

## “preserving the heart of [the story]”: Adapting North Carolina Literature for Film

Margaret D. Bauer, Editor

We began our exploration of “North Carolina Literature into Film” in the premiere issue of *NCLR Online*, which was launched in February, and we will continue our exploration through the annual Eastern North Carolina Literary Homecoming at East Carolina University, September 21–22. We invite our readers to join us here in Greenville to meet several of the writers featured in these pages and in our online supplement – including keynote speaker Charles Frazier, whose essay opens this issue.

We are so grateful to the writers who have shared their thoughts about watching their words translated into moving pictures – in the essays by James Dodson and Eleanora Tate in *NCLR Online*; in Charles Frazier’s essay and two more in this issue, by Jim Grimsley and Timothy Tyson; and in interviews with Ellyn Bache and Lois Duncan, as well as with John Ehle, incorporated into Terry Roberts’s article. But don’t expect to read of these writers’ frustration over filmmakers “ruining” their work; as Ellyn Bache says, “They can’t ‘ruin’ your book; the book is there. You can still read the book.” Rather, you will read of their appreciation of the hard work involved in creating this other medium for their stories while, as Tim Tyson puts it, “preserving the heart of things.”

A good film (or even a bad film in which a good story is evident behind the flaws) very often brings the public, sadly no longer always inclined to read if they can watch, back to the book. As you can read in the issue of *NCLR Online* that we published earlier this year, this potential is what Paul Green saw in film. This North Carolina playwright, who believed in theater for the people, saw movies as a way to reach even more people. He was disappointed in the quality of many films and critical of filmmakers who did not give audiences more credit when deciding what kind of movies people would pay to see. But likely he would not have been disappointed in the

films based on the books by these writers, who were apparently very fortunate to work with like-minded directors like Anthony Minghella (*Cold Mountain*), James Bolton (*Dream Boy*), and Jeb Stuart (*Blood Done Sign My Name*).

The authors’ generosity extends beyond their trust in and gratitude toward these filmmakers. The editorial staff of the *North Carolina Literary Review* appreciates the authors’ – and in some cases, also the directors’ (and many others’) – willingness to share photographs with us for the issue: Charles and Katherine Frazier put us in touch with their daughter, Annie, who sent us photographs from the Romanian set of the filming of *Cold Mountain*. James Bolton sent stills from the Louisiana film set of Jim Grimsley’s eastern North Carolina novel *Dream Boy*. Jeb Stuart and Tim Tyson, along with Melody Ivins, provided photographs from the set of *Blood Done Sign My Name*. John Ehle and his wife, actress Rosemary Harris, sent us, by way of Terry Roberts, whole pages from their photograph album of snapshots taken on the set of *Winter People*. Ellyn Bache mailed a box of photographs and book covers, and Lois Duncan emailed numerous scans.

As usual, the special feature section theme defined itself as we received new poems by James Applewhite with allusions to film (see more such poems that we found in his collections, which are reprinted in *NCLR Online*), and as our research led



COURTESY OF JEB STUART AND REAL FOLK PRODUCTIONS



RIGHT Author Timothy Tyson and Gattlin Griffith in the role of Tim Tyson on the set of *Blood Done Sign My Name*

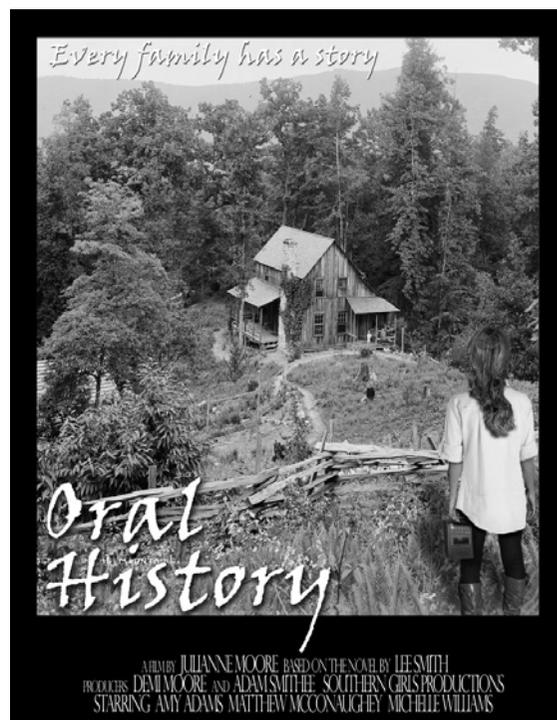
us to such interesting literature/film connections as Paul Green screenwriting for Hollywood. Our thanks to Laurence Avery for stepping out of retirement, during which he has been writing poetry (see *NCLR* 2010, for example), to write about this provocative chapter of Green's career for us. We also appreciate the funding provided by the Paul Green Foundation to cover the photographs we purchased for that essay and Green's own essay, reprinted in *NCLR Online*.

In another essay in this section, Larry Tise considers the influence upon Paul Green of the 1921 film of North Carolina's colonial history, often called "the Lost Colony film," even though the plight of the missing colonists is just one of many chapters of North Carolina's early history covered in the film. This essay notes the film's provocative emphasis on the violence against Native Americans and hypothesizes that the idea behind this film may have prompted Green's commission to write his first symphonic outdoor drama, *The Lost Colony*, which is enjoying its 75<sup>th</sup> season this summer. Tom Whiteside follows up on how this "Lost Colony film" has been lost and found several times over the years.

Other essays in this section explore other writers' forays into the world of moviemaking. Anthony Slide shares his work on Thomas Dixon's post-D.W. Griffith/*The Birth of a Nation* film career (and some related photographs for the article). Dixon, the North Carolina author of the novels upon which *The Birth of a Nation* was based, apparently enjoyed this new arena for fiction enough to get quite involved in filmmaking himself after Griffith's now infamous but still influential film. And speaking of the significance of *The Birth of a Nation* to filmmaking, we were not surprised that it came up in William Hart's discussion of a North Carolina novel in James Patterson's Alex Cross series – yes, that James Patterson, whose famous psychologist/detective comes home to his native North Carolina, when his niece is kidnapped in *Kiss the Girls*, which is set largely in Durham and Chapel Hill. Thanks, too, to my colleague Anna Froula, who shared her own film expertise to note the echo of *The Birth of a Nation* in *Kiss the Girls*.

After the 2011 issue, which concluded with Scott Hicks's essay on teaching North Carolina environmental writers, I was very pleased when Elisabeth Benfey agreed to write about her students' experiences with making short films based on stories by Allan Gurganus, Randall Kenan, Lee Smith, and Daniel Wallace. In her essay, Benfey focuses on the students' adaptation of Randall Kenan's "The Foundations of the Earth," indeed, my favorite Kenan story. Read this essay and then come to the Eastern North Carolina Literary Homecoming and hear Elisabeth Benfey and Randall Kenan talk about this film, along with Dante James, who made a film based on another North Carolina short story, "The Doll" by Charles Chesnutt.

Finally, we look forward to the lively discussion we hope will follow your reading of this issue's concluding essay by George Hovis on "Ten North Carolina Stories that *Ought* to be Films." Thank you to Assistant Editor Randall Martoccia who replied to my question "How are we going to illustrate this essay?" without a moment's hesitation, "Movie posters" (and got an artist friend involved in helping him to create one). We also appreciate Joan Mansfield (cover artist for *NCLR* 2011) for answering our invitation to art and graphic design professors and thereby giving her illustration



MOUNTAIN CLEARING PHOTOGRAPH BY WILLIAM HENRY (1902); COURTESY OF THE LIBRARY OF CONGRESS PRINTS AND PHOTOGRAPHS DIVISION

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- students this opportunity to publish their work. And we thank English Department Associate Chair Donna Kain for sharing one of her many talents to advise NCLR interns on their posters – and for creating several posters herself for this essay as well as for the Duke students' film of Randall Kenan's story and for Terry Roberts's discussion of John Ehle's *The Changing of the Guard*, which has not yet but, according to Terry, should be made into a film. You can see these posters in full color on our website. And also on our website, you can find a link to a blog we created for responses to this issue. We want to hear your suggestions of other works of North Carolina literature that should be adapted into film, how you envision those adaptations, and the actors you see playing your favorite characters. ■
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