

Writer, Reconstructed

Gritty and lyrical—a fine first novel of the American South.

It's hard to remake yourself at 50, but Wayne Caldwell, a literature PhD turned furniture retailer, decided at that age to become a fiction writer, and it's good he did. His stories won prizes, he wrote what he later called a "bloated typescript" of a novel, trimmed it down, and now it arrives: **Cataloochee** (Random House), a vast, old-fashioned Southern tale starting in the aftermath of the Civil War and following three families over the next 60 years. The central character, Ezra Banks, comes of age during Reconstruction, makes his way to the Cataloochee Valley in western North Carolina, marries the daughter of the valley's largest landowner, and, while conquering the wilderness, turns into the meanest cuss in what is already a pretty mean Appalachian landscape. Needless to say, though it takes a while, he comes to a bad end. Caldwell writes with lyricism, precision, a hint of the Gothic, and a sweet underlying humor that together make his long story crackle and move. He captures the physical look and the rich language of this breathtaking mountainous country, and puts before us vivid new versions of an American type—hard, stoic, at home in isolation, courageous, pious, and strong—that is still an essential component of how we see ourselves. Every moment of the story feels both generous and true. —VINCE PASSARO

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