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'St Dale'

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Author Sharyn McCrumb remembers when she thought "NASCAR" was the former president of Egypt.

And she thought Kurt Busch was the governor of Florida and Kasey Kahne was now-Gov. Tim Kaine.

"I felt like the dumbest person within 50 miles of Martinsville," she said.

But with the help of Martinsville Speedway Public Relations Director Mike Smith, who invited her to attend the Advance Auto Parts 500 race at the speedway in April 2004, driver Ward Burton and an old friend who is a NASCAR devotee, the award-winning writer admits she now is hooked.

McCrumb, who spoke at Reynolds Homestead on Thursday at the invitation of the Friends of the Blue Ridge Regional Library, said the reason for this immersion in NASCAR was research for a book she was writing about the sport's most well-known icon, the late Dale Earnhardt.

She said she knew that the process of writing this novel, "St. Dale," would bring her in touch with a "closed society" and often misunderstood part of American culture, NASCAR. But she did not know that it also would make her a devoted fan of the sport and of Earnhardt.

McCrumb's reason for writing the book, oddly enough, dates back to the 14th century, when Geoffrey Chaucer wrote "The Canterbury Tales."

In that novel, a man named Chaucer is traveling from London with a group of strangers to visit Canterbury, a borough southeast of London. This group of people is thrown together when they travel to the shrine of Saint Thomas ^ Becket, who was murdered in Canterbury in 1170.

The aspect that fascinated her, she said, was "secular sainthood" -- when a person is so popular with the masses that the people themselves decide he or she is a saint. McCrumb said she wanted to use a modern figure as the subject of the canonization.

"I got this idea back in the '80s and it wouldn't go away," she said. "As a writer, when that happens, you know it has to be written."

The problem was, she said, no popular figure fit the bill for the book.

"I was thinking of a pilgrimage to Graceland," she said. "But Elvis had been overdone. I was thinking about Princess Diana, which would have included all walks of life. But you can't know a culture that thoroughly when it's not your own culture."

On Feb. 18, 2001, a tragic death ended her search.

"That's when Dale Earnhardt hit the wall (and was killed) on the last lap of the Daytona 500, only 11 seconds from the end of the race," she said.

The public reaction, McCrumb said, was immediate and immense, with people flocking to cold, empty racetracks that night to pay their respects, leaving racing jackets, memorabilia, flowers and rivers of tears.

The next step, though, was selling the idea for the book to her publisher in New York City.

McCrumb, who grew up in the mountains of western North Carolina and now lives near Roanoke, had built her international reputation on the "ballad" novels about Appalachia, from "She Walks These Hills" to "Ghost Riders."

"Try selling NASCAR to New Yorkers, who don't even own personal cars," she said, adding that one editor told her to write it and then mimeograph 10 copies. "That's about how many NASCAR fans can read," she said he told her.

Such stereotypes were something McCrumb wanted to dispel, in much the same way she has helped put to rest many stereotypes about people of the Appalachian Mountains through her books.

In the end, she did convince her publisher and her "pilgrimage" with Earnhardt fans began.

Her book, set in 2002, tells of an eight-day journey to racetracks, from Bristol to Martinsville, Talladega and Daytona Beach before ending at Darlington. At each track, the pilgrims, who are from all walks of life (as NASCAR fans are these days, she said) and bound only by a love for Earnhardt, lay a wreath in his honor.

During the trip, the life of each pilgrim unfolds, helping to explain why Earnhardt had such a following and why, as has been said, more grown men cried on Feb. 18, 2001, than at any other time in the course of human history.

While learning all about Earnhardt and NASCAR, McCrumb said she became a fan. But she was told by a friend, "You won't understand NASCAR until you care who wins."

Although she had met and was impressed with Burton, she still didn't have that "attachment" to a particular driver. Or at least she didn't think she did.

She said she and her friend were watching "happy hour" (the last practice session before the race) for the July 2004 Daytona race when a wreck sent a car sailing through the air.

The "0" car was in the air upside down, she said, and during that flash of time three things went through her mind.

"First, I remembered what Earnest Hemingway wrote -- 'There are only three sports: mountain climbing, bullfighting and auto racing. All the rest are games.' Then I thought, yes, that driver could be killed. Then I realized it was Ward Burton. And I started crying."

Her friend, she said, told her, "Now, you're a fan."

While the book has received rave reviews, maybe the highest compliment McCrumb has received came from members of Earnhardt's family.

They told her they had trouble understanding why so many strangers, people who had never met Earnhardt, were heartbroken when he was killed, as if he were a member of their families.

"When we read this book (St. Dale), we got it," she said they told her.

Also, McCrumb said members of the Earnhardt family, including Teresa Earnhardt, Dale's widow, are open to the idea of the book being made into a movie.

"But don't hold your breath until the popcorn is ready," she said, adding that she now feels like Earnhardt had been part of her family.

McCrumb is writing another novel with NASCAR as the centerpiece. It is about an all-female NEXTEL cup team that has a male driver, with the "catchcan" girl (the crew member who handles the large gasoline cans that are used for refueling during pit stops) being in love with that driver.

And even in the middle of writing a book, traveling or giving one of her many lectures, McCrumb said if she can't watch a race, she will have someone phone her with the details.