



Nora Bonesteel's Christmas Past

Sharyn McCrumb

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When someone buys the old Honeycutt house, Nora Bonesteel is glad to see some life brought back to the old mansion, even if it is by summer people. But when they decide to stay through Christmas, they find more than old memories in the walls. On Christmas Eve, Sheriff Spencer Arrowood and Deputy Joe LeDonne find themselves on an unwelcome call to arrest an elderly man for a minor offense. As they attempt to do their duty, while doing the right thing for a neighbor, it begins to look like they may all spend Christmas away from home.

In a story of spirits, memories, and angels unaware, Sharyn McCrumb revisits her most loved characters who know there is more to this world than the eye can see, especially at Christmastime.

Nora Bonesteel's Christmas Past Details

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From Reader Review Nora Bonesteel's Christmas Past for online ebook

Werner says

Though I've only reviewed the second installment of the Ballad series, *The Hangman's Beautiful Daughter*, I've read the first seven novels, and greatly liked all of them except the first one, which I fortunately didn't start with. (IMO, McCrumb didn't really hit her stride with the series until the second book.) This novella is numbered as #10.5 of the series because of when it was published (after the tenth novel), but it's not really tied into the series order, and could be read out of sequence without any problem. (But as I explain below, I personally wouldn't recommend beginning your reading of the series here.)

Like all the Ballad books, this one is set in the present-day Tennessee mountains, in and around the fictional county seat town of Hamelin. Three major characters well known to series fans appear here, in two separate and unrelated plot strands that alternate back and forth in the narrative. In one of these, on Christmas Eve, at the behest of a vindictive Senator, Sheriff Spencer Arrowood and his deputy Joe Le Donne are tasked with traveling into the fastnesses of Dark Hollow to serve an arrest warrant on the driver of a car involved in a minor fender-bender with the lawmaker's wife's vehicle. In the other, a retired couple from Florida, summer residents of one of the older homes in the hills around Hamelin who've decided to stay on for Christmas this year, call on the resources of aged mountain wise woman Nora Bonesteel --blessed, or cursed, with the Sight that runs in her family- to deal with an unusual problem.

I've always classified the Ballad series as general fiction, because the real main thrust of it is realistic depiction of the lives, relationships and problems (individual and societal) of true-to-life people in a modern Appalachian community. But because three of our main series characters work in a sheriff's office, plots often do involve detective work to solve crimes (McCrumb is also a very successful mystery writer). And the supernatural world often impinges on the natural one in real ways; in the world of the Ballad series, ghosts, the Sight, etc. aren't figments of the imagination. There's not much of a mystery element in this book. But the central premise of Nora's plot strand here is very real supernatural phenomena. A case could be made that what we have here is supernatural fiction. But if the defining characteristic of "general fiction" --what I sometimes call "everyday" fiction-- is straightforward depiction of normal, everyday modern life, the author brings you to accept the fact that, for instance, an occasional conversation with a ghost IS a normal, straightforward part of life for some of these characters, no more out of tune with everyday reality than a conversation with a grocery store clerk would be.

This book isn't nearly as substantial as the novels in this series. That's partly because the shorter length provides less scope for substance, but also because there are indications that the author's craftsmanship here was less painstaking than it is with the other books --as if this book wasn't taken as seriously, and was slapped together more hurriedly. For instance, the exact chronology of Nora's interactions with "snowbird" Shirley Haverty, in relation to the other plot strand, are vague; not all of the former takes place on Christmas Eve, but it's not really clear if any of it does. That's a flaw, in my estimation. In one place, the author loses track of who's speaking in a thread of dialogue. There's a fair amount of telling, rather than showing, because in some cases the author doesn't have time to show. McCrumb's knowledge of, and deep sympathy for, traditional mountain culture is usually a strength of the series, but here the shorter length makes the occasional info-dumps more noticeable. While one could begin an acquaintance with the series here, you don't get as full-orbed an introduction to the characters as you would in the novels. This book would appeal the most, I think, to readers who already know and like these characters.

That said, I still liked the read. For me, it was an enjoyable short visit with old friends. (Yes, my reading of it was spread over 12 days, but that's misleading; most of those days, I didn't have a chance to read. If I'd had,

I'd have finished this much more quickly.) I liked the celebration of the more permanent and worthy values of an older, less commercialized, homogenized and plastic time, and the positive depiction of a willingness to help others who need it even if it means some personal inconvenience. The endings of both plot strands are well done. And as an added plus, there's no bad language here (probably due to its being published by Abingdon Press, a Methodist imprint --the novels, originally published by Scribner, do have some of that).

One general comment that could be made about the series is that, although the novels are apparently set at the time they're published (the second book, first published in 1992, for instance, refers to the first Gulf War), there's not much indication that the characters are aging. The first book was published in 1990, some 26 years ago. I don't have that one in front of me at the moment, but my impression is that Spencer was in his mid-to-late 30s then, and his co-workers Joe and Martha perhaps five years or so younger than he. (Though Joe served in the Vietnam War, and U.S. involvement in that conflict ended in 1973.) We know from *The Rosewood Casket* that Nora was of marriageable age when the U.S. entered World War II; by 2014, when this novella was published, she'd be at least in her 90s. That's not so problematic; she's already elderly when she's introduced in the second book, so we've never thought of her, except in the flashbacks, as young. But by now, Spencer and his deputies would certainly be at least in their early 60s. or pushing 60. There's never any indication that they've grown that old. Granted, this book may take place earlier in the series chronology; but none of the books I've read really acknowledge the passing of time.

Melodie says

I enjoyed this holiday visit with old friends from the beginnings of McCrumb's Appalachian Ballad series. A couple of stories come together to make one enjoyable Christmas novella. Recommend!

Shirley Schwartz says

I received this book as an early review copy, but I finally just got to it. I know it's out of season as this is well and truly a Christmas story. Actually, it's two Christmas stories about two very different situations. If anyone is familiar with Ms. McCrumb's Appalachia series, this little book tells two very different stories. One is about Sheriff Spencer Arrowwood and his taciturn deputy Joe Le Donne. The other is about the ancient seer that lives in the neighbourhood by the name of Nora Bonesteel. Norah and Spencer are acquainted, but they do not meet each other in this little book. Nora is asked by some new neighbours to help them with what they think is a haunting . Someone is upsetting their Christmas tree and scattering the ornaments. This little task causes Nora to go back in her memory to Christmases when she was a child during the Second World War. Once she does that in her mind, she has no trouble identifying the culprit and providing her neighbours with a solution. Spencer and Joe are delivering a warrant for the arrest of an alleged hit-and-run accident. It's Christmas Eve and they're both in a hurry to get this last task done before heading off for their own Christmas Eve plans. They get far more than what they bargained for when they reach the remote home of two elderly people. All ends up fine in the end, and Spencer and Joe receive a lesson in helping out people in need. The little stories are magical and the lessons portrayed wonderful. I love Sharyn McCrumb's Appalachian series and this little book is like a gift for her legions of fans.

James Klagge says

It's not really a novel(1a), but two clever and heart-warming stories that never intersect. Each story is very

well-done, and I'm glad I read them.

But the writing doesn't quite live up to the stories. The Florida influence seems awkward. And, as I said, the stories are not tied together. Also, it is hard to say what has happened to McCrumb's so-called "Ballad" series. Once again no ballad figures in these stories. "I'll be Home for Christmas" is the only song that really figures in the story. (Perhaps the Ballad Novels would now better be called Appalachian Mountain Novels.) Reading Nora's reflections in Chapter 5 put me in mind of the song "Rank Stranger" (the "Albert E. Brumley" song, popularized by the Stanley Brothers). But this is neither mentioned nor used. Finally, there's a slip that I don't understand from a careful mystery writer: on p. 19 McCrumb says the Honeycutt Place is "two-story", and on p. 21 it is "three stories high"!

Lelia Taylor says

3.5 stars

Two companion stories that really are not related except that a few of the people know each other and they're in the same mountain location offer a brief but gentle look at the Christmas season. Sheriff Spencer Arrowood and his deputy, Joe LeDonne, are tasked with arresting a traffic offender on Christmas Eve with snow approaching and the elderly Nora Bonesteel, who has the Sight, is asked by a "snowbird" neighbor to find out why peculiar things are happening with her Christmas decorations.

Both stories, on the surface, would seem to be rather simplistic and they actually are but there's a kernel of meaning in each that reflects the best of home and hearth, so to speak. At times, the stories drag a little but it's nice to spend time again with Nora and the Sheriff and Joe (as cranky and cynical as the last might be) and absorb some of the Appalachian sensibility Sharyn McCrumb conveys so well. Is there mystery here or perhaps fantasy? Yes, in a very mild way, but it's far more about the characters and the setting. The appeal is in these people and their community and I always enjoy returning to Appalachia and, in particular, to Ashe Mountain.

Luanne Ollivier says

A Christmas book? Already Luanne? I know, I know, but can I be the first to tell you that there are only eighty days until Christmas! One of my favourite things to do in the days leading up to the twenty fifth is to read holiday tales. So, really, I'm just giving you lots of advance notice.....and a chance to own Nora Bonesteel's Christmas Past!

I've found that many novelists publish a holiday story featuring their recurring characters or settings. And that's true with Sharyn McCrumb's first Christmas book. McCrumb also writes what she knows.....

...."My books are like Appalachian quilts," says Sharyn McCrumb. "I take brightly colored scraps of legends, ballads, fragments of rural life, and local tragedy, and I piece them together into a complex whole that tells not only a story, but also a deeper truth about the culture of the mountain South."

Nora Bonesteel has lived her whole life in her family home in the mountains. She has fond memories of years and Christmases gone by. When her newish neighbour comes to call, prattling on about their house being haunted, Nora has an idea what might be going on....

McCrumb also includes a parallel storyline featuring Sheriff Spencer Arrowood and Deputy Joe LeDonne,

who are reluctant to carry out an arrest warrant on Christmas Eve. When they arrive at the house, they too are in for a bit of a surprise....

McCrum's description of the settings evokes vivid pictures of time and place. But it is Nora's memories that stayed with me - Christmases gone by that were celebrated in a simpler fashion, without the commercial frenzy. It was about the people, not 'things'. McCrum's style of writing is comfortable, almost folksy, leaving the reader feel like they're part of the story.

This was an good start to this year's holiday tales!

Don says

I wasn't at all sure what to expect from this little book; in fact, the only reason I read it was because I was looking for something short with which to end the 2016 holiday season. As it turns out though, I saved the best for last.

Nora Bonsteel has lived in the same small community for many, many years. One of her neighbors who is generally a snowbird chooses to stay on for the winter in the hopes of enjoying a storybook small town Christmas. However, she soon begins to think her house might be haunted. Nora has a bit of a reputation for knowing about such things and so the neighbor approaches her for help.

Meanwhile, the town sheriff and one of his deputies are on a mission to arrest an elderly farmer for a traffic accident. Both of them are a little uncomfortable about this, especially since it's Christmas Eve. But when the car you wreck belongs to a prominent politician, ... well, that can make a difference.

Now I know all of you are wondering why in Heaven's name I would recommend this rather odd sounding book so highly. Because the characters are well developed and lots of fun, we learn a good bit about old traditions as Nora relives parts of her past while attempting to help her neighbor, and each and every page of this most creative novella is filled with the spirit of the season.

If you are tired of those corny holiday romances, if you want something off the beaten track, if you want a well written story you won't soon forget, then give this one a try. You'll be glad you did.

Donna Davis says

I'm a long-time fan of Sharyn McCrum. Once in awhile I am disappointed, usually when she veers into a specialty area that doesn't interest me; I think one of those was set around Nascar with tons of racing details, and I had to give it up. But her ballad novels (and now a novella) are sure fire hits. This one is no exception.

I feel compelled to mention that the kindle galley was so full of formatting issues as to render it unreadable. I hope the publishers will correct this issue before it is released. I was able to read it with no trouble at all once I moved it to my desk top.

But back to our story.

We have parallel stories, and the setting is Christmas, of course. The story lines, one of Christmas present,

which features Sheriff Arrowroot being ordered to drag an elderly man to jail on Christmas Eve, appears to have a dead-sure predictable ending, except that it doesn't. That's all I'm giving away in this case.

The more flavorful thread is Nora Bonesteel's. The Bonesteel women have "the sight". Those who have followed McCrumb's novels already know that, but a reminder doesn't hurt. Nora is asked out to solve a haunted manse issue for some new-comers. I found this part vastly amusing.

The setting, for those unfamiliar with McCrumb's work, is in the Appalachian Mountains. It was one of her novels that taught me how to pronounce the word correctly (all soft "a"s). Her love of place comes through on the page, and as much as I love the Pacific Northwest where I have lived for most of my life, while I read this, a part of me positively yearned for the Smoky Mountains, which I only visited once as a (oh the shame) tourist. It's a rare kind of engagement. You can say she casts a spell over the reader, if you wish.

Ah. But that leads us to the descriptor I read in Net Galley, the fine folks who connected me with her publisher so that I could read her work in advance. It is described there as a "Christian" novella. I confess it gave me pause. There are Christian novels, and there are Christian novels. Some are so heavy handed that they make terrible literature, from a critical viewpoint: we're racing along, plot-wise, when someone announces that they should go to the Lord with their problem. A page and a half of long-winded prayer follows. Lather, rinse, repeat. I didn't want to find myself stuck with a book like that, but a strong writer builds a bond of trust with her readers, and my sense was that McCrumb was unlikely to trash her own work in such a manner. I was correct, and the story is great. The single religious reference is central to the plot and is entirely consistent with the setting. Also, sometimes "Christian" is a sort of code to let the reader know there will be no profanity or sweaty sex scenes, and frankly, I was just as glad to be spared those.

To sum up, McCrumb is a master writer, a mystery champ, and a brilliant novelist whose work with Appalachian setting and tradition stands alone in an otherwise crowded field. Pick up a copy in November. You can enjoy it and then pass it around for family and friends to enjoy. The quirky humor and redolent, traditional setting are sure to please anyone who loves Christmas and a good read.

Cindy says

This was my first book by this author and I thoroughly enjoyed reading it. I plan on checking out the rest of her Ballad series. I loved the character, Nora, and would like her to know her and her gift better.

Appalachia is the setting for this story or I should say stories since the author alternates between two stories with different characters. I enjoyed both of them, one involving the sheriff and his deputy made me smile. And Nora's was very touching. The author gives us some interesting superstitions to add to the fun of this story.

If you're liking for a sweet touching book to read during the holidays, this novella is a perfect Christmas read!

**I was given an ARC by the publisher and NetGalley to read in exchange for my honest review.

Delta says

This is my first Nora Bonesteel story and I must say that I really enjoyed it. Admittedly, I didn't understand

what Sheriff Arrowood had to do with the story, but I enjoyed his mini-story all the same. In fact, I think I enjoyed it more than Nora's story. I think I will try to find other books in this series.

I received a copy of this book in exchange for an honest review.

Terri Gilbert says

I wasn't crazy about it. I like McCrumb's books, generally. I like the characters in the ballad series. This novella was too preachy for my tastes. McCrumb seemed intent on giving readers lessons on the American Chestnut, the manners and quirks of mountain people, and the silliness of summer people. Still, it was a quick seasonal read in keeping with the Christmas spirit.

Marjorie says

I didn't receive this book in time to read it at Christmas but it would have been just as enjoyable if I had read it in the summer. How could it not be – it's by Sharyn McCrumb! I've loved her books for many years and Nora Bonesteel is one of my all-time favorite literary characters. For some reason, this little Christmas treat slipped by me so I'm particularly pleased to have found it now.

There are two storylines in this short novella. One has Sheriff Spencer Atwood and Deputy Joe LeDoone reluctantly dealing with the arrest of a man for a traffic violation. The second has Nora Bonesteel dealing with a spooky visitor at the old Honeycutt house, which brings back memories of the past.

While there's not length enough for a lot of character development, it's a totally charming book filled with the author's wonderful sense of humor and the mystical atmosphere of the Appalachian Mountains. Pure enchantment.

I won this book in a Goodreads giveaway and am under no obligation to review it.

Jacqie says

I received a copy of this book from Netgalley in exchange for an honest review.

This little novella is all about the spirit of Christmas. There are a couple of mysteries, but really they're more like puzzles. No murders here, no blood and gore. There are two different threads which never come together, but which both feature one of McCrumb's best known and loved characters.

In the first thread, Sheriff Spencer Arrowood and his deputy drive out to serve a warrant in an isolated part of the mountains. They quickly get drawn into a scenario out of a fairy tale, with the requisite three tasks and mysterious figure who seems to be testing them. I kind of enjoyed the twist in this one.

In the second thread, Nora Bonesteel is asked by her snowbird (from Florida) neighbor to get to the bottom of why her neighbor's Christmas decorations are being destroyed. Is it a ghost or evil spirit? Nora, with her supernatural sensitivity, should be able to find out the answer.

Really, this is just a couple of hours of light escapism celebrating Christmas, and it does just fine at that. McCrumb also weaves information about Christmas and Appalacian tradition into her story, which was interesting, although not new information to me. I have to confess that some of the parts about the ghost who couldn't stand a modern Christmas felt a bit judgy to me. Yes, traditional Christmas is beautiful, but maybe a couple from Florida would put meaning in their own unconventional Christmas traditions. Holidays are really a personal family affair, and while I wouldn't choose a pink aluminum tree, there's enough room out there for everyone to celebrate in whatever way they wish. "Santa Baby" and "Jingle Bell Rock" might not be quite as traditional as "Silent Night", but I think many people still love hearing them around this time of year. And let's not forget that "White Christmas" really only became known after WWII, which makes it "modern" too. Or maybe it was all supposed to be funny, and I didn't get the humor. That happens with me.

Deann Doolittle says

This is one of my favorite authors and I love that she put out a Christmas novella. I really liked it! Always have loved the characters and the story line was great. Brought a smile to my face at the end.

Betsy Ashton says

Fans of Sharyn McCrumb's ballad series need wait no longer for a new Nora Bonesteel story. NORA BONESTEEL'S CHRISTMAS PAST offers McCrumb at her best with two parallel stories centered around Christmas Eve.

In the primary story, Nora Bonesteel, she with the Sight, welcomes a new family in the old Honeycutt place next to her family home on the mountain. Summer people have decided to spend the holiday season instead of returning to Florida. Shirley Haverty wants to be friends with Nora but lacks knowledge of mountain traditions. She's too pushy at first, although she gradually backs off. When she arrives on Nora's doorstep one morning with a tale of her house being haunted, Nora invites her in, listens to the story and has an idea about what is happening in the parlor over at the Honeycutt mansion. She's sure her old friend is keeping a promise to be home by Christmas. The promise was made in the Second World War.

A parallel story involving the sheriff and his deputy takes the two on a trip up a mountain just as bad weather sets in. Pressured by a prominent politician to arrest a man for hitting his wife's car over in Tennessee and running from the accident send the two men on a journey they aren't likely to forget. They find their quarry, an old man living in a rundown farm house, at the end of a gravel lane. When they try to get the man to go with them, he agrees but is concerned for his aging wife. She needs firewood. A window in the bathroom lets in icy air. The two lawmen help split and stack firewood and reglaze the window. Darkness comes early. Before they can leave, the old man notices his cattle have gotten out of the barn. Again, the two lawmen help.

I won't tell you what happens in either story, but long-time fans will not be disappointed. The richness of McCrumb's detail, her deep knowledge of mountain tradition, her acknowledgement that prying is a breach of good manners combine to bring us a heartwarming read.

Yes, it's about Christmas. More, it's about human nature.

Received through NetGalley before I bought the book for my collection.

