Review | 'Man Who Loved Birds' set in Ky. Knobs

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The Man Who Loved Birds by Fenton Johnson (University Press of Kentucky, 2016); 318 pages; $24.95 (hardcover).

As a writer, I read a lot, both for work and pleasure, and I usually bring along a book for road trips when I’m not driving. On a recent Sunday afternoon, my husband and I headed for a favorite place of ours, the hiking trails at the Abbey of Gethsemani near Bardstown, the heart of the Kentucky Knobs.

On that warm, late winter day, through either kismet or coincidence, I brought along Fenton Johnson’s new release, The Man Who Loved Birds, so hot-off-the-press that I hadn’t even read the book jacket blurbs. From the first page, I realized we were driving directly into the book’s setting, beginning with this line:

Brother Flavian was not entirely certain what brought him, a Trappist monk soon to celebrate his seventeenth year in the monastery, to be standing in the Miracle Inn with a draft beer in one hand and a pool cue in the other.

I was hooked from the start.

The novel is set in the 1980s, a period when the region around Nelson, Marion and Washington counties received national attention as federal and state drug enforcement officers seized 182 tons of marijuana in an extensive sting operation in multiple states. The hub of the operation, deemed to be the largest domestic marijuana-growing organization, was in Kentucky.

The bust sent many Kentuckians to prison, some for life under mandatory drug sentencing laws enacted during the Reagan administration’s war on drugs. In headlines and in legend, the Kentucky marijuana cartel became known as the Cornbread Mafia. A 2013 nonfiction work, Cornbread Mafia: A Homegrown Syndicate’s Code Of Silence And The Biggest Marijuana Bust In American History, was written by local author James Higdon (Lyons Press).

Johnson’s work, however, is fiction based on actual events. His research began more than two decades ago when he wrote a feature-length article titled “High in the Hollows” for the New York Times Magazine when 68 people faced federal and state drug charges.

In addition, Johnson was inspired by his own memories of the 1971 murder of a Marion County man in a suspicious shootout with Kentucky State Police. Johnson, who grew up in Nelson County, now teaches creative writing at the University of Arizona and the Spalding University MFA program.

Three main characters form the heart of the story as they configure themselves into an unlikely triangle. Brother Flavian is a Trappist monk, doubting his vows and venturing into the world beyond a central Kentucky monastery whenever he can. Dr. Meena Chatterjee is a Bengali-born physician who is recruited to set up a nearby rural practice in a former gas station; she hesitates to take action that could jeopardize her immigration status. Johnny Faye is a pot-growing Vietnam vet who uses outlying monastery land to cultivate his crop.

The three share a bond by their connection to war: Flavian entered the monastery as a conscientious objector to the Vietnam War; Johnny’s military service shifted his world view and introduced him to marijuana; Meena left India after the war for Bangladesh liberation. Each is an outsider in their communities.

Johnson’s narrative is compelling and his descriptions of the central Kentucky landscape are lush and recognizable. The woods, creeks, rocky soil, birds and snakes – particularly the snakes – come alive for the reader. The author has constructed a world of sensual beauty, a landscape that feels both natural and mystical, made more powerful as a place that teeters between paradise and tragedy.

The novel explores the redemptive power of love in a world of good, bad and power-hungry individuals. While its setting is rural Kentucky, its scope is far from myopic. Destiny and coincidence are important themes – what we choose and what chooses us, as demonstrated by my chance selection of this book for our drive to the Knobs, a place now indelibly connected to Johnson’s unforgettable characters.
Jayne Moore Waldrop is a Lexington writer and attorney. She received her MFA in creative writing from Murray State University. Her monthly book column (/story/opinion/2016/03/03/lcj-book-column/8115116/) appears in Forum the first Sunday of every month.

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