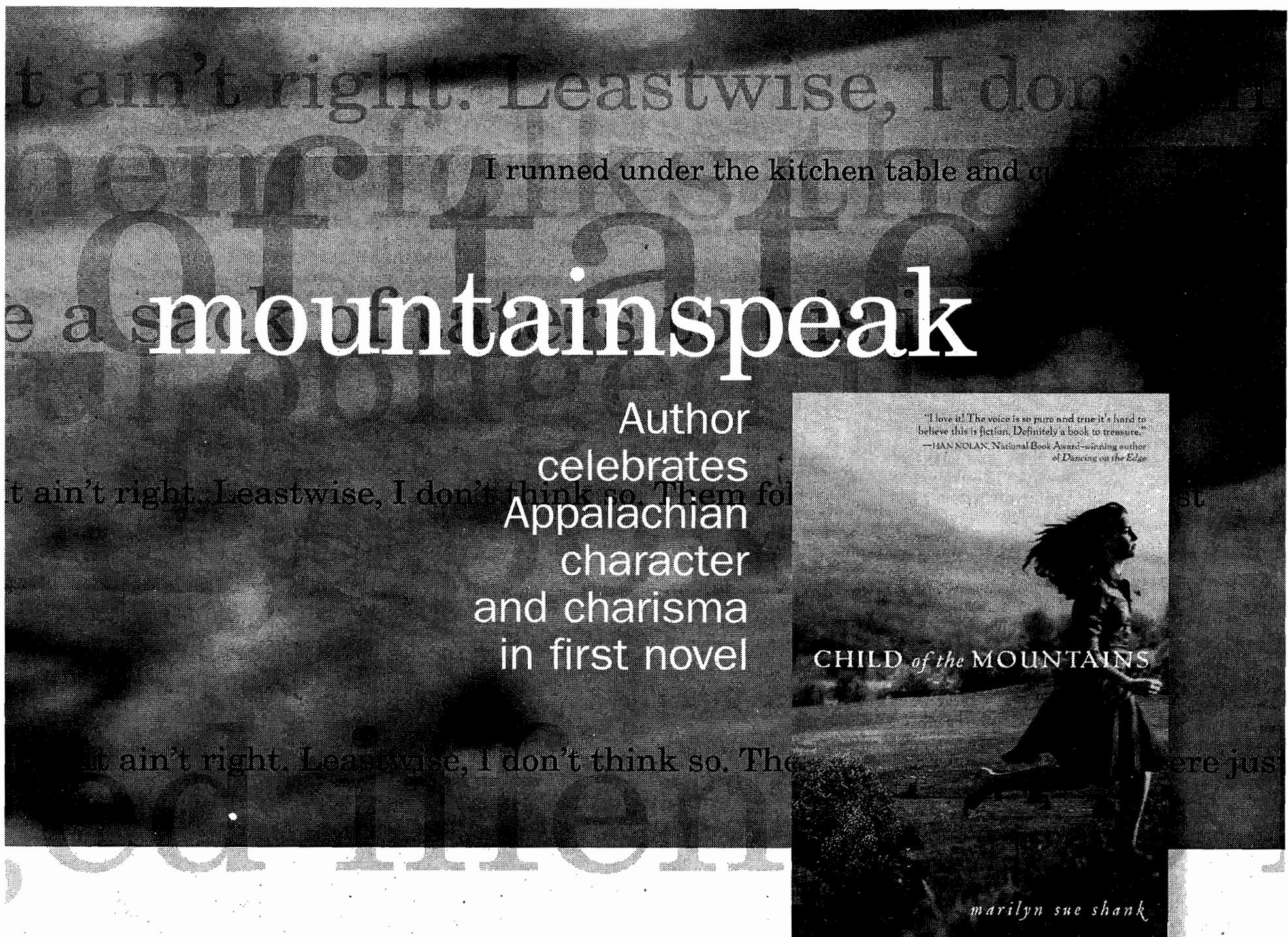


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mountainspeak

Author celebrates Appalachian character and charisma in first novel

"CHILD OF THE MOUNTAINS."
 By Marilyn Sue Shank.
 Delacorte-Random House.
 259 pages. \$16.99.

By Lisa Shrewsberry
 LIFESTYLES EDITOR

My mama's in jail. It ain't right. A girl's voice spoke inwardly to teacher, writer and proud West Virginian Marilyn Shank. Like a ghost seeking the earthly resolution leading to eternal rest, her voice was honest and its plea, persistent: My mama's in jail. It ain't right.

It was the sound of Lydia being born. "I call it socially acceptable schizophrenia," explains Shank of what Shakespeare might have labeled his Muse. "The difference with writers is, we know the voices are not real." Her response to the character developing in her mind was to open a new document file and start writing.

But the only way Lydia Hawkins could achieve believability as lead in Shank's novel, "Child of the Mountains," was if her creator remained true to her voice.

"In writer's conferences, they always say, 'Don't write in dialect for kids.' But I had to be true to what I heard. This was what I remember my relatives speaking."

Shank, a Charleston native and Ph.D. in special education

who had become an expert on children with difficulty learning to read, revered her heritage and how those who forged it spoke.

As any true Appalachian, she has absorbed the shock of outlander comments, ones maintaining the lyrical stream of metaphors and double-negative-laden hill language equaled minimal intelligence.

"I got a kick out of one person on Amazon (not from Appalachia) who said Lydia's English seemed to improve as the book went on. They just began to understand it more."

Shank

People not from this area struggle initially with heavy Appalachian dialect.

Without regard to whether a literary giant would see beyond the wrappings of accent and trappings of formality to accept her story, Shank flew onward... by the seat of her pants... and into publication through Delacorte Press, a division of Random House.

An agent, who agreed to represent Shank after reading "Child of the Mountains" and who is also West Virginian, labeled the writer a "pantster" — "someone who flies by the seat of their pants when they write," explains the author, the opposite of a plodder, the painstakingly organized purveyor of beginning, middle

and end. Later, a linguaphilic French-born editor was drawn to the story, someone who just happened to be searching for an Appalachian manuscript when she was introduced to Shank's Lydia and the folk of the 1950s West Virginia coalfields. It was one in a string of conveyances allowing her story to come to life.

"Amazingly, the first copy editor was from West Virginia. She was really wonderful at helping me stay consistent with the dialect," Shank acknowledges.

She recalls one editor remarking to her early on that Lydia would never say "taters," would she? "She wouldn't say anything else," was Shank's repartee.

To get to Paradise, you have to go through Confidence

The backdrop for Shank's debut novel is bucolic Putnam County, where the author witnessed firsthand what she classifies as "wisdom from the hills." She was drawn to the allegory of getting to a place called Paradise through a place named Confidence, her relatives having grown up on Paradise Hill. Through to a pivotal swearing on the Bible, the spiritual notion carries Lydia along her pathway to self-discovery.

Confidence, while never an actual coal camp, becomes one in "Child of the Mountains," a

small stretch of artistic license taken within the book's accurate geography.

There follows suspense building up to a crucial trial, which the author has been criticized for not laboring. There is a memorable, though for the most part absent, pillar of strength in Lydia's mama, who is unfairly accused of murder, and relational twists and turns abound to keep a reader interested and the story unpredictable. But what binds the threads of each chapter is the power of family connection in overcoming imperfection, the indelible solution of spirit and of blood.

"The humanity of the family and the intelligence and wisdom of the family, that's what I wanted to portray," states Shank, who remains in awe when she thinks back to the intelligence of her own relatives and the accomplishments of their children and grandchildren through the generations.

"We have highly educated people living in the hills. We have so much to be proud of."

Consanguinity

While certain writers capturing the young adult market entertain vampires to do so, Shank battles prejudices and stereotypes instead.

BJ told me about a time them doctors stood around his bed. "He's from West Virginia, isn't he?" a doctor asked one time. "Perhaps consan-

guinity is an issue we should investigate. It might benefit our research." Them doctors should have investigated how smart BJ was. They had no idea he figured out all the stuff they said about him.

Young Lydia, faced with the death of her brother, BJ, and the unjust imprisonment of her mother, must struggle against painful pigeonholing rather than mythical beasts and post-apocalyptic battles to emerge as a warrior worthy of an aspiring trilogy.

BJ's recollection to Lydia of his treatment inside a distant hospital was an adaptation of a real experience Shank carried with her from her days completing her doctorate in Kansas. Born with a rare genetic condition affecting her eyes, she encountered the lesson that would eventually work itself onto the pages of her novel through BJ's experience.

"I went to get my eyes examined and the doctors asked 'Where are you from?' The follow-up question was, to Shank's dismay: Are your parents first cousins? 'I was offended by the assumption. Here I was working on my Ph.D. and they're asking if my parents are related?'"

Good and bad ring true in fair measure down through the generations in Shank's mind, some themes echoing louder than others, especially where prejudice is concerned.

See MOUNTAINS, 2E

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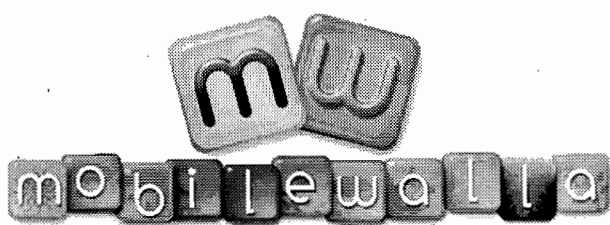
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MOUNTAINS

Continued from 1E

She carried many of her own observations from childhood and adulthood into "Child of the Mountains." "There has to be similitude in fiction," she maintains. "An element of personal truth."

Having shoes, going barefooted

The cover portraying Lydia is a photo illustration by Richard Tuschman of Florida, a highly acclaimed jacket artist who designed the image for 2011's Newbery Medal winner, "Moon Over Manifest" by Clare Vanderpool. As Shank considers his interpretation of her Lydia, running across a meadow barefooted, she notes another element of serendipity to the birth of her story.

"The little girl he used was his neighbor, but the shot was from within our region. She is a beautiful little girl who just happened to be the same age as Lydia and looked like what I envision Lydia to look like."

The scene-setting image contains a stereotype Shank is willing to accept. "She is barefooted, but everybody went barefooted. I went barefooted as a little girl at times."

Having been disabled from her career as an educator by a car accident, Shank was allowed through the tragedy leaving her with chronic pain an opportunity to

bring her voices to life, the ones extolling the strength of character within the people from the state she calls home. She admits she has Lydia's second and third stories well detailed in mind, should the opportunity to tell her story continue.

The author believes it deserves to continue, for Lydias everywhere and for the preservation of Appalachian heritage.

"We are becoming more homogenous as a nation because of an exposure to media. We're losing a lot of regional identity. That's what I really wanted to preserve in "Child of the Mountains." It needs to be preserved before we lose it."

"Child of the Mountains" was the only book selected to represent

West Virginia at the National Book Festival in Washington, D.C., Sept. 22-23. It has also been recognized by the American Booksellers for Children as one of six middle-grade Spring New Voices Titles.

"This is my love story to West Virginia. This is my heart and soul for West Virginia. I want people to realize that we can have so much pride in where we come from and who we are as Appalachians," she states.

Shank will sign copies of her book at Tamarack July 8 from 11 a.m. to 2 p.m.

For more information on Marilyn Shank and her work, visit www.MarilynSueShank.com.

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