

If Chaucer had written tales about NASCAR

By Dorman T. Shindler
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Sharyn McCrumb's last book labeled as a mystery, "MacPherson's Lament," part of an ongoing series, turned out to be more of a historical novel about the Civil War than the sort of whodunit that won the author an Edgar Award.

So longtime fans shouldn't be surprised to learn that her latest, "St. Dale," is nothing like the mystery novels she wrote at the beginning of her career, like "Bimbos of the Death Sun" and "Missing Susan." Nor does it have much in common with her ethereal series of Appalachian historical novels, including "Ghost Riders," "Songcatcher" and "The Hangman's Beautiful Daughter."

A present-day, blue-collar comedy dealing with spirituality, stock cars and shaky lives, "St. Dale" is new territory for McCrumb, and she treads the ground with admirable sure-footedness.

In an author's afterward, McCrumb says that "St. Dale" is her attempt to write a modern-day version of "The Canterbury Tales." For those familiar with Chaucer's epic, this bit of homage will be immediately clear, and those readers blissfully unaware of the author's designs still will enjoy this often farcical novel.

Taking on the job of leading a group of tourists - his band of pilgrims - Harley Claymore, a failed stock car driver who still longs to get into the circuit, learns that the "tour of Southern speedways" is actually a pilgrimage to the sites where the recently deceased NASCAR icon Dale Earnhardt once raced.

Joining Harley on this trip is a motley band of travelers, including Bekah Sue Holifield, who was tricked into coming along by her sister; Justine, a die-hard fan; the Rev. Bill Knight, who is accompanying a dying child on his "Last Wish" trip; stockbroker Terence Palmer, who is on the pilgrimage to try to "connect" with his long-lost father; Ray, a Nebraska fan who cut the number "three" (Earnhardt's number) into his alfalfa field; Karen and Shane, who plan to be married at the first stop of the tour by Karen's Wiccan mother; and

Cayle, a woman who believes she had a ghostly encounter with Earnhardt when her car broke down while en route to Charlotte.

True to the form of the classic that she emulates, McCrumb has the pilgrims relate their stories to each other and how Earnhardt has affected their lives as they make their way toward each new site. Though the plot of the book is minimal at best, the strong characters, substance and themes running through it make "St. Dale" one of McCrumb's finer achievements. And it carries a salient message for everyone. After all, hero worship, fawning over celebrities and secular sainthood isn't limited to the blue-collar world.

If "St. Dale" is McCrumb's attempt at writing a full-fledged mainstream novel, she has succeeded marvelously, cobbling up a modern-day version of Chaucer's classic that mixes the perfect amount of comedy, pathos, thoughtfulness and the fine points, history and joy of stock-car racing.

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