the fiery furnace a 'drink' of orange molten iron.... The workers were just small dark figures made even smaller by the great size of the ladies and the furnace. The hot glow of the liquid steel made the dark mill light up as if the sun itself was being poured out. And standing on the bridge we could feel its awful heat."

Descriptive and evocative phrasing like this abounds in *No Star Nights* and can serve to bring memories flooding back for adults while Steven Johnson's outstanding illustrations show those of us who were not there what it might have been like.

Rising up behind the mill were huge piles of coal, iron ore, and rusting scrap metal, and the crane lifting and loading these piles looked like a dinosaur. The children imagined the mill was a huge beast and they would run all the way home. Giving life to a machine is another activity that seems to come naturally to 7- to 10-year-old children and is one today's children will easily follow. Smucker's description lays the groundwork for that by providing the sounds, smell, and size of the mill that must have seemed all the more gigantic to children, and therefore so easily turned into a monster.

Adventure and discovery are common childhood exploits, whether in reality or in our imagination. Smucker provides both, from the imagined steel mill beast that chases her, to an actual adventure climbing a slag hill. The narrator and her friend reach the top just in time to stop a truck from dumping slag onto their little sisters who were following them and still near the bottom of the hill. The reader or listener shares the girls' tension and their relief as they looked down on the mill which seemed to stretch the entire length of the valley and somewhere in the clouds of orange smoke they hear the distant sound of a whistle marking the end of a shift, and the end of Smucker's childhood memories.

She concludes the story in the present describing how the town looks now that the steel mill has closed. The valley is quiet, the slag hill is covered with grasses and blackberry bushes, and the night sky is filled with stars. Not many children live in the town anymore; grandchildren come back to visit and listen to stories about the night sky that glowed red.

*No Star Nights*'s primary strength is the melding of everyday activities that children will recognize, sympathize with, and relate to. Wrapping these activities around the workings of a steel mill almost makes the mill one of the story's characters. Smucker crafts her childhood memories to capture the memories and attention of children. Almost immediately after I finished the story, the third graders wanted to share their experiences of parents who worked at night or of the treat of going to a baseball game. They were quick to notice the connection between an adult's work and family routines.

The next two children's books take us into the hills where the coal that fired the mills was mined. *When I Was Young In The Mountains*, by Cynthia Rylant, is not about coal mining the way *No Star Nights* is about the steel industry. It is more a childhood memoir tying family events and childhood adventures to the rural coal-mining hills of West Virginia in the first half of the twentieth century.

Rylant is the youngest of the three girls and these events, like those of most 5- to 7-year-olds, connect people and events together. The young girl's grandmother "spread the table with hot cornbread, pinto beans, and fried okra,"
took her to the outhouse in the middle of the night, and fixed hot cocoa for the girl and her brother to drink after their baths.

In summer, the children walk through the woods to the swimming hole, where they sometimes see snakes but jump in anyway. Sunday church services were held in the schoolhouse and the congregation walked to that swimming hole for baptisms. Her grandmother intimidates a black snake that slithers into the yard and on another occasion the children drape a dead black snake around their necks for an itinerant photographer.

The young girl’s grandfather appears on the first and last pages of the story. In the beginning he comes home from the mine covered with black coal dust except for his lips, with which he kissed her on the top of her head, and at the end he is with the girl, her brother, and grandmother, resting on the porch after a day’s work. I assume that his absence from the rest of the story was because he worked long hours in the coal mine, but I wonder whether young children will guess his whereabouts. Rylant should also be recognized for choosing a not-so-traditional family of children and grandparents, drawing upon her own experiences growing up with her grandparents. However, I think curious children and adults are going to wonder what happened to the parents.

Rylant’s strength is in conveying the young girl’s love for the mountains. The last page of the story is the girl’s confirmation that she never wanted to leave the mountains because they had everything and everyone who was important to her. When I Was Young In The Mountains is a very peaceful, soothing story that acquaints the reader with the simplicity of life in rural West Virginia. That she does not discuss the dire poverty that must have surrounded her must be because those are the sort of concerns that most 5- to 7-year-olds rarely articulate.

The illustrations by Diane Goode contribute to this softness. The last picture does hint at some of the poverty, dirt, and hardships involved with living in a mining community but glosses them over with a smiling girl and shining mountains. The girl sits on her back steps, a book in her lap, staring out towards the mountains with flowers growing in old cooking and coffee pots. I was disappointed that When I Was Young In The Mountains did not bring more of the daily survival activities and routines into the story. One of the young girl’s school days or helping her grandmother prepare food might have provided a more detailed picture of what life was like back then. The other two books reviewed here present rich, positive narratives with a life-line to their locale, without hiding the dirt, smoke, crumbling steps, and peeling paint.

Judith Hendershot’s In Coal Country is a year-long picture of growing up in a company-built mining town during the 1930s. The narrative follows the seasonal activities of a young girl in an Ohio coal mining camp. She notices the burdens of a livelihood governed by a coal company. She describes her house as one in a long row of two-family houses, where the exterior paint peels off because of something in the coal smoke. The families of coal miners lived in these houses owned by the Black Diamond Mine Company and there were many playmates among the 75 children living there. The narrator’s father is the only family member who bathes daily, after he comes home each morning covered with coal dust. Her mother heated water on the stove, filled the “No. 3 tub,” and set it behind a blanket in the kitchen. This is the reader’s introduction to Willow Grove, the setting of a year in the life of this young girl.

Spring flowers covered the hills surrounding Willow Grove and brightened the family’s table. The stones and dirt picked out from the good coal were discarded on “gob” piles that form the huge hills on which the children played. Sometimes a gob pile would catch fire and smolder for days; this burnt stone was called red dog. All the roads in Willow Grove were covered with red dog stone, a memory which may strike home for many residents of coal country.

The railroad ran right past the Company Row and the girl often watched the engineers pulling and pushing as many as 100 cars at a time. The trains made the houses shake as they moved coal from the mine to the power plants and steel mills along the Ohio River, day and night. The creaking of the tracks, the groaning of the locomotive as it starts, and the “whooohoo” of the train whistle are described like a lullaby. They are the kind of descriptions that bring an image of the past quickly to life for the reader: they caught the attention of the third graders, who wondered how anyone could sleep all night long with trains groaning and whistles blowing next to their houses.

Helping to make ends meet was a family affair. In the mornings, children took buckets to collect the lumps of coal that had spilled off the trains at night. And mothers worked as hard as fathers at Willow Grove: the narrator’s mother tends a vegetable garden, cans in the fall, and bakes rye bread every other day. The girl describes laundry as the most difficult household chore, from carrying the water up from the pump at the creek and heating it on the stove, to her mother’s hands raw and wrinkled from scrubbing the clothes. The third grade students had ques-
tions about the details of chores. They wanted to know how heavy the water bucket was and how much coal the children in the story needed to collect.

Summer time in Company Row for children was filled with carefree adventures. When it was hot they spent the day under Bernice Falls, where the water flows from a natural spring. On payday the girl’s father buys her an Eskimo Pie at the company store, where they stocked anything miners’ families might need. Thomas Allen’s illustration shows the front porch of the store with a gasoline pump in the foreground. The third graders wanted to know why there was only one store and why the town didn’t have a gas station.

The autumn leaves made the hills glow fiery colors and the children gathered nuts meats that would be used in holiday cookies. Wintertime sleds were made from tin, left over from roofing, and ice skates were shared as children took turns skating on the creek. Christmas was the best time of year because the house smelled of a Christmas tree, roast goose, and other baked goods; most importantly, no “whistle called Papa to the mine.”

Hendershot’s text is very matter of fact, ideally suited to her 9- or 10-year-old narrator. A balanced number of men’s and women’s tasks are illustrated, and readers have the impression that life in Willow Grove or any coal mining camp depended on whole families working together. The joy and the fun of being a child is related in the warm way the children’s activities are described. Thomas Allen’s pastel and charcoal illustrations capture the freshness of the spring wildflowers, the deep orange color of the autumn hills, and the many shades of gray and black as the trains move throughout the night. *In Coal Country* provides an easy-to-follow and clear illustration of a way of life that is nearly gone from the Ohio Valley.

All three of these books are the authors’ first for children. Each author brings a freshness to her story-telling and a willingness to share the tremendous affection they have for their childhood experiences. In all three books the settings and roles of characters are what is important in conveying the narrator’s sense of pride in telling you about her world. But equally important to the third graders was the girls’ names; they all wanted to know, “what was her name?” In all three stories none of the characters has a name; they are all known by their roles as mother, father, grandfather, grandmother, brother, sister, and teacher. We talked a little about how the narrators were writing about their childhood memories, so each of their names is the name of the girl telling the story. Throughout each book one sees that the young girl who is narrating received her enthusiasm and capability for enjoying her surroundings from her family. And as the women who have written them down, each was encouraged to use her fine powers of observation about her subject matter and her audience.

For readers who grew up in the Ohio River Valley, these books present an outstanding aid in helping them to share their childhood memories with children. For people outside the region or people who have recently made the valley their home, this trio of books can help them discover the history of the place through a child’s eyes, which is often the least encumbered way of learning anything. For teachers, these books provide wonderful introductions to family, local, and oral history projects. I imagine that children, their teachers, parents, and grandparents in the Pittsburgh region will someday write down their stories, ones that are as engaging and honest as the three reviewed here.

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**'Genius Loci': A Southwesterner, Once of Pittsburgh, Comes Back into Print**

Book review essay by John Schulman

**Pittsburgh Memoranda**

By Haniel Long

Haniel Long (1888-1956) has for many years enjoyed a cult following among readers of regional literature. His major works mainly fall into that genre, and the concept of regional literature, as well as its promotion, was a central concern of his. The term “regional literature” has always been a bit puzzling to me, primarily because it can be used so dynamically, applied sometimes to a body of literature about a particular

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