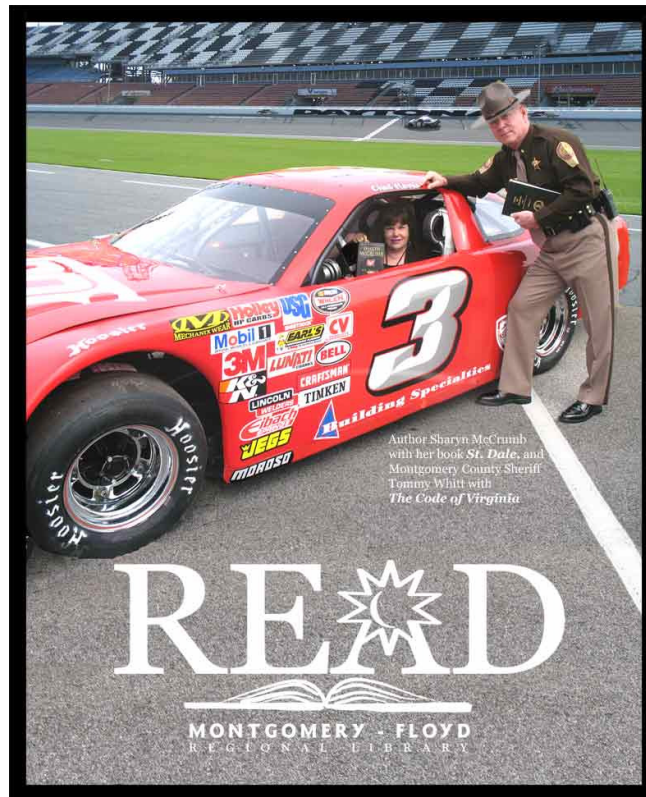


Proposed Program Title: **Chaucer is my Crew Chief :**
NASCAR: Putting *The Canterbury Tales* in A 21st Century Cultural Context

St. Dale, the award-winning novel by *New York Times* Best-selling author Sharyn McCrumb, is the *Canterbury Tales* set in NASCAR, used as a supplementary text in Chaucer classes, and by secondary schools and college classes as a contemporary Southern novel of popular culture. Its theme is humanity's continuing need for heroes.



Sharyn McCrumb – Author of *St. Dale*

Program: Sharyn McCrumb's award-winning novel *St. Dale* set "The Canterbury Tales" within the world of NASCAR, and produced a wise and wonderful book that became required reading in colleges and high schools throughout the country. *St. Dale* is the story of a group of ordinary people who go on a pilgrimage in honor of racing legend Dale Earnhardt and find a miracle. McCrumb will discuss her adventures in researching and writing the novel, and distribute a teaching guide to the audience discussing the use of the novel in schools as a supplementary text in Chaucer courses. She has visited a number of the schools studying her novel, sometimes taking a race car driver with her in order to address both Chaucer and NASCAR questions. She also discusses the novel's theme of 'grassroots canonization' in contemporary heroes.

Part I – A Review of The Canterbury Tales & the Concept of Pilgrimages

The concept of a pilgrimage is a feature in many different cultures. The medieval pilgrimages to Canterbury in England, to Santiago de Compostela in Spain, to Rome, and to Jerusalem have their counterparts in (*for example*) the Haj to Mecca in Islam, and the pilgrimage to the 88 holy sites of Shikoku in Japan. There are also secular pilgrimages, e.g. to Graceland.

This illustrated multi-cultural journey will form the basis for an understanding of the concept of the pilgrimage and the role of the hero in world cultures..

Part II – An Introduction to NASCAR

How can you relate a book to NASCAR if you don't know the subject? The same way your students learn about *The Canterbury Tales*—you make an effort to become knowledgeable. Sharyn McCrumb knew nothing about NASCAR when she began researching the book, but she studied it as if it were an academic subject, and she learned it. In this segment, there will be a pre-test of the audience's knowledge of NASCAR and the sharing of strategies for mastering the subject.

Count to ten in "NASCAR"! Never forget a series of numbers again!

Part III – Setting the Canterbury Tales in NASCAR

What do Thomas Becket, Elvis Presley, Princess Diana, and Dale Earnhardt have in common? They were all the object of a process of "Grassroots Canonization," transformed in death into "the People's Saints." Discussion of our need for heroes, and how a culture chooses its icons.

How does an author get an idea for a novel and then go about researching it? A guided tour inside the creative process, with emphasis on the adventure of research. As an author researching her novels, Sharyn McCrumb has done laps in a race car at Lowes Motor Speedway, sat in Tennessee's electric chair, and learned to shoot an 1841 Springfield muzzle-loader. It's all part of the job.

Part IV- Teaching Strategies for Reaching Students via Popular Culture

"I have team-taught classes with a race car driver!"

St. Dale has been taught now in six states as a supplementary text to *The Canterbury Tales* or on its own as a Southern novel. A discussion of success stories and teaching strategies using this novel to reach the at-risk learner, compiled from the educators who have already had success with it. **Special emphasis on eliminating the elitist negative stereotypes of NASCAR which alienate certain students.**

Applicable Standards of the 21st century learner:

General Statement: An overarching ideal of the Standards of Learning is to get students to read works that we think are important (such as *The Canterbury Tales*) and to understand, or question, why great works are written. To get students to read and enjoy the classics, we need to make them relevant to the learner's own context—as I do with *St. Dale*. It is no coincidence that schools in six states have adopted reading *St. Dale* alongside *The Canterbury Tales* in order to interest students in the discussion about

stories and their meaning in the pursuit of happiness, etc.

As a major theme, we first need to get students “hooked on reading” They need to want to know what will happen next and why. All the Standards stipulate that the learners use previous knowledge to understand the text. What better way to understand the text than by using NASCAR, something that youths today (*particularly boys*) know a lot about.

- Standard 4: (The student who is an independent learner is information literate and pursues information related to personal interests.)

St. Dale, The Canterbury Tales in a NASCAR setting, has proved to be an effective way to interest at-risk students in classical literature by relating the medieval pilgrimage to the image of a journey and a hero *within the scope of their own experience and interests*: instead of a journey from London to Canterbury to visit the shrine of Thomas Becket, the “Number Three Pilgrims” in *St. Dale* make the journey from Bristol to Daytona to pay their respects to NASCAR driver Dale Earnhardt, who was killed in the Daytona 500 in 2001.

4.1.2 Read widely and fluently to make connections with self, the world, and previous reading.

Students see their own cultural values and customs as a facet of the universal experience. A trip to Bristol Motor Speedway to get the autograph of Dale Earnhardt, Jr. is a tradition akin to the Japanese student’s visit to the *Okage Mairi*, or the medieval shepherd’s reverent journey to Canterbury. It infuses past and foreign stories with the relevance of their own life experiences.

4.1.3 Respond to literature and creative expressions of ideas in various formats and genres.

Film: Compare scenes from the 1964 Richard Burton film *Becket* (based on the Jean Anouilh play “Becket: The Honor of God”) to scenes from the 2005 Dale Earnhardt biopic film *3* to show people’s reaction to the death of heroes.

Art: Paintings and stained glass images of Thomas Becket have their contemporary counterparts in Earnhardt memorial tee shirts and bumper stickers, expressing sentiments like “God Needed A Driver,” or the drawing of a “3” morphing into a dove of peace.

Music: Compare The Gregorian Chant “On the Martyrdom of Saint Thomas Becket” to the songs written or played following the death of Dale Earnhardt: “The Dance” by Garth Brooks; “Tracks of Gold,” by David Allan Coe; “Matthew Mark, Luke, and Earnhardt.”

- Standard 8: (The student who contributes positively to the learning community and to society is information literate and practices ethical behavior in regard to information and information technology.)

Combatting Stereotypes: The ethical behavior I would like to see addressed here is a change in the condescending attitude toward a sport which has 70 million followers in the U.S. This sport originated in Appalachia, in a culture whose young people were generally too small to qualify for the National Football League or the National Basketball Association. This is the sport for “little guys,” who are still athletes—who drive for 500

miles in 120-degree heat inside the race car, stopping for no longer than 13 seconds at a time. It is a sport and they are athletes.

People who would be ashamed of their ignorance of modern art or opera boast that they know nothing about racing. Any time people are proud of being ignorant, it worries me. A little knowledge will repay your efforts tenfold when you are trying to reach male students who are racing fans and indifferent students.

- Standard 9: (The student who contributes positively to the learning community and to society is information literate and participates effectively in groups to pursue and generate information.)

The real miracle of *St. Dale* is the number of people who had never read a book in their lives, and who suddenly discover that books contain stories that they can relate to. The book gets passed along from students to family members to people within the community, because it speaks to them about a common interest. Even after the book leaves the classroom, it continues to educate.

About the Presenter:

Sharyn McCrumb is an award-winning Southern writer, whose novel *St. Dale* tells the story of a group of ordinary people who go on a pilgrimage in honor of racing legend Dale Earnhardt, and find a miracle. This *Canterbury Tales* in a NASCAR setting won a **2006 Library of Virginia Award**, as well as the **AWA Book of the Year Award**.

McCrumb, who has been named a “**Virginia Woman of History**” in 2008 for Achievement in Literature, was a guest author at the **National Festival of the Book** in Washington, D.C. sponsored by the Library of Congress and the White House in 2006.

Best known for her Appalachian “Ballad” novels, set in the North Carolina mountains, including *New York Times* Best Sellers *She Walks These Hills* and *The Ballad of Frankie Silver*, Sharyn McCrumb has lectured on her work at Oxford University, the Smithsonian, in Paris and Berlin, and at universities and libraries throughout the country. A film of *Rosewood Casket* is currently in production. Sharyn McCrumb is a graduate of UNC Chapel Hill with an M.A. in English from Virginia Tech.

Title *St. Dale*

Author Sharyn McCrumb
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Copyright: 2005 (*hardcover*) by Kensington Publishing Group, ISBN: 0-7582-0776-X
2006 (*paperback*) by Kensington Publishing Group, ISBN: 0-7582-0777-8

Awards **2005 Library of Virginia People’s Choice Award**
2005 Appalachian Writers Association Award “Best Novel”
Featured Novel at the *National Festival of the Book* 2006

Other Editions ***Large Print Edition:** Thorndyke Press, ISBN 1-58724-909-X
* **Audio Book:** BBC Audio (www.BBCAudiobooksAmerica.com)
ISBN 0- 7927-3465-3; Read by Anna Fields.
* **Book Club Selection:** Literary Guild, Alternate Selection, February 2005;
Doubleday Book Club, Alternate Selection, March, 2005. *Also selected by:* The
Mystery Guild, American Compass, and BookSpan.

Book Selection for the *One Community-One Book* program:
Community libraries in North Carolina, Tennessee, and Virginia.
Campus-wide reading selection at Caldwell Community College, Lenoir, NC, 2007.

Genre **Southern Fiction**

Setting A pilgrimage of Southern NASCAR Speedways, beginning in Bristol,
TN, and continuing on to Martinsville VA, Mooresville NC, Concord
NC, Rockingham NC, Talladega AL, Hampton GA, Daytona Beach FL,
and ending in Darlington, SC.

Time period: Saturday August 23 to Sunday August 31, 2002

Synopsis Harley Claymore, an over-the-hill race car driver who has lost his ride, accepts a job as a
guide for a bus tour of Southern speedways, because the tour offers a chance to attend
two races. Harley hopes to network with NASCAR teams at these races in order to get a
new ride. When he accepts the tour job, he is told that the tour is in fact a NASCAR fans
pilgrimage in memory of NASCAR Champion Dale Earnhardt. Harley Claymore raced
against Dale Earnhardt, and hated him, but for the next nine days he will be trapped on a
bus with weeping Earnhardt fans, and he has to behave himself in order to make it to the
final race—his last hope of getting a job. On the bus there are Dale Earnhardt fans and
passengers who are just along to accompany a loved one who is a fan, but, in the end,
everyone on the bus gets miracle.

Themes * People yearn for (or create) heroes to fill a void in their lives
of the * Life's Too Short for Restrictor Plates
Novel * Ordinary people can be each other's miracles
 • Sometimes "Believing" is "Seeing"

Reading Level 9th grade to Adult - *St. Dale* has been taught in both high schools and colleges in
six states.

Curriculum
* **American Literature** – Because *St. Dale* is a contemporary American novel,
portraying people of different ages, regions, social classes and educational levels,
who have nothing in common, except a love of stock car racing, the novel is a study
of modern society, and a celebration of the quintessential American sport.

***English Literature** – *St. Dale* is a modern homage to *The Canterbury Tales*, the
fourteenth century work by Geoffrey Chaucer. In Sharyn McCrumb's novel the
martyred St. Thomas Becket is replaced by the grassroots saint Dale Earnhardt, 7-
time champion of NASCAR. Throughout the book, many of the characters in

Chaucer are echoed in their modern counterparts, often with the same names. Several of the tales themselves are embedded within the text.

***Sociology-** *St. Dale* is a study of contemporary popular culture, and it used to study the cult of the celebrity, the veneration of heroes, and the cross-cultural similarities of “grassroots canonization” and the custom of pilgrimages. It is also a novel of the southeastern United States, with an accurate portrayal of contemporary Southern customs, values, and dialect. Besides NASCAR, the book has a New Age women’s group (the Friends of the Goddess); a priest studying pilgrimages; a woman with Alzheimers; an orphan child caught in the “system;” and a child of divorced parents trying to connect with the half of his heritage he never knew.