



The United States of Appalachia: How Southern Mountaineers Brought Independence, Culture, and Enlightenment to America

Jeff Biggers

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Few places in the United States confound and fascinate Americans like Appalachia, yet no other area has been so markedly mischaracterized by the mass media. Stereotypes of hillbillies and rednecks repeatedly appear in representations of the region, but few, if any, of its many heroes, visionaries, or innovators are ever referenced.

Make no mistake, they are legion: from Anne Royall, America's first female muckraker, to Sequoyah, a Cherokee mountaineer who invented the first syllabary in modern times, and international divas Nina Simone and Bessie Smith, as well as writers Cormac McCarthy, Edward Abbey, and Nobel Laureate Pearl S. Buck, Appalachia has contributed mightily to American culture — and politics. Not only did eastern Tennessee boast the country's first antislavery newspaper, Appalachians also established the first District of Washington as a bold counterpoint to British rule. With humor, intelligence, and clarity, Jeff Biggers reminds us how Appalachians have defined and shaped the United States we know today.

The United States of Appalachia: How Southern Mountaineers Brought Independence, Culture, and Enlightenment to America Details

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Alexander says

Meh. No coherent argument or narrative to speak of here; worthwhile only in the sense that you'll learn a few interesting facts.

April says

Some of the facts were wrong. If Biggers was truly a student of Appalachia history, he would not have confused Charles Town, WV with Charleston, WV. He also would have touched on & mention more of West Virginia's history. After all, West Virginia is the only state that is truly & purely Appalachian. Next time Biggers does write a book, he better check himself & his facts.

Mandy says

I gave up on it. From an academic perspective, it leave something to be desired, such as footnotes. There are other books that argue, much more convincingly, of the uniqueness and character of the Appalachian region.

Lillian says

Heard about this on NPR

Jonathan says

I had read some of Bigger's writing on coal and so expected this book to be at least sympathetic movements for Appalachian Justice. However, I assumed that Biggers would invoke one Appalachian stereotype or another to defend Appalachia.

Instead I was excited to find that right off the bat he outlined four popular misrepresentations of Appalachia: Wilderness, Backwater home to peculiar people, a preserved specimen of Scotch-Irish cultural purity/rugged pioneer independence, and poster child for poverty and environmental exploitation -- instead of trafficking in one of these myths it was clear that Biggers was planning to paint a more complex picture of the region. Then I was pleasantly surprised to find that he dedicated the rest of his introduction to examining Appalachian music through the lives of Nina Simone and Bessie Smith.

Bigger's next chapter told the story of the development of the Cherokee syllabary. I applaud this as a way to begin a book about Appalachia. Despite this exciting beginning, the book still read like a white history of Appalachia, fitting Appalachia into a white narrative of the US. While Biggers did not avoid the reality that

many of Appalachia's patriots were also white enslavers who were trying to use any advantage possible to rob Native people of their land, I felt he was not careful with his use of language, sometime using the term enslaved Africans but other times slaves, sometimes African Americans other times lower case plural 'blacks.' (I'm not sure but 'Black people' and blacks convey a very different tone for me.)

I was again really heartened that in his chapter about industrialization Biggers wrote about Appalachian women workers rebellion in textile towns before chronicling the mine war at Blair mountain. I was very interested to learn about abolitionists (Black and white) in the region. While Biggers was selective in the stories he told (I don't see how you could avoid being selective) I was pretty excited about the stories he choose. And I found his personal note about his relationship with the Appalachian Southern Folklife Center and his own roots in the coalfields of southern Illinois, touching. All and all, this book was so much better than I expected; I learned a lot reading it.

David02139 says

An interesting history of the contributions and influences that the people from the Appalachia had on the United States. Last chapter was on the Highland School. Owner of New York Times, first abolitionists and a number of widely recognized writers of the different times.

Mark Klinepeter says

Written in a pro- Appalachian point of view, this book gives new insight into who the Appalachians are. I would recommend this book, especially to the people of this book, Appalacians.

Keith says

Fascinating read. Full of little-known information about, and contributions by, those from Appalachia from the early development of the USA to modern day, in the areas of social reform/rebellion, the arts, politics, the Press, industry, etc. Dozens and dozens of native Appalachians at the forefront of American history, and how many Americans know about them? I would have preferred, like others have said below, a bit more about West Virginian contributions (he does mention a few, e.g. Pearl Buck).

The best thing is that this book shatters all of the negative stereotypes about hillbillies that exist for once and for all, and praises the contributions of the Native Americans (here, mostly the Cherokee), as well.

Ray Zimmerman says

Jeff tells a great story in this book. He draws on numerous sources and personal experiences exploring Appalachia. His book relates the story of Appalachian people, the lives and struggles, and the outside forces which impact their fortunes.

Elizabeth Sulzby says

I have review notes on Facebook which I need to retrieve and insert here.

Marjorie says

I liked this book but was disappointed that he barely mentioned WV, instead focusing on tennessee, the carolinas, and even illinois and pennsylvania if you can believe that. as if any other state could be more appalachian than west by god.
