

Themes & Discussion Questions for *The Rosewood Casket*

In *The Rosewood Casket*, I wanted to talk about the passing of the land from one group to another, as a preface to the modern story of farm families losing their land to the developers in today's Appalachia. The voice of Daniel Boone is central to the novel's message, a reminder that the land inherited by the farm families was once taken from the Cherokee and the Shawnee. The novel begins with Cherokee wise woman Nancy Ward, in the last spring of her life, as she realizes that her people are about to lose the land that she tried so hard to preserve for them. As a reminder of that transience of ownership, in a passage in chapter one of *The Rosewood Casket*, I trace the passing of the land even farther back: to a time at the end of the last Ice Age, twelve thousand years ago.

Appalachia was a very different place at the end of the Ice Age, when the first humans are believed to have arrived in the mountains. The climate of that far-off time was that of central Canada today, too cold to support the oaks and hickories of our modern forests. Appalachia then was a frozen land of spruce and fir tree, but it was home to a wonderful collection of creatures: mastodons, saber-tooth tigers, camels, horses, sloths the size of pick-up trucks, and birds of prey with wingspans of twenty-five feet. The kingdom of ice that was Appalachia in 10,000 B.C. was their world, and they lost it to the first human settlers of the region, who hunted the beasts to extinction in only a few hundred years. Losing the land is an eternal process, I wanted to say. It seemed fitting to start with these early residents, as a reminder that even the Indians were once interlopers.

Although the title came from a 19th century Tin Pan Alley tune ("The Rosewood Casket"), for me the theme song of the book is *Will the Circle Be Unbroken?*

The supernatural aspect of the book is actually magic realism-- the blurring of the line between the real and the supernatural with the equal acceptance of both. I put this in the book because I find it in the culture itself as an echo of the traditions brought to the region by the settlers from Celtic Britain. You will find the same patterns of second sight and revenants on both sides of the Atlantic.

The family relationships in the book are a microcosm of the dilemma faced by families whose children must leave home to have careers.

Questions

1. You will be better prepared for this discussion, if you do a little Googling first. Find out about the Cherokee *Ghigau* Nancy Ward; the biography of Daniel Boone; the literary convention of "magic realism"; and the introduction of the "starling" songbird into this country. Also read my essay on the land connections between Appalachia and Celtic Britain.

2. This book contains many examples of people and things **losing their land**. I can think of five off the top of my head. How many can you find?
3. Nora Bonesteel's gift of the Sight is not uncommon among people of Scots-Irish descent. What examples of it have you seen in people you know?
4. What effect does luxury land development have on the original residents of an area? If this were happening in your community, how would you deal with it?
5. Robert Lee Stargill's wife believes that she has a guardian angel named Rudy. ruddy actually (physically) appears to another character during the course of the novel *When and where does he show up*, and how is this an example of magic realism rather than fantasy ?
6. Try making Nora Bonesteel's Scripture Cake.
7. Describe the landscape of east Tennessee in 10,500 B.C. (the end of the last Ice Age.) Climate, air quality, inhabitants? What plants and animals would you see?
8. *"I believe the future is simply the past, entered through another gate."* -- How do modern characters in the book echo historical figures? (e.g. Dovey Stallard-- Nancy Ward; Clayt Stargill- Daniel Boone.)
9. One of the problems of Appalachian stereotyping is that people assume that Appalachia is synonymous with poor people. But the differences between people are more a question of economics and social class rather than regional affiliation. It is important to stress this. "Cities are judged by their richest inhabitants and rural areas are judged by their poorest." How does your own region or ethnic group suffer from stereotyping?
10. How are the conflicts between the songbirds -- the starlings and the Bewick's wrens-- a metaphor for the plight of the people in the novel?