



Wayne Caldwell

Asheville author introduces people of Cataloochee



Rob Neufeld

COLUMNIST

descendant, Wayne Caldwell.

One surprise is that the story takes us up only to the brink of removal. (Caldwell's next novel will continue the saga.) Caldwell memorably embraces pre-removal generations, starting with the advent of Ezra Banks, a hardened farmer and war veteran who ventures to Cataloochee in 1880 to seek land and a wife.

Banks is the second surprise. It's his tragic progress — from all-business and work-on-Sunday provider to dissolute abuser — that frames the novel, even though he's an outsider.

Mattie Carter may best Ezra's son,

BOOK REVIEWED

"Cataloochee" by Wayne Caldwell (Random House hardcover, 2007, 368 pages, \$24.95).

AUTHOR EVENT

Wayne Caldwell presents his novel "Cataloochee" at Malaprop's Bookstore, 55 Haywood St., Asheville, 7 p.m. June 23. Call 254-6734.

WEB EXTRA

See this story at CITIZEN-TIMES.com to hear Rob Neufeld's interview with Wayne Caldwell.

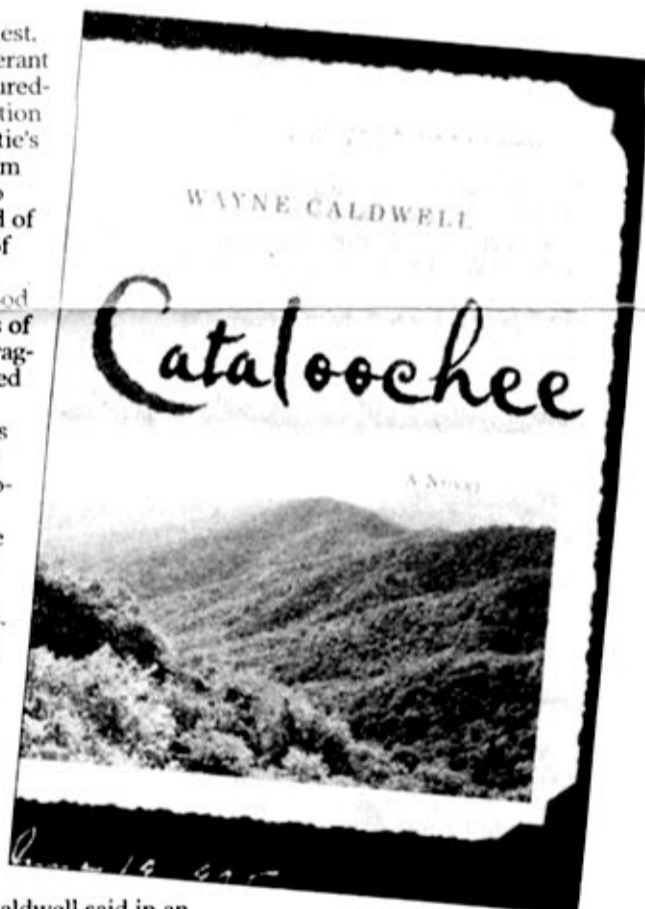
Cataloochee, the Great Smoky Mountains community that had comprised 1,200 people before its displacement by the National Park Service in the 1930s, has been calling out for a novel for a long while. Now it's got one, titled "Cataloochee," written by a Cataloochee family

Zeb, in a shooting contest. Bud Harrogate, an itinerant worker, may good-naturedly survive an interrogation by Rhetta, wife of Mattie's brother, Silas. Young Jim Hawkins may come up with a brilliant method of retrieving the corpse of Sal, Henry Sutton's beloved mule, from flood wreckage; and all sorts of other humorous and tragic episodes may proceed in "Cataloochee."

But it's Ezra's effects and fate that frame the novel and give it the resolution with weight. Because of his role, the community's response to its dispossession seems almost religious. Caldwell acquaints us with the people of Cataloochee. Then — in his most amazing accomplishment — he balances the expulsion from the homeland with an enlarged vision that develops after a rite of passage.

Mountain people, Caldwell said in an interview with the Citizen-Times, "tend to think of something called God's Plan ... and we're all a part of it, and that's how we work through a child dying. That's how we work through a tree falling on somebody and killing him when he's not even 40 years old. And that's also, ultimately, how we work through having our land taken by the federal government."

Caldwell revealed how he started writing short stories about Cataloochee in 1998, when he'd turned 50, ended up with 900 pages, and eventually crafted his novel down to 350. In the process, the saga became a graspable, moving



experience. It also cut back on a couple of luxuries — nature-and-work-based poetic language (though it's there in parts); and a more interior, discursive narration (sometimes sacrificed in order to hit dramatic high points).

In sum, Caldwell's novel has entered the canon of Southern Appalachian literature; and will stay on people's minds as we consider who we are.

Rob Neufeld writes about books for the Citizen-Times. Contact him at 768-BOOK or RNeufeld@charter.net. Visit his blog, "The World and Books," at CITIZEN-TIMES.com/booksblog.

Caldwell tells how short story became novel

Question: How did your novel get started?

Answer: It started out just being short stories. Specifically, it started when I wrote a story based on a character based on my great-grandfather, who lived in Cataloochee and was out plowing one afternoon, and a tree fell on him. I thought, well, that's bad luck, and I got to imagining how everybody felt about that, wrote a story, won a prize with it. And not long after that, it started coalescing. The characters just sort of started falling into a line.

Q: What prize did you win with that?

A: It was a contest at a magazine called "Now and Then," which is published by East Tennessee State University. I was in Pack Library one day and just happened to walk by and saw a copy of "Now and Then."

I picked it up, and found out they were having a short story contest. I entered and I won. Lee Smith was the judge of that particular contest, and she and I got to be friends.

Q: Does being a Caldwell and a descendant of a Cataloochee family give you any special point of view?

A: Well, perhaps. I'm not quite sure how to answer that because I think any novelist adopts whatever characters he or she is writing about. I'm not sure that being a descendant gives me any better perspective on it than anybody else. You tend to identify with your characters so much that you don't need that perspective.

Q: Is there a character in your novel with whom you most identify?

A: I think that would be young Rass (a young man with a wish for adventure and talent for writing). I had kept wanting Rass to be the central character of the novel. In the long version of this, he figured more prominently than he does in the published "Cataloochee." I'm writing the second novel right now, and I started out thinking, well, this is going to be Rass' book. But it hasn't turned out to be, so I'm not quite sure when he's going to get a book all to himself, but I want him to have one of these days.

Q: Rass says, at one point, that he tried to write a story about a Civil War ancestor, but he said the story didn't sound good with proper grammar. Is he reflecting a feeling of yours?

A: It's always risky to write a book in dialect. It is very difficult to write a book in Appalachian dialect without having everybody sounding like Jed Clampett. I was trying to walk that tightrope while I was doing this.

As a matter of fact, I decided at one point we really should make everything standard English. But they (the characters) just didn't sound right ... I do recall having a conversation with one of my editors, saying, "Do I need to take this particular section out?" It was kind of heavy on Appalachian dialect. And she basically said, "Well, that's kind of up to you." I took that to mean, let's tone that down and leave it — because I have known these old people who actually talked this way, and I think there's value in preserving that sort of speech pattern ... If we can do that and still be commercially successful, more power to us.