

A tribute to fishing and fish

In last week's The Smoky Mountain News, Gary Carden began his review of Ron Rash's collection of poems, **Waking**, by praising the writer's description of a trout brought home and kept alive in a trough, where "its gills were like filters/that pureness poured into."

The streams and rivers of Western North Carolina attract anglers like — well, like a well-tied fly attracts a trout. Even casual hikers are accustomed to the sight of a man or woman in waders in the middle of a stream, line out, intent on the dark shadows of the moving waters. In some families, fishing and what Hopkins once called "the tools and tackle" are passed along as heirlooms with the same reverence as that shown to Granny's Bible, Uncle John's shotgun, and Aunt Martha's quilts. Others come to the pleasures of fishing — the solitude, the skills, the thrill of hooking a brown or a bass — later in life. However people find their way to water with a pole in one hand and refreshments in the other, they frequently become as passionate about their avocation as a golfer in a clubhouse on the eighteenth hole.

In **Growing Gills: A Fisherman's Journey** (Bright Mountain Books, ISBN 978-0-914875-60-4), David Joy offers readers both a paean to fishing and a memoir of his own days on the water. He takes us from the coast of North Carolina, where he fished as a boy with his family (he dedicates his book to his grandmother, who not only helped teach him to

fish, but who also gave him a collection of stories from her own days of fishing), to the creeks and rivers of our own mountains.

A fisherman since the age of 4, Joy as a child studied fishing shows on television while other adolescents were watching Saturday

morning cartoons. He recounts what a fine teacher his Granny was, showing him, for example, how a fish on the line feels as opposed to the tugging of an ocean wave. He then extends his story into his many forays into the mountains, recounting trips along the Tuckasegee, telling us stories of his catches and near misses, explaining how he learned to tie flies from a friend named Zac, whose "Burke County blood had toughened him into a man."

Joy, who credits his Granny for first teaching him the fine arts of story-telling and the power of description, does his mentor proud in **Growing Gills**. Here, for example, he recreates a scene on a coastal beach:

"The winter sun had sunk behind the swaying sprigs of sea oats and disappeared beneath the smoothed dunes. A sleek pane of wet sand, a remnant of receding waves, shone like a sheet of ice in the dying sunlight."

Joy also lets us feel the emotions of those who put a line into water:

"When I see a trout rise to a fly or turn on a nymph, pleasure builds in my chest nearing explosion. This is

when an artist knows to wait: oftentimes I do, but at other times the urge becomes too much, usually resulting in a missed fish."

Yet Joy does more than wax poetic about fishing in **Growing Gills**. Here are practical

chapters on fly-casting and its difficulties, on scouting the shadows and sunlight of a creek for various fish, on the challenges and rewards of night fishing. Both amateur and veteran anglers may learn some good lessons from Joy's clear, clean prose on the technical aspects of fishing.

The last half of **Growing Gills** is somewhat marred by Joy's Bambification of nature and a concomitant misanthropy. "I was the species that dismantled the world with empty syllables, with metaphors meant to dominate," he writes. "I wanted out. I wanted to become a fish." In wanting to become one with nature, he frequently attributes to its creatures human thoughts and feelings. He doesn't seem to realize that a fish is; it doesn't read Plato, it doesn't drink beer and smoke cigarettes, it doesn't write books about fishing. (His approach here is sometimes baffling. He kisses the fish which he releases, for example, but not the ones he eats, which seems to set an old Native American tradition on its head.) Joy's feelings for fish and for nature in general then led him to a dislike for the human. He yearns to "revert to primitiveness," to "escape the madness of the mechanized world and become in tune," and is finally forced "to accept my humanity." The man who truly wants to be a fish rather a man must leave his listeners wondering whether he understands in full what it means to be a man or a fish.

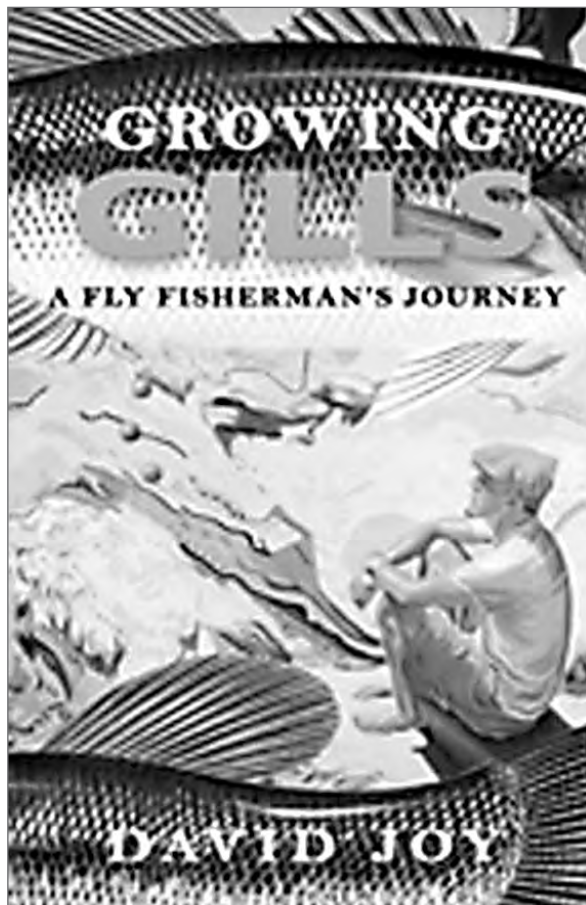
But these are quibbles, given the intent of **Growing Gills**. Even those who have never baited a hook will find pleasure here. The delights of Joy's prose are enhanced by the drawings of Michael Polomik, a talented illustrator whose work here compares favorably to those wonderful drawings once found in certain fine books produced 70 and 80 years ago.

Both Joy and Polomik will launch their book at 3 p.m. on Sunday, Sept. 18, at Blue Ride Book and News in Waynesville. Both the publisher of the book, Cynthia Bright of Bright Mountain Books in Asheville, and a representative of the Waynesville Fly Shop will also appear at this event.



Jeff Minick

Writer



In **Growing Gills: A Fisherman's Journey** by David Joy. Bright Mountain Books, 2011. 208 pages.

"Nick's heart tightened as the trout moved. He felt the old feeling."

— Ernest Hemingway, quoted in **Growing Gills**

Wake Up Man authors to visit story time

Author Thomas Rain Crowe and Asheville artist and illustrator Marilyn King Dawson will be at a special children's story time reading at 11 a.m. on Saturday, Sept. 17, at City Lights Bookstore in Sylva. The event will celebrate their new children's book, **The Wake Up Man**.

In the spirit and in the tradition of the legendary tale of The Sandman, Crowe and Dawson have brought to life an imaginary sequel to the Sandman myth with the creation of **The Wake Up Man**.

Since it is the Sandman who visits us each night and with his magic dust puts us to sleep, it is only logical, therefore, that there should be a **Wake Up Man** who is responsible for waking us up.

Refreshments will be served along with the reading and book signing.
828.586.9499.

Author Chris McMillan to read from debut memoir

Local author Chris McMillan will read from her new memoir at 3 p.m. on Saturday, Sept. 17, at Blue Ridge Books in Waynesville.

Backwards Off the Curb is the story of McMillan who, at 54, decided to leave the comforts of her suburban life and head out on a cross-country pilgrimage of self-discovery.

McMillan was a well-traveled Air Force wife who ran retail stores in Tallahassee, Florida for 20 years. She found herself stagnating in her daily routine, so she packed up her van and embarked on a 10,000-mile journey to "find her sanity."

The result is 207 pages of feisty Southern feminine soul-searching, memory-strolling, and self-reflection.
828.456.6000.