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A novelist shifts gears to NASCAR

In research for 'St. Dale,' author becomes new fan

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Three and a half years ago, novelist Sharyn McCrumb knew almost nothing about NASCAR world. Even the names of famous drivers stumped her.

"I thought Kurt Busch was the governor of Florida," she said.

Now McCrumb could pass a comprehensive exam about stock car racing. She knows its history and current cast of characters, and she delights in explaining such terms as drafting and gear ratio.

The best evidence of her expertise is her spirited new novel, "St. Dale." It's about NASCAR fans (and a few reluctant others) on a Canterbury Tales-like pilgrimage honoring the late driver Dale Earnhardt, who periodically reappears to offer hope and perform miracles.

Will NASCAR embrace McCrumb's humorous but heartfelt offering? She'll find out beginning this week, as she goes on a book tour heavy with stops important to the sport, including Charlotte.

"I have no idea what to expect," she said. "I could be the Salman Rushdie of NASCAR."

This allusion -- to the writer who faced a death sentence from Islamic fundamentalists for producing a novel they considered blasphemous -- would seem to be hyperbole. The "St. Dale" dust jacket comes with endorsements from Junior Johnson, Ward Burton and Kyle Petty -- big dawgs in NASCAR world.

McCrumb, 56, grew up in various parts of North Carolina, mostly Burlington. She graduated from UNC Chapel Hill in 1970, and went on to get a master's in English at Virginia Tech.

She has long been a published author, earning a strong following in Charlotte and elsewhere for what she calls her "ballad" novels about the Appalachian Mountains. Such books as "The Rosewood Casket," "She Walks These Hills" and "The Songcatcher" offer memorable characters and stories and reflect McCrumb's extensive research into Appalachian history, culture and ecology.

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In "St. Dale," Dale Earnhardt has become a secular saint who performs minor miracles.

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For years, McCrumb wanted to explore in fiction her fascination with the mass outpouring of grief after the deaths of certain celebrities. She saw a religious quality to the graveside vigils and wreath-layings, with many parallels to the pilgrims Chaucer wrote about in the 14th century.

Elvis Presley qualified as a subject, but didn't do much for her. Princess Diana was more intriguing.

But the overwhelming response to Dale Earnhardt's death in a crash at the 2001 Daytona 500 caused McCrumb to commit to a NASCAR novel, drawing on the *Canterbury Tales* for structure.

Though she didn't know much about NASCAR, she had a leg up in understanding the affection for Earnhardt.

"He was from North Carolina, and so was I," she said, adding that many boys she grew up with were just as car-crazy, fearless and down home as the famed driver of car No. 3.

McCrumb began her study of NASCAR with poet friend Jane Hicks, the one literary type she knew who closely followed the sport. Apart from Hicks' tutorials, McCrumb read extensively. She started with "NASCAR for Dummies," progressing to Charlotte writer Frye Gaillard's book on the sport, Frank Vehorn's biography of Earnhardt and various other relevant books and articles.

McCrumb also took a NASCAR course at East Tennessee State University. She interviewed Junior Johnson and Leonard Wood, of Wood Brothers Racing, and spoke as well with sportswriters and fans. She agreed to speak for free to a Junior League in exchange for skybox privileges at the speedway in Bristol, Tenn.

She and Hicks visited other tracks and watched many races on TV. McCrumb became fluent in NASCAR-speak, but Hicks told her she wouldn't be a real fan until she became emotionally invested in a driver.

That began to happen when she learned that Ward Burton had formed a foundation for wilderness protection -- an issue dear to her heart.

With Hicks, McCrumb watched a race on TV in which Burton crashed spectacularly. Recalling the moments before she knew he was OK, McCrumb said, "I'm crying so hard I can't see the television. Jane drops a Kleenex box in my lap and says, 'I think you found your driver.'"

McCrumb has befriended Burton, who will sign copies of "St. Dale" with her Monday morning at a Roanoke bookstore, near her home in the Virginia mountains.

Though McCrumb said "St. Dale" was more fun to write than her other books, getting it published brought hassles. There was an auction, and three publishers bid -- far fewer than might be expected, given that McCrumb has had New York Times best-sellers.

Even at Kensington, the firm that won the contract, the attitude was "you're crazy, but we'll give you a contract anyway," McCrumb said.

She had to fight for the sleek black cover that features Earnhardt's No. 3. The publisher initially wanted something far more feminine, in hopes of attracting female readers -- the main buyers for hardback fiction.

McCrumb also pushed successfully for a rewriting of the dust jacket copy, which she said was too much like that for her ballad novels.

New York publishers are even more NASCAR ignorant than she was, McCrumb said, and can't imagine that race fans read novels.

The author of "St. Dale" takes umbrage at that. But she also takes comfort in the numbers.

"There are 70 million NASCAR fans," McCrumb said, adding that she and the publisher will do just fine "if

one half of one percent buy this book."

Meet the Author

- Sharon McCrumb will be at Park Road Books, 4139 Park Road, on Thursday, beginning at 7 p.m.

MCCRUMB ON NASCAR

- Her favorite driver: Ward Burton, partly because he challenges the NASCAR image with his environmental work.
- Her favorite tracks: Martinsville and Bristol "I love the short-track races."
- Her favorite NASCAR technical term: "gear ratio."
- What's on her vanity car license plate: "StDale."