WEARING 2 HATS: PROFESSOR AND NOVELIST

NC State professors Wilton Barnhardt, Jill McCorkle and Elaine Neil Orr are willing to share their secrets of literary success with NC State students.

Barnhardt’s novel Lookaway, Lookaway features a North Carolina matriarch who is trying to preserve her family’s name and legacy. The New York Times Book Review gave the book a strong thumbs up, as have many regional and national critics. Reviews were so strong that HBO has optioned the novel for adaptation as a weekly series, with Barnhardt as co-executive producer.

Five of McCorkle’s books have been named notable books by the New York Times. Her most recent novel, Life After Life, centers on the lives of residents and workers at the Pine Haven Retirement Community in the fictional town of Fulton, N.C.

Much of Orr’s debut novel, A Different Sun, is set in Nigeria, where she grew up as a child of missionaries. Her novel draws on the 1853 diary of the wife of a missionary from Georgia.

The three authors were featured in NC State magazine and the blog Red and White for Life, both published by the NC State Alumni Association. Enjoy some excerpts from those interviews below.

• How would you describe yourself as a novelist?

BARNHARDT: I’ve eluded categories. I’m not a naturalist, I’m not a romantic, I’m not a realist. I would probably say that I’m a classicist. I hope I’m writing sort of the classic novels of the 19th century. I’m nervous about being in any camp. I have a New York novel. I have a religious novel. I have a Hollywood novel. This is the Southern novel.

• Where do your ideas for stories and novels come from?

MCCORKLE: It is that combination of what you see blending with imagination. Imagination is a key part of our experience. We see something we don’t understand, but our brain is determined to make sense of it and to keep firing suggestions as to what might be the reason this is happening. I like to tell my students that it is your brain’s job to be a couple of steps ahead of you, seeking reasons. So if you’re always walking around with your eyes and ears open, you can’t help but see a whole lot of stories.

• What did you learn about writing while completing this novel?

ORR: I have enormous new respect for novelists that I could have never grasped without writing this novel. Writing even a mediocre novel is an enormous achievement because you have to do all this research, create a universe, create the histories of people and keep them all afloat and moving. I used to think that literary theory was hard, but that was before I encountered novel writing.

IN PRAISE OF WORKING DOGS

A person named Cat has written a book about her dog. Don’t expect her to write a book about cats anytime soon, because Cat Warren is allergic to cats.

In Warren’s book What the Dog Knows, the science journalism professor offers one part memoir, one part science and one part history as she tells how her obedience-school dropout, Solo, became proficient in an unusual hobby: helping law enforcement officials search for people who are missing and presumed dead. Warren and Solo have trained with several organizations, including the Durham police and sheriff’s K-9 units, since the dog was certified eight years ago.

Rebecca Skloot praised the book in the New York Times Book Review: “What the Dog Knows is a fascinating, deeply reported journey into scent, death, forensics and the amazing things dogs can do with their noses: sniffing out graves, truffles, bedbugs, maybe even cancer. But it’s also a moving story of how one woman transformed her troubled dog into a loving companion and an asset to society, all while stumbling on the beauty of life in their searches for death.”