



GHOST RACERS

Bestselling author meets homeboy saint

BY ANN WICKER

NEW YORK TIMES bestselling author Sharyn McCrumb has seen the light — think headlights — and has become a convert to NASCAR. Best known for her series of Appalachian “ballad” novels, McCrumb combines and updates old-fashioned storytelling techniques and intertwines the past and present in such well-received books as *The Ballad of Frankie Silver*, *The Rosewood Casket* and *She Walks These Hills*.

Her most recent in this series is *Ghost Riders*, based on a real life governor of North Carolina, Zebulon B. Vance, and the true story of Malinda Blalock, a young woman who disguised herself as a man to join her husband who was conscripted to fight for the Confederate Army. Their stories parallel a contemporary story about mountain folks clashing with Civil War re-enactors.

But it's McCrumb's upcoming novel, due out in February “during Daytona week,” that fueled her conversion. It's called *St. Dale*. Yep, that's Dale as in Dale Earnhardt. Earnhardt, as most of you already know, was killed during the big race at Daytona in 2001.

“I don't suppose it's really about him,” McCrumb says in a recent telephone interview. “I mean it takes place between August and Labor Day 2002, so it's a little late to have him. It's actually a rewrite of *The Canterbury Tales*.”

A Virginia resident with ties to North Carolina (she graduated from UNC-Chapel Hill and spent her junior high and some high school years in Burlington), McCrumb studied *The Canterbury Tales* in grad school at Virginia Tech. “I was always getting the wrong thing out of what they were trying to teach me,” she says. “So I'm looking at this group of pilgrims going to Canterbury in 13th century England, to worship at the shrine of St. Thomas Becket, and I'm thinking, you know, he hadn't been dead that long. And that Becket was a Saxon in Norman-controlled England, which means he was a redneck. He was probably considered by the pilgrims to be a homeboy saint — their man in heaven — because he was from their place and time.

“I thought,” she continues, “you could

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update this story if you could just decide who the saint would be. And I thought, right — if you had the *Canterbury* pilgrims in the southeast United States heading for a shrine — the homeboy saint would be Dale.”

Her update involves a driver “who has lost his ride” and is trying to visit the speedways to network. He takes a job he thinks involves giving a guided bus tour of Southern speedways. “After he agrees to do it,” she says, “they say (to him) oh no, it's not a guided tour, it's the Earnhardt Memorial Pilgrimage. We're going to lay a wreath on every track from Bristol to Daytona.”

McCrumb admits with a laugh, “I knew nothing about NASCAR when I started — I was writing *The Canterbury Tales*. But of course to

followed the 2002 season. She missed Daytona 2003 because of trying to fly home in a snowstorm. “I ended up in Bristol, at my NASCAR mentor's airport. So she picks me up — it's one o'clock in the morning, it's snowing — I said ‘Who won Daytona?’ And she said Mike Waltrip. I said, ‘Wait, OK, so 2003, Mike Waltrip wins; 2001, the race in which Dale died, Mike Waltrip won and Dale was an owner, so he gets credited for those two wins. He's doing better posthumously than he did when he was driving.’

“And I thought three in a row is a miracle,” she says. “So I said,

‘Who won the 2002 Daytona 500?’ And it was one o'clock in the morning, in the snow and she said, ‘Dale Earnhardt, Jr. Get in the car.’”

McCrumb sounds indignant but amused. “And I believed her. I mean, why would you lie? It was what I *wanted* to hear. Since Dale Earnhardt died he has not lost the Daytona 500. So I wrote this up as a proposal and I sent it to New York.

“They don't know anything about NASCAR,” she laughs.

“They think Kurt Busch is the governor of Florida.

They bought it and I'm

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“WE WOULD WATCH [NASCAR] RACES AND QUOTE HENRY V. IT WAS THE ODDEST CROSSOVER.” - SHARYN MCCRUMB

put it in NASCAR, I had to learn NASCAR. My one friend who was a NASCAR fan is a published poet with two masters degrees.”

This friend became her mentor. She laughs again. “We would watch races and quote *Henry V*. It was the oddest crossover. . . I actually studied NASCAR the way an anthropologist would study the Comanche — as a civilization. I was studying it as a culture.

“Somebody could do a dissertation quite easily on NASCAR as a culture,” she adds. “But I just loved it — then I got hooked on the sport.”

McCrumb almost spun out about halfway through writing the book. Saints need two miracles and she had one in the story about Earnhardt winning Daytona in 1998 after about 19 tries. This time he'd glued to the dashboard a lucky penny that was given to him just before the race by a handicapped 5-year-old fan. But she needed a second miracle.

By Daytona 2003, she says, she “understood what was going on” but she hadn't



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happily writing along and I'm 50,000 words into this book, on schedule."

The caution flag came out when she was watching a DVD of 2002 race season highlights which she bought to "get the paint schemes right when I describe the race. And suddenly the announcer is yelling 'And the winner of the 2002 Daytona 500 is Ward Burton.' Who didn't drive for DEI. And there went my miracle! I had to rewrite the whole book."

But McCrumb says she also thought, "Who the heck is Ward Burton?"

"It turns out he's from up here (Virginia)," she says. "I did all my research and rewrote the book and found out along the way what a great guy he was — he's got this wildlife foundation. While everybody else is buying car dealerships, he bought 2000 acres along the Staunton River and turned it into a wildlife sanctuary."

Her affectionate attitude comes through clearly as she talks about NASCAR and this book, Kyle Petty's feedback ("Kyle loved it."), and spending the day with the legendary Junior Johnson (he cooked breakfast). "It changed me," she states. "I've written a lot of books and people have written to me and said this book has changed their lives. I've had people move to Western NC because of reading the ballad novels. But books really didn't change me until this one."

McCrumb will read a preview from St. Dale at Creative Loafing Carolina Writers Night, Tuesday, October 26, at 7pm at Neighborhood Theatre. ♦