

Readers Guide to *The Devil Amongst the Lawyers*

By Sharyn McCrumb

In *The Devil Amongst the Lawyers*, it is 1935 and a beautiful young mountain woman has gone on trial for the murder of her father. Because the defendant was attractive and educated, the national media made a *cause célèbre* of her case. In order to emphasize her status as "victim," the reporters depicted the citizens of Wise County, Virginia as ignorant rustics. The newspaper reporters' manipulation of the case, their misrepresentation of the culture in their coverage perpetuated stereotypes that have tainted the image of the region for 75 years. This is not a crime novel. I use this case as a vehicle to examine the politics of culture. Supposedly objective reporters can influence popular opinion with methods as subtle as a word choice, or a carefully-chosen unflattering photo

In writing *The Devil Amongst the Lawyers* I was making cultural connections. In the novel one of the national reporters spent his youth in Japan, and, through his eyes, I make comparisons between one rural culture and another. My template is Matsuo Basho's poem "*Narrow Road to a Far Province*," describing his three-year journey through the remote hill country of Honshu. Many of Basho's observations fit perfectly as descriptions of the Virginia Blue Ridge. My readers' favorite character Nora Bonesteel appears in this novel, aged thirteen, just coming to terms with the Sight. You may also notice that 1935 Wise County has much in common with present day America: a country in the throes of an economic depression; a deadly flu epidemic; a world contending with the rise of political fanatics; and a media culture determined to turn news stories into soap operas for the diversion of the masses.

Here are some discussion questions that may enrich your discussion of the novel.

1. In this novel, national reporters stereotype the rural mountain community. In what ways do the media or people from other regions misunderstand your hometown or your culture?
2. *The Devil Amongst the Lawyers* is set in 1935. How do the issues of that time compare with today's problems in health crises; national disasters; international relations; the economy, etc.?
3. How does the prologue (*about the hanging of the elephant*) relate to the Erma Morton trial?

4. Reread the story of Urashima Taro, told in Chapter Five of the novel. Does this folk tale remind you of similar stories in the folklore of other cultures? Why do you suppose so many cultures independently developed some form of this story?
5. Carl Jennings, Harley Morton, and Shade Baker are all young men with rural origins. How are they alike and in what ways are they different?
6. Henry Jernigan is condescending and prejudiced against the Appalachian culture. He is prejudiced in favor of the Japanese. Discuss this disparity.
7. Nora Bonesteel is a young girl coming to terms with the Sight. Have you or anyone you know had experiences similar to hers?
8. The chapter headings in *The Devil Amongst the Lawyers* are taken from *Oku No Hosomichi*, a 17th century Japanese poem by Matsuo Basho. (The title in English is: *A Narrow Road to a Far Province*.) How does the journey of Basho through the mountains of Japan compare with Henry's journey in southwest Virginia?
9. The year 1935 came amidst the Great Depression. Would you rather have lived in that era in a large city or a rural area? Why?
10. Author Sharyn McCrumb has said "*Cities are judged by their richest inhabitants, and rural areas by their poorest.*" Is this true? What evidence can you show to support or refute this statement?

Suggested Supplementary Materials to Accompany the Novel

1. Look at the Depression-era photographs taken by Dorothea Lange and others, and consider whether they record fact or opinion.
2. Watch the 1960 film "*Inherit the Wind*" (Spencer Tracy). Discuss the interaction between the big-city lawyers and the people of the community.
3. Watch the 1935 film "*The Trail of the Lonesome Pine*," (Henry Fonda) whose setting was Wise County VA in 1890. What would have changed between 1890 and 1935?
4. Read *Oku no Hosomichi* by Matsuo Basho. Available in translation by Dorothy Britton.
5. Listen to the music of The Carter Family, southwest Virginia country/folk musicians recording in the 1930's.

Sharyn McCrumb is an award-winning Southern writer, known for her Appalachian "Ballad" novels, including the *New York Times* Best Sellers **She Walks These Hills** and **The Rosewood Casket**, **The Ballad of Frankie Silver** and **The Songcatcher**. **St. Dale**, The Canterbury Tales in a NASCAR

setting, won a 2006 Library of Virginia Award, as well as the AWA Book of the Year Award. McCrumb, was named a “**Virginia Woman of History**” in 2008 for Achievement in Literature. Other honors include: AWA Outstanding Contribution to Appalachian Literature Award; the Chaffin Award for Southern Literature; the Plattner Award for Short Story; and AWA’s Best Appalachian Novel.