



Sharyn McCrumb in Boone, North Carolina, at an old frontier cabin

care taker

In her best-selling Appalachian Ballad novels, Sharyn McCrumb weaves enchantment for her readers. But could even this master spellbinder find the words to save the river where the magic flowers bloom?

BY VICTORIA HALLMAN-TRAVER
PHOTO BY HOLLY HINSHELWOOD

flower: Sharyn, I suppose it's not surprising that a lot of mountain folklore involves flowers. SHARYN MCCRUMB: Not surprising at all. I think immediately of rhododendron, because one of the things I'm doing in my new novel, *The Devil Amongst the Lawyers*, is comparing the mountain culture of Japan to the mountain culture of Virginia, and rhododendron is a plant they have in Japan as well as here in Virginia where I live. Another is kudzu. We imported that from Japan. The weird thing is that over there it's not the menace it is here, because Japan has a cooler climate. In Japan, it's not a monster plant,

but in Alabama it's too hot and it does things it would never have done if it had stayed where it belonged.

And kudzu flowers are absolutely beautiful—magenta, sometimes pale pink or white, and highly fragrant. It's like that old song, "Oh, why can't you behave?" That's what happens when man steps in and puts something where it doesn't belong. Also, here in America you never hear anyone complaining about rhododendrons, but if you go to Killarney, the big lake in the middle of Ireland, they hate them. Apparently rhododendron grew in Ireland back in the middle ages.

Then it died out completely. But at some point in the nineteenth century they brought it back, and now it just takes over the ground. In Killarney National Park, they pay people to uproot and burn it.

I remember in your book *The Rosewood Casket* you telling how little animals in the Appalachians get trapped in rhododendrons. It was very disturbing to read. Yes, poor little things, and also legends abound of early botanists who'd be tramping around in the mountains and get in some of those thickets. It would take them days to get out.

What a flower that rhododendron is, wreaking havoc in the Appalachians where other wildflowers are struggling to survive. Oh, and so many flowers grow in the Appalachians that don't grow anywhere else—like Gray's Lily, which only grows on a few meadows. And most wildflowers are so easily killed. Acid rain can do it, development; people are the problem. They can simply go hiking and step on them, or even just pick them so that there's nothing to leave seeds for new ones to grow. For instance, ginseng, a flowering herb, grew all over the mountains here, but it's used for medicinal purposes and sells for a dollar a pound in Asia. So, people came up here and picked it practically into extinction. They'd take it, roots and all, and leave nothing to replenish it. Now it's grown in National Parks as a protected plant.

I recall one of your characters gathering flowers for medicinal purposes. They grew down by that sad, polluted river. In *The*

Hangman's Beautiful Daughter, Nora Bonesteel is gathering Balm of Gilead, a flowering shrub, to use as a burn salve. She would gather it along the riverbank, because rivers are borders, and borders have heightened magical powers. Halloween is a border between one season and another; twilight and dawn are magical borders. So she gathers the balm of Gilead by the river, because it will be more potent.

Your description of that river really struck me. I mean we picture the mountain wilderness so green and pristine, and here was this sludgy slime slithering through it. I thought *The Hangman's Beautiful Daughter* was the opposite of *Deliverance* [James Dickey's 1970 novel]. In *Deliverance*, you have a bunch of city people on a raft in the river, and

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the local mountain people come out and attack those nice city people. In my book, you have the nice hardworking people who live in the mountain region, and the city people come and build the paper factory and pollute their river.

That aspect of the book was so affecting I can only assume it was taken from reality. It was. There were all kinds of EPA studies about the effects of water pollution on populations, and nobody read them. Then I wrote this book in which an old man is dying of liver cancer because of the polluted river, and I got letters from people all over the country saying, 'Okay, what do I tell my Congressman?' Hearts and minds. You have to make people care. ❖