

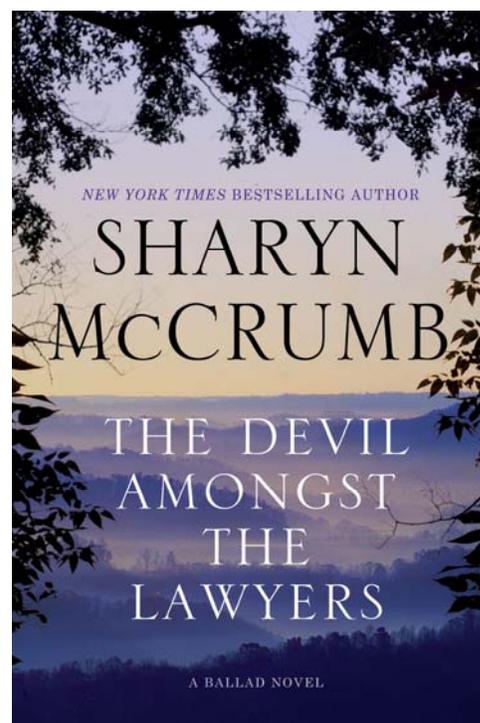


The Devil Amongst the Lawyers

by Sharyn McCrumb

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About this Guide

The following author biography and list of questions about *The Devil Amongst the Lawyers* are intended as resources to aid individual readers and book groups who would like to learn more about the author and this book. We hope that this guide will provide you a starting place for discussion, and suggest a variety of perspectives from which you might approach *The Devil Amongst the Lawyers*.

About the Book

In 1935, when Erma Morton, a beautiful young woman with a teaching degree, is charged with the murder of her father in a remote Virginia mountain community, the case becomes a cause célèbre for the national press.

Eager for a case to replace the Lindbergh trial in the public's imagination, the journalists descend on the mountain county intent on infusing their stories with quaint local color: horse-drawn buggies, rundown shacks, children in threadbare clothes. They need tales of rural poverty to give their Depression-era readers people whom they can feel superior to. The untruth of these cultural stereotypes did not deter the big-city reporters, but a local journalist, Carl Jennings, fresh out of college and covering his first major story, reports what he sees: an ordinary town and a defendant who is probably guilty.

This journey to a distant time and place summons up ghosts from the reporters' pasts: Henry Jernigan's sojourn in Japan that ended in tragedy, Shade Baker's hardscrabble childhood on the

Iowa prairie, and Rose Hanelon's brittle sophistication, a shield for her hopeless love affair. While they spin their manufactured tales of squalor, Carl tries to discover the truth in the Morton trial with the help of his young cousin Nora, who has the Sight. But who will believe a local cub reporter whose stories contradict the nation's star journalists? For the reader, the novel resonates with the present: an economic depression, a deadly flu epidemic, a world contending with the rise of political fanatics, and a media culture determined to turn news stories into soap operas for the diversion of the masses.

A stunning return to the lands, ballads, and characters upon which she made her name, *The Devil Amongst the Lawyers* is a testament to Sharyn McCrumb's lyrical and evocative writing.

Praise for *The Devil Amongst the Lawyers*:

"The story begins with a train ride, a magic carpet that carries us back to the year 1935 and into the heart of a famous murder trial. As we head for the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia, we get to know the characters, those journalists and photographers and sensation-seekers who always turn up for a good spectacle. Sharyn McCrumb re-creates this time and place with such precision, the reader forgets that seventy-five years have passed since that faraway event in that isolated place where the outer world clashes with superstition and folklore. This is storytelling as those Celtic bards meant it to be: lyrical, haunting, and truly unforgettable."

--Cathie Pelletier, author of *The Funeral Makers* and *Running the Bulls*

"Wow! Sharyn McCrumb is not *just* a writer---in fact, she's a conjurer, a genius, a wordsmith, an entertainer, a wit, a scholar, a wise woman, and a storyteller of the first rank. *The Devil Amongst the Lawyers* is flat-out brilliant and transcendent, a book that gets everything exactly right. Simply put, novels don't come any better than this."

--Martin Clark, author of *The Legal Limit* and *The Many Aspects of Mobile Home Living*

"*The Devil Amongst the Lawyers* is a superb novel that, once started, is so well written and so expertly researched that readers will find it impossible to put down. It is also a scathing indictment of how Appalachia has been, and continues to be, stereotyped by a supposedly objective media. Bravo!"

--Ron Rash, author of *Serena*

About the Author

Sharyn McCrumb is the author of *The Ballad of Frankie Silver*, *She Walks These Hills*, and many other award-winning novels. Her books have been named Notable Books of the Year by *The New York Times* and the *Los Angeles Times*. She was named a "Virginia Woman of History" for achievement in literature in 2008. She lives and writes in the Virginia Blue Ridge, less than a hundred miles from where her family settled in 1790 in the Smoky Mountains that divide North Carolina and Tennessee. Visit Sharyn online at <http://www.sharynmccrumb.com>.



Discussion Questions

1. In this novel, national reporters stereotype the rural mountain community. In what ways do the media or people from other regions misunderstand your hometown or your culture?
2. *The Devil Amongst the Lawyers* is set in 1935. How do the issues of that time compare with today's problems in health crises; national disasters; international relations; the economy, etc.?
3. How does the prologue (about the hanging of the elephant) relate to the Erma Morton trial?
4. Reread the story of Urashima Taro, told in Chapter Five of the novel. Does this folk tale remind you of similar stories in the folklore of other cultures? Why do you suppose so many cultures independently developed some form of this story?
5. Carl Jennings, Harley Morton, and Shade Baker are all young men with rural origins. How are they alike and in what ways are they different?
6. Henry Jernigan is condescending and prejudiced against the Appalachian culture. He is prejudiced in favor of the Japanese. Discuss this disparity.
7. Nora Bonesteel is a young girl coming to terms with the Sight. Have you or anyone you know had experiences similar to hers?
8. The chapter headings in *The Devil Amongst the Lawyers* are taken from *Oku No Hosomichi*, a 17th century Japanese poem by Matsuo Basho. (The title in English is: *A Narrow Road to a Far Province*.) How does the journey of Basho through the mountains of Japan compare with Henry's journey in southwest Virginia?
9. The year 1935 came amidst the Great Depression. Would you rather have lived in that era in a large city or a rural area? Why?
10. Author Sharyn McCrumb has said "*Cities are judged by their richest inhabitants and rural areas by their poorest.*" Is this true? What evidence can you show to support or refute this statement?

A Conversation with Sharyn McCrumb

You did a ton of research for the book. How did you carry out that research? Did you have a particular event that happened during your research that struck you?

The first step in researching anything is to read background material. That way when you do have to question real people, you will have a basic understanding of the subject. I read accounts of the historical events mentioned in the novel. I visited the places where the book is set. I listened to the music and watched the films of that era to capture the mood, and I stayed in the Martha Washington Inn. I talked with people who had known the actual defendant in the trial on which "The Devil Amongst the Lawyers" is based, and with newspaper reporters who had covered southwest Virginia trials in that era.

The best adventure I had in researching the novel was the day that I spent in Wise County, with Wise County Tourism director H. William (Bill) Smith as my guide. We explored the Wise County courthouse, visited the old jail, explored every floor of the now-derelict Inn at Wise, and drove up Highway 23 to "The Pound" to see the place where the Maxwell house once stood. The current mayor of Pound is a cousin of Edith Maxwell, who was the model for Erma Morton, the young woman on trial in the novel. I took photographs of everything, so that I could describe it correctly. The room I gave to Henry Jernigan in the novel is on the top floor of the Inn, between the columns, and it has a fireplace and a large triangular window, just as described.

Part of the book is set in Japan. Have you been to Japan? What was the inspiration?

I have never been to Japan, although I wish someone would invite me. I reasoned that since I could not go to Japan in 1923, going there now wouldn't tell me much that I could not learn from reading travelers' accounts of Japan in that era. I read a number of books on early 20th century Japan, and I based Henry's roseate view of the country on the attitudes expressed by the Irish writer Lafcadio Hearn. Questions about language, customs, and folklore were answered for me by Ichiro and Yuka Wada of Osaka, and by Yoshihiro Iwai, who was a graduate student at Virginia Tech while I was researching the novel. I tried to learn some Japanese, but since I was a Spanish major, my accent is terrible. Listening to me trying to speak Japanese to a native speaker is a good game of Charades.

Are any characters in *The Devil Amongst the Lawyers* based on people you know?

Carl Jennings' background and education is based on that of my father, who grew up in Erwin, TN and attended East Tennessee State University. He became a college professor instead of a journalist, but the description of Carl's youthful experiences and personality are my father's.

Name a past (and hopefully embarrassing) celebrity crush. Who's your present celebrity crush?

When I was in high school, I had a crush on Steve McQueen. I suppose I imprinted on the ultra-macho little chicken hawk guy as the epitome of Prince Charming. Years later, I met a 21st century incarnation of Steve McQueen, a wild and fearless guy in a NASCAR firesuit, and that whirlwind encounter with *the bad boy who takes your breath away* led to my creation of the character of Danny in *The Devil Amongst the Lawyers*.

One of the most delightful things about being an award-winning author is that you no longer need to have celebrity crushes. I have been fortunate enough to make friends with people I

respect, whose work I admire: a Nobel-prize winning physicist; a winner of the Daytona 500; several country singers and Hollywood actors, and half a dozen members of the House of Lords.

Who is or was your favorite pet? What made him/her so great?

Since we live on 80 acres of land in the Blue Ridge, there is no shortage of critters around. We have an aloof white Arabian horse who is polite to us only because we know how to open the grain barrel; no one quite has the temerity to ride him. The most dangerous creature in residence is an ancient snapping turtle whose shell is the size of a garbage can lid. He lurches along the driveway sometimes on his way to the creek, and he is so large that you cannot get past him in the car, and he refuses to move over. Once I got out and picked up a stick the size of a broom handle, hoping that I could nudge him over to the side of the road, so that I could drive past. The enraged turtle whirled around like a tank turret and in a flash, he bit the broom-sized branch in half. I got back in the car and waited until he left the road. We have several dogs. The smallest one is a registered Papillon who has a long pretentious name, but my husband took one look at this cat-sized pooch romping with the German Shepherd, and re-christened him "Morsel." Last fall, a yearling bear ambled up the driveway to the house, probably in search of garbage or bird food. Morsel, defender of the home, lit out after the bear, barking furiously, and the 100-lb. bear actually climbed a tree to escape the wrath of this furiously yapping dust bunny. Morsel has been insufferable ever since.

What do you enjoy doing the most with your free time?

I like to have adventures. Researching a novel can be a wonderful experience, but actually writing one is like composing the never-ending term paper. I try to spend the time away from my desk traveling and doing exciting things instead of just imagining them.

Sharyn McCrumb, on what is real and what is fictional in the story

Someone once said that writing a novel is the process of "putting imaginary toads in real gardens." While most of the characters in *The Devil Amongst the Lawyers* were either imaginary or composites of real people, all of the places and events described are as accurate as I was able to make them at a remove of 75 years from the time of the novel.

The Devil Amongst the Lawyers opens with Johnson City reporter Carl Jennings remembering the circumstances involved in the hanging of an elephant in Erwin TN in September, 1916. This event really happened, just how and why I said it did. My grandfather, who worked in the machine shops of the Clinchfield Railroad in Erwin, witnessed the event, and I heard him speak of it when I was a child. I felt that this true story of Mary's being hanged to make a sensational news story made a perfect prefatory parable to introduce similar behavior on the part of the national reporters during the Morton trial.

The other media circus--that of Floyd Collins trapped in a cave in western Kentucky, mentioned in chapter four--is also true. It happened just as described by the Abingdon elders in the "Pink Tea room" (*which also existed.*) The young local reporter who actually did crawl all the way into the narrow fissure to take food to Floyd Collins and interview him was the

Louisville Courier-Journal's William B. "Skeets" Miller, who won a Pulitzer Prize for his reporting of the incident.

All of the news events mentioned by the reporters were real: the Lindbergh kidnapping case; Will Rogers' death in a plane crash in Alaska, and the fact that his body was kept in a warehouse in California and not actually buried until several years later: true. The World War I Espionage Act, and the fate of Victor Berger of the *Milwaukee Leader*-- true--thus it was plausible that Henry Jernigan could have been forced to flee the country for publishing an anti-war cartoon and essay. Japan's 1923 Great Kanto Earthquake and the 1918 Influenza epidemic in Philadelphia were as described in the novel.

When Nora Bonesteel is reading a New York newspaper on her train ride to Wise County, the stories she reads about the royal wedding and the Chicago soup kitchen of Al Capone were actual stories from November 1935. I get very tired of people assuming that Appalachia is a region of unalloyed poverty; actually we have physicians, college professors, scientists, and quite a few millionaires. I put in the article about the Chicago soup kitchen run by a mobster as a reminder that you can find poor people where you live, too.

The novel is set in east Tennessee, in Abingdon, Virginia, and in Wise County, Virginia--all places that I visit often and know well. If you go, you will find the train depot, as described in the novel. Abingdon's Martha Washington Inn in Abingdon still as elegant and hospitable as ever, and across the street is the Barter Theatre, still staging wonderful productions.

WOPI-Radio in Bristol really existed. Shortly after the time of the novel, the station hired an office boy named (Tennessee) Ernie Ford, who became a nationally famous singer of such hits as "Sixteen Tons." WOPI did have a Saturday night program of live music, and the Carter Family, who lived nearby, might have taken part in just such an evening as described in the novel, because they did have a new album released in June of that year.

The courthouse in Wise County is just as described, and you can visit the upstairs courtroom where the real trial took place. The Inn at Wise, where the reporters stayed, is still standing, but it has been vacant for decades. Plans are underway to restore it.

The trial that is the centerpiece of the novel is based on an actual Wise County trial in 1935, in which Edith Maxwell, a pretty young schoolteacher from Pound, was charged with the murder of her father. Edith had come in late on a July night in 1935, and after an argument with her father, supposedly over her breaking "curfew," she had killed him by hitting him in the head with a shoe. Initially, Edith and her mother told investigators that Trigg Maxwell's death was accidental, the result of a fall while he was drunk. Later Edith changed her story to a claim of self-defense. The family did not summon help until Trigg Maxwell was on the point of death, and they did not report the incident to the police until ten hours later, which weighed heavily against Edith in the trial. This domestic tragedy was further complicated by the presence of national crime reporters, particularly those writers with the Hearst Syndicate, who paid the family for exclusive rights to personal interviews and family photos. Edith Maxwell's brother Earl, who handled the matter, said that the newspapers' money went to pay for Edith's defense at the trial.

The national journalists sensationalized the story, and portrayed the college-educated defendant as a "backward hillbilly gal," demonizing the county with archaic stereotypes and manufactured myths about a non-existent "Code of the Hills." The basis for their stereotypes was a 1908 novel "The Trail of the Lonesome Pine," which was being made into a movie in 1935, the year of the trial. The novel, depicting feuding mountain families and a romance between a Harvard-educated engineer and a "hillbilly gal" was set in the 1890's and was

probably hogwash even then, but it is what 1930's newspaper readers expected to read when the reporters visited Wise County.

Edith Maxwell was convicted of the murder of her father and sentenced to life in prison, but seven years later, at the request of First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt, she was pardoned by the Governor of Virginia. She changed her name and moved to the Midwest, where she married and had two children. She died in Florida in the 1970's without ever speaking publicly about the trial or her part in the death of her father.

To listen to “The Devil’s Dream”, an audio introduction to the book, with Sharyn McCrumb and fiddler Rick Cunningham, visit <http://us.macmillan.com/thedevilamongstthelawyers>

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