



Tracey Porter

Billy Creekmore
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When I first started thinking about the book that would become *Billy Creekmore*, I thought about the books that meant a great deal to me, books that concerned children alone in the world, working for their living and scrambling to simply grow up. It didn't take me long to realize that the books I loved most, both then and now, were those by Dickens and Twain. *Oliver Twist*, *Huckleberry Finn*, *David Copperfield*, *Great Expectations*, among others, all deal with children who were ill treated or abandoned by parents and society. I loved following the rise and fall of the main character's fortunes, how each chapter began with its own suspenseful title, and ended with a sentence that made you want to turn the page. These books -- suspenseful, traditionally structured, plot and character bound—became my model for *Billy Creekmore*.

I began to research child labor in the United States and incorporate elements from my family history into a narrative. I was fortunate to have a landscape that called to me and became the setting for my book. My father was born and raised in a small Appalachian town on the Ohio River. I remember the long drive from our home in Columbus to Ironton, Ohio, and how I used to look out the car window at the small towns along the way. The smell of minerals was in the air and the broken edges of the hills around my grandmother's house were veined with coal. From her house, it was only a short drive to the coal camps and hollers where children like Billy lived. I was in grade school then, reading *Tom Sawyer* and *The Secret Garden*, and listening to my father's stories of growing up on the river and roaming the woods.

Like Billy, my mother, Susan Morcone spent time in a foster home at a working farm. She, too, was abandoned by her father after her mother died in childbirth, and was later adopted by her aunt and uncle. To this day, she is afraid of cows, goats, chickens and mules. Because of her stories about being chased by geese and nipped by a pony, the typical peaceful farm scene has always read false to me. On my father's side, my great-grandfather and his mother were sent to debtor's prison after his father drowned off the coast of Liverpool. Eventually, my great-grandfather was indentured to help pay off the family debt to a farmer in northern England. He was badly beaten and near starved, so, this adventurous relative of mine stowed away on a boat to Canada (an illegal immigrant!), where he found his way to a kind baker who taught him the trade. Much of my immigrant family experienced the harsh face of late nineteenth- and early twentieth- century capitalism.

I spent five years researching and writing *Billy Creekmore*. I read everything I could find about the early years of coal mining in West Virginia, the daily lives and struggles of the boys working the mines, the United Mine Workers and the battle to unionize the coal industry, and how and why joining the circus would seem to be a terrific alternative to life in the mines. On a ten-day road trip with my father and my brother James, we drove through southern Ohio and West Virginia, exploring coal towns, hollers, and bends in the river. We walked through Matewan, West Virginia and saw where the bullets from a gun battle between striking miners and Baldwin Felts agents are still lodged in a brick building on the main street in town. We visited the Beckley Exhibition Coal Mine and spent an hour deep in the mine (more than enough time, I can assure you. It's spooky down there!) The next afternoon, in the archives of the West Virginia State Museum in Charleston, I had the great opportunity to look through a very old book that recorded the deaths of miners in the early years of the 20th century. I found the names of many boys who were killed in the mines, and recorded them in the notebook I devoted to taking notes and scribbling ideas for my book. I wasn't sure why I wrote down so many names at the time, but I found them haunting and beautiful, names such as Clyde Light, Frank Moon, Rufus Twilly, and Golden Breedlove. Eventually I realized that one part of my book wanted to be a memorial of sorts to these boys, so, with the exception of the title character, every boy character in *Billy Creekmore* is named after a boy who died in a mining accident before reaching his seventeenth birthday.

I also traveled to Sarasota, Florida to spend some time with my stepfather Larry Short and his wife, Roberta. They had long told me about the Ringling Circus Museum, and thanks to them my knowledge of the early American circus deepened considerably. The curators at the museum were kind enough to let me look through their archives, and many of the facts and details of Billy's experiences with the Sparks and Graftin circuses are based on what I uncovered there. Charles Sparks, the great, benevolent circus owner, is a historical person, and I was thrilled to look through one of the few remaining copies of the Sparks Circus route book, just like the one Billy looks at when he's feeling lonesome for his old friends. Captain Graftin is not a historical person, but his character is an amalgam of several of the grifters and showmen I read about.

It's often said that everyone's story is unique, but I'm more interested in how our stories are similar. All of us are haunted by scraps of memory, family history, books we've read, and stories we've been told. These elements are elusive and powerful, like the spirits that visit Billy. Should we choose to listen, they'll connect us like an invisible web, holding past and present, the distant and familiar together. I hope Billy's story encourages my readers to connect to children like him, to other books, and to their own family stories.