



**THE STRANGE
RURAL NOIR OF
WILMA
DYKEMAN'S *THE
TALL WOMAN***

Rediscovering A Lost Classic of Mid-Century Literature

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Wilma Dykeman was not a crime novelist. Her most celebrated work, *The Tall Woman* (1962) does not appear on lists of “neglected mysteries” or “forgotten thrillers.” The book is not considered a “malice domestic” or even a “slow burn.” No, *The Tall Woman* is a quiet novel, set in the valleys of mid-nineteenth century North Carolina. Its main character is a housekeeper, farmer, midwife, education advocate and all-around naturalist. Her job is to raise children and tend to the needs of the homestead—not the kind of character one would expect to find at the center of a crime novel. Nor does anyone conduct detective work in *The Tall Woman*. There are no cops, no private investigators, and no sleuths.

But be assured, *The Tall Woman* is a novel about crime.



Specifically, it’s about a singular event at the outset of the story that affects an entire family, and ultimately, an entire community. Like many crimes, both real and fictional, this one traumatizes its victim, her family, and the gentle agrarian community of the novel. And again, like many crimes, the effects reverberate for years to come. Really, *The Tall Woman* is a species of rural noir, that sub-genre so in vogue nowadays, but not

one in the conventional sense. Indeed, one might read it and never come away thinking as much.

What's unique about Dykeman's work is the way in which the initial crime manifests itself in the collective psyche of the different characters, and how it governs actions that outwardly bear no relation to the crime itself. It's all part of an elemental malaise that runs throughout the book, one that remains part and parcel of its rural character, and one which certainly qualifies it as "noir," but again, not in a way commentators or readers normally conceive of the term. And Dykeman's conception of the wilderness itself, at times distinct from the highly rural "valley," figures crucially in its relation to the crime and to the sickness it has engendered. The woods of *The Tall Woman* can be at once hostile and welcoming, poisonous and restorative.

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And so, if you enjoy rural noir, you should read Dykeman. If you *write* rural noir, it's criminal *not* to read her.

It's no spoiler to note what happens at the beginning of the novel. During the American Civil War, a group of "outliers" raid the Moore family farm in rural North Carolina. The patriarch, Jesse Moore, is away at the time, fighting for the Confederacy, while his son-in-law fights for the Union. On a pillaging campaign, the rogue marauders descend on the farm and take captive the matriarch of the family, the elderly Sara Moore. Because of the singular nature of its perverse cruelty, and because Dykeman does little else with violence in the novel, the passage remains striking not only for what it is on its own,

but for the contrast it creates against the bucolic scenes that precede and follow it. It is the literary “interrupted idyll,” and to quote it here would be to deprive readers of its power as it’s situated in the novel. There is an important note sounded in this scene, however, one that anticipates the darker elements of the story. As Lydia and Robert Moore struggle to free their mother from her binds and convey her to safety, the younger Robert rages, “Why did they do it to her, Lydia?” Lydia answers, “There’s no why to it, Robert.”

This existential remark ushers in the sense of hardship, futility, and anguish that underlays much of the novel’s action, as well as the psychological trauma that defines the character of Mark, Lydia’s husband, and by extension, Lydia’s own trauma. In fact, Mark is directly and immediately affected by the torture of his mother-in-law, though he’s nowhere near the scene of the crime, nor is he even aware of it. Later, though, he correctly reasons that his harsh imprisonment in Andersonville prison during the war is related to the outliers’ raid. As a new member of the Moore family through marriage to Lydia, he realizes he’s been sold out to the enemy, and in one of his fits of rage, he screams: “Somebody here in the valley give me away to the enemy. Somebody here betrayed me, got me sent, alone out of all my outfit, to that hell-hole they called a prison. Who else would know so much about one common soldier out of thousands but a person from his home place?”

Dykeman is skilled in the manner in which she spins out Mark’s post-traumatic stress and psychoses, the first visible effects of the crime’s foul seed. Ever-aware of the importance of the husband/wife

relationship during the era and place—the strength or weakness of which can be the difference between life and death—she manages to render Mark’s suffering as something borne equally by Lydia. This is tricky for a writer who eschews anything that smacks of sentimentality in favor of stylistic subtlety. Significantly, then, Mark’s recollections of Andersonville come to the reader through Lydia, but not by way of dialogue. Rather, Dykeman manages to effect for Lydia a sort of internalization of Mark’s suffering by way of *third person narration*.

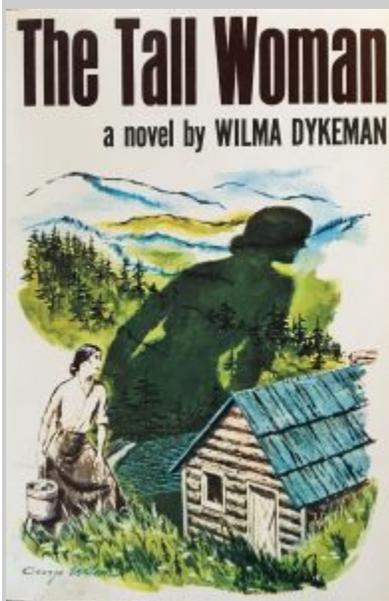
Mark is tight-lipped, not given to effusiveness. In several places, in fact, he notes plainly that he’s not skilled with words. It’s the more reflective and sensitive Lydia whom we hear in the passage where the young wife struggles to understand her husband’s malaise and the alienation it caused. “Perhaps this tension was prison borne,” Dykeman writes,

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“[Lydia] tried to recall all those terse, important words by which he had sought to bridge the gap between them yesterday. He told Lydia and the others only that he had been imprisoned at a place called Andersonville. Under the blazing suffocation of late autumn’s sun and in the chill drizzle of winter rain, he had watched a herd of men, been one of the herd, twisted from humans into grasping, craving animals—yet not quite beasts: sub-humans, super-animals, ashamed in their cunning, insufficient in their tokens of kindness that still flashed through the welter of humiliation and starvation.”

The terms, the imagery, don’t belong to Mark, we can be certain, though the pain surely does. Instead, the depiction belongs to the

more lyrical Lydia. It's a technique Dykeman employs throughout the novel, the conveyance of sadness, of alienation or disillusionment springing ultimately from the outliers' crime. In another section, early on in the novel, Lydia laments the loss of the Mark she knew before Andersonville, before the outliers. It's a loss she associates with the land itself, with bucolic memories of their courting: "[T]he Mark who had come back to her was not the Mark who had left. The Mark here with her last night had been a strange, greedy, knowing man alien to the affection of the Mark who had lain with her and sung to her under the poplars by the spring a long time ago."



When Mark's trauma becomes too much to be borne, he decides to leave the familiar valley for the wilderness of the Devil's Brow, a hard land above a granite outcropping, a forlorn place where Mark feels he can get away from people, get away from the crime of the outliers and from the collective crimes of man. He rages, "We're going up on the mountain. I've had enough of the swinish ways of

men. We'll take to the woods and the beasts that have natural cruelty and cunning. We'll build us a home up under the Devil's Brow." And here the narrative moves from the picturesque, agrarian valley to that of the hardwoods.

Clearing the rough land for farming up on the Devil's Brow is torturous work, but Mark, Lydia and their growing family stick it out, eking out a life up there. At times Lydia feels at peace in the wooded area, and to an extent, Mark does too. Lydia has cleaned a stream of impurities and established a bed of ginseng, among other herbs, and root plants. The couple has built a barn for livestock. But they remain isolated from the rustic valley, and if Dykeman presents scenes of rural beauty in Devil's Brow, she never hastens to remind us that Mark is forever touched by the crime of the outliers. In fact, his first child, David, born while Mark was at war, suffers from some unnamed "affliction," as Lydia calls it (something akin to what might be called autism nowadays). Incredibly, even this Mark attributes to the outliers, to his imprisonment and the trauma that Sara Moore's torture wreaked on her pregnant daughter. About his son's disorder Mark says, "Same as if he had been out on the battleground . . . He's victim to that war and to those hellish outliers." Years later, then, Mark still cannot overcome the violence of it all. "The war seemed very long ago," Dykeman writes in the interior voice of Lydia.

"Perhaps Mark was right, however, and it was still alive, in David . . . and in Mark's crippled view of life." But it's the thought of the outliers specifically, and of vengeance, that obsess and disturb Mark so. He swears to Lydia, "Long as there's breath in me I'll be seeking

out the traitors that caused me to be in that Anderson death-hole, caused you and your ma to be robbed and ruined—.”

In the end, the move to Devil’s Brow has not been any kind of escape for Mark, nor for Lydia, or for the marriage in general: “So misery clung to them like a stale odor that could not be banished. And words could not span the gulf between them.”

Toward the close of the novel, an event occurs that seems to bring Mark some peace, a fact that delights Lydia and her now large family. But just as Dykeman offers this uplifting twist, she pulls the rug out from everyone: The mystery of the outliers’ identity, and that of their conspirators, is suddenly revealed. Mark’s desire for vengeance resurfaces, and a showdown of sorts ensues. But in typical Dykeman fashion, the matter is not resolved in a way we might expect from a rural noir, or from any crime novel, for that matter. Still, there is both clever plotting here, and an expression of true, spiritual Grace (with a capital “G”) that move the story in a most satisfying way in these final pages.

Throughout the novel other characters, too, are disoriented, alienated, and traumatized generally by the outliers’ crime. There is a murder/suicide, an act of arson, and a would-be lynch mob event that can all be tied back to the crime in one way or another. Rather than enter into a discussion of all these events, suffice it to say that Dykeman has managed to create rural noir in *mood* and in collective *psyche* more than in the presence of crimes, subterfuge, or detection. *The Tall Woman* is a psychological rural noir, if there is such a thing.

Dykeman only wrote two other novels (*The Far Family*, 1966 and *Return the Innocent Earth*, 1973), sagas that continue the McQueen/Moore family story, but among the later generations who live in the city. These works lament the loss of the rural sensibility seen in places throughout *The Tall Woman*, the death of the noble agrarian life as it was in the nineteenth century. Of course, Dykeman also seems to suggest in these later works that humans can be alternately repulsive or gracious in both country and city.

For its unique treatment of rural crime, and for its towering stylistic power, *The Tall Woman* should earn a place in the pantheon of rural noir, whenever one is established.



[Chris McGinley](#)

Chris McGinley's *Coal Black* (Shotgun Honey, 2019) is a collection of crime stories set in the hills of Appalachia. His work has appeared in *Mystery Tribune*, *Mystery Weekly*, *Tough*, and other forums. He teaches middle school in Lexington, KY where he lives with his wife.