

## Asheville's Rob Neufeld on the works of Ron Rash, who will keynote the upcoming literary festival at WCU

In his early 40s, Ron Rash published his first two books, "The Night the New Jesus Fell to Earth," stories, and "Eureka Mill," a book of poems.

With a movie based on his best-selling novel "Serena" in the works, and 10 other acclaimed books in circulation, it's safe to say that Rash has been having a sensational midlife.

Rash engages in an audience participation author show at Western Carolina University on March 20, on the third day of the 10th annual Spring Literary Festival.

### Images like icons

Rash writes in three forms — novels, short stories and poems. With his poetry, he gives us his most worshipful and private self, as when he dwells on an image.

"Tonight I hold the photograph lightward, / try to read my grandfather's face," Rash

relates in his poem, "September, 1957," published in his book, "Eureka Mill."

Images are like icons to Rash in his work. "Serena" owes its birth to a vision of a woman on a horse atop a ridge, Rash has said.

The photograph of his grandfather in the poem connects Rash to one of the biggest apprehensions in his life, the fate dealt mountain farmers who moved to mill towns.

"I sit on the porch steps, watch / my grandfather lean his cancered body / against the back of Alec Price's Ford," Rash begins, entering the photo.

Fellow millworkers have just barged in on Grandma and carried Grandfather out of his sickbed to their big fish catch in the truck back. Grandma finally goes along with the disturbance and takes the photo, which the poet holds, seeing behind the smoke of his grandfather's cigarette, "a grimace of pain or a grin. / It is the one sure thing/ I cannot remember."

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## Believing

There are no mills in Rash's second book of poems, "Among the Believers," set in the mountains with his pre-mill kin.

Rash was teaching at Tri-County Technical College, near Clemson, while writing "Believers." He dedicated it "in memory of my father James Hubert Rash — believer."

James Rash got his GED and teacher's degree while working full time at Eureka Mill and thus climbed his family out of that trap. Memories of country life, as much as a healthy paycheck, had been in James' mind.

"I rose with the moon, left the drowsy sheets, / my nine months wife singing in her sleep." Rash begins his poem, "Plowing on Moonlight," taking on his father's persona in the moment of tending to his fields.

Rash takes on many personae in his writing, most of them not his family. "The Night the New Jesus Fell to Earth," for instance, brings together a gathering of resettled mountaineers talking about obsolescence and destiny.

Rash's father, in the poem, represents a communion with nature through work.

"All night / I plowed, limbs pebbled, beard budded by frost, / my chest nipples, my breath blooming white, / and knew again the sway of the sea, / the flow of river, the smallest creek, / rain's pelt and soak, the

taproot's thrust, / the cicada's winged resurrection."

"Among the Believers" ranges wide. It taps into Celtic cadences with a translation from "The Mabinogian," a Welsh epic. Sea warriors, returning home, recall dead kinsmen, "woes of ages, old wounds, heart grief."

Two other poems dwell on the Shelton Laurel Massacre in Madison County, the focus of Rash's 2006 novel, "The World Made Straight." Mountain religion fuses with nature and ancestry in many entries.

## The drowned

"Beneath Keowee," a poem in "Among the Believers," visits the ghost world at the bottom of the dammed lake between Tri-County College and Lake Jocassee. Jocassee rises from burial at the beginning of Rash's third book of poems, "Raising the Dead."

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“Rent a boat,” the poet tells readers of his poem, “Under Jocassee.” “Soon/ you’ll see as through a mirror / not a river but a road flowing beneath you. / Follow that road.”

Passing a graveyard, a house, and a barn, “cut the motor and drift / back sixty years and remember / a woman who lived in that house” and the day she looked up, as she might be doing now, at “something dark (that) has come over her.”

That same image haunts the story, “Not Waving but Drowning,” in Rash’s second volume of stories, “Casualties” (2000).

The narrator is in a hospital waiting room where his wife, Mary, is about to suffer a miscarriage, her second in their marriage. There with him is a millworker and his wife with busted teeth.

The narrator recalls when his and Mary’s new child had been conceived, on a boating trip on Lake Jocassee. They’d looked into the water and saw, “Eighty feet down were farmhouses Duke Power hadn’t bothered to raze when they’d built the dam.”

“It’s like if you watched long enough,” Mary had said, “somebody would walk out of one of those houses and look up and wave.”

The ghosts of that displaced community are like the ghost of a miscarried child. “You carry that pain inside like a tumor, and though it may shrink with time, it never disappears, and it’s malignant.”

Rash’s first novel, “One Foot in Eden,” a multiple award-winner, takes place in the Jocassee Valley as its drowning approaches. The drowning — of an industrialist’s daughter — kicks off Rash’s second novel, “Saints at the River,” with the girl’s last thoughts. There’s a drowning in “Serena,” too — at a logjam in a millpond.

## Personal religion

All of Rash’s previous favorite subjects come together in his fourth and most recent book of poems, “Waking,” where it seems that their weft is imbued with a greater strength, something like a personal religion.

Religion has many aspects, including humility and service to people less fortunate than oneself.

In the story, “Honesty,” published in Rash’s 2007 volume, “Chemistry and Other Stories,” a writer with writer’s block takes his wife’s suggestion and answers a singles

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ad to write about the lovelorn.

As it turns out, the woman, Lee Ann, whose incarcerated husband continues to threaten to kill her, learns about his ruse and forgives him.

“Somehow, despite all this,” she tells him as they part, “I still think you’re a good person.” He could see loving this demeaned person in an alternate life. “No, I’m not,” he says.

The bonds between people are particularly heartfelt or heart-rending, in Rash work, when a father and child are involved.

The father in the poem, “The Reaping,” published in “Waking,” does not “need an owl cry or his wife’s/ linger by window to know / what keeps his son in the field’s / gathering darkness.”

The boy, who had a bad habit of taking short cuts, had been working the hay baler. The father “frees an arm from the roller/ chides his son for half a life / lost to save half a minute, / before kissing the cold brow, / forgives what the reaper cannot.”

Rash’s most recent book of short stories, “Burning Bright,” won the Frank O’Connor Award for best story collection in the world in 2010.

His upcoming novel, “The Cove” (Ecco/Harper Collins, April 2012), reveals love, beauty, and anti-German hatred in the mountains during World War I.

## SPRING LITERARY FESTIVAL

Ron Rash engages in an audience participation author show, emceed by Rob Neufeld, at 8 p.m. March 20 at Western Carolina University as part of the 2012 Spring Literary Festival.

Twelve other noted authors are featured over five days. Find the schedule at [www.litfestival.org](http://www.litfestival.org) or call 227-7264 to learn more.

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