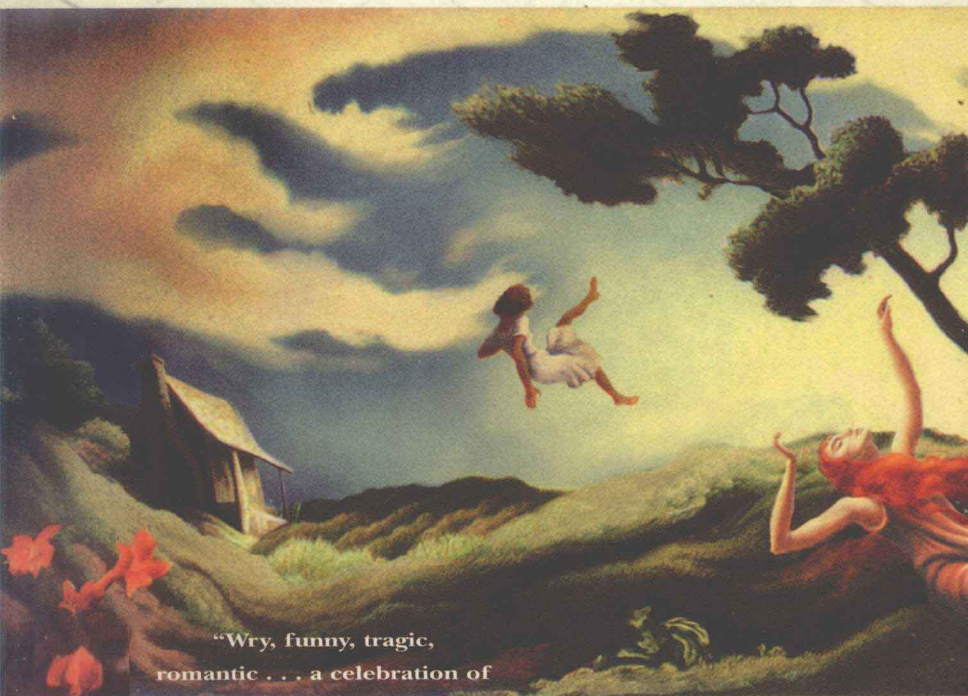


# Water from the Well



"Wry, funny, tragic,  
romantic . . . a celebration of

the goodness and  
heroism in the lives  
of white and black folk  
that history overlooks."

—Ron Hansen,  
author of *Atticus*

Myra  
McLarey

# Water from the Well



Myra McLarey

Scribner Paperback Fiction  
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In memory of  
Charles McLarey, my dad  
Nellie Peterson, my sister  
Don McLarey, my brother  
Corliss Archer Lamb, my niece



For my daughter, Kristina,  
aka TJ

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*Jesus gave her water  
that was not from the well  
Gave her living water  
and sent her forth to tell  
She went away singing  
and came back bringing  
Others for the water  
that was not from the well.  
Old Spiritual*

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# 1

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## Red Sky at Night

*When it is evening, ye say, It will be fair  
weather: for the sky is red.*

Matthew 16:2

APRIL 2, 1919

On the afternoon of April 2, 1919, in Sugars Spring, Arkansas, the Sugars Spring men's baseball team boasting three of the best hitters and the very best pitcher in Hampstead or Harwell County played the coloreds of Chickenham. Just for practice of course, since the Hope Cougars, not wishing to blemish their record, sent word by the mail carrier that they were down with the fever. They laid out the diamond in Amos Henry's cow pasture as they didn't want to scratch and scar their new field on the ridge between the school and the Baptist church. And they didn't want to play in Chickenham—although Lincoln Bradley,

who owned the Chickenham store and an automobile, told them they was most assuredly welcome to—because somehow it didn't set right being hosted by coloreds. So they settled on Amos Henry's cow pasture in the valley which was the last white house—if you didn't count the Ardis Young shacks—before getting into Chickenham, which the coloreds called Bethel, but which was part of Sugars Spring governmentwise and townshipwise.

The day had dawned cold with a starched white sky, and Jack Frost made an unusually late appearance, sparing the ridge but spewing a mist of ice crystals on most everything in the valley. Cora Emery—as she was still called even though she had been Cora McRae ever since she married James McRae shortly after coming to Sugars Spring from her home in Maine nearly twenty years ago—had risen in the half dark, pulling coveralls over her thin wool gown, and poured water on her jonquils, now in full bloom, yellow as a banty egg yolk, and on her irises, just coming into bloom, and spewed with a thin spray of frozen crystal, so they would escape the burn of the gold spring sun that by afternoon had the men on the Sugars Spring team shedding their flannel shirts and rolling the sleeves of their undershirts above their elbows.

David Ben Sugars, who had come back from the war totally intact, even went so far as to strip naked—to the waist—causing the young girls watching to titter, and causing the women to look

down at the ground or at each other, pretending not to notice how finely sculpted his body was, bronzed even this early in the year and gleaming with sweat in the heavy air that had fallen on the valley by the time the game got under way.

Then Mr. Davis Huff, a deacon at the Baptist Sugars Spring Church, quietly called David Ben aside and asked him if he didn't think it a mite improper to be in a state of such undress with women-folk around. David Ben said Mr. Davis Huff was surely right and he had plumb forgot his manners, so he put on his undershirt and rolled up the sleeves. But he still looked naked somehow.

David Ben hit two home runs, one with nobody on, and another with the bases loaded. Then he rolled down the sleeves of his undershirt, put on his brown and white checkered shirt, whacked his cap against his thigh sending out a puff of red dust—fine as gunpowder—and excused himself as he had to drive his mother to her ailing sister's in Hope.

May Ellen Huntley in her grass green dress moved out from the shade of the catawba tree where she watched the game alone—like a hunter stalking a five-point buck—and stepped in front of David Ben as he passed. She batted her eyes and said David Ben, I'd surely like to take a little drive with you sometime in that brand spanking new Model A of yours.

David Ben, looking like a jackrabbit caught in

an automobile's lights, toed the dirt and said surely. Then he stepped around her and walked past the women and the girls, nodding his head to the women. Miz Abigail Huff sighed and said he sure would be one fine catch if his mama would make him grow up and if he could escape snares of the likes of May Ellen who had already led many, young and old alike, to their damnation. And one of the women said, not to mention that May Ellen had utterly destroyed the spirit of her dear father who was a fine man and good minister even if he was a Methodist. And a woman with a faded bonnet said no doubt only his belief that he could by some miracle redeem May Ellen coupled with May Ellen's strong resemblance to her dear, departed mother prevented him from casting his daughter out into the world where she belonged. Miz Abigail Huff said I've said the same thing myself. She said Reverend Huntley must find himself saying just like in the Bible *alas my daughter thou hast brought me low*. The women all nodded their heads in agreement and one of them thanked God that the Lord had been merciful in not letting May Ellen's mama live to see her daughter behave like the daughters of Sodom.

Most of the Sugars Spring team got hits and at the end of the third inning, the score was twenty-one to nothing—not much of a contest, but since school was turned out for planting and most of the farmers, after waiting out the wet boll weevil

weather of early March, had finished getting their crops in the day before, there was an air of jollity about it.

Hoss Richards, one of the fielders and a real black one, black as shoe polish, kept hollering at the top of his lungs, I gots it, I gots it, don't nobody gets in my way, I gots this one. Then the ball, each time, slid through his glove like quicksilver. And Cabbage Tramble, whose real name was Isaiah, kept skidding on his behind just as he was about to scoop up a grounder, sending up a trail of red dust.

Little Abe Tramble, the pitcher, who was at least six foot three, threw two zinger strikes to a Sugars Spring batter, then threw the next four so wild that not even a catcher for the St. Louis Cardinals could have caught them much less Rooster McElroy, their catcher, who must have been all of five foot two. The balls went sailing over his jumping height and each time Rooster hollered at Little Abe calling him a dumb turkey and other names that sounded like gibberish.

The women of Sugars Spring, sitting under the magnolia tree on chinkapin benches that Amos Henry had brought out from his barn, had supper to see to so they gathered to leave. The young girls in pigtails and long finger-wound curls and starched cambric dresses said aw Ma can't we stay longer, and the women said not to whine, not to complain, as that would get them nowhere in life. So by the start of the fourth inning the only

women still under the magnolia tree were Cora Emery McRae, a widow and a Yankee, and May Ellen Huntley, the pretty daughter of the Methodist minister, who did what they damned well pleased. And Isannah Sanders, who stayed because her husband, the Baptist minister and the backup third baseman, a man old enough to be her father, loved her so much he couldn't bear for her to be out of his sight. And whose red hair sliding out from her gingham bonnet burned the eyes of the players in the field.

Colored women with homespun dresses and kerchief-covered heads—women so old their bones creaked as loud as the door hinges on the Bethel Baptist Tabernacle Church—sat on stumps and upturned wooden buckets under the stand of cottonwoods out in left field, a bevy of children, barefooted and dressed in faded oversized clothes, fluttering around them. Their laughter pelting across the field prompted Miz Abigail Huff, as she led the women up the slanted rose-colored road toward town proper, to say she had to allow that coloreds got more enjoyment out of life than whites and that maybe it was indeed a blessing to be simple.

This would not have been a story to be telling years later if Samuel Daniel McElroy, Rooster's cousin from Hayden's Landing, had not driven by in a mule-drawn wagon on the way to Pleasant Gilbert's store to pick up a gasket Mr. Ernest Stone

Junior had ordered for his truck. Samuel Daniel brought the mule to a halt in the middle of the road and called Rooster who was just stepping up to bat to ask him if he wanted a day or two of work cutting barrel heading in Saline bottom. And Rooster said sure as shootin' he did. Then Rooster asked Samuel Daniel if he wadn' at least gonna have a time at bat. Samuel Daniel said he wadn' interested in playing a clown and a fool such as what Rooster and Abe and the rest of 'em be doin'. And Rooster said he supposed Sammy Dan had the bodacity to hit the ball clear to burning hell and back. And Samuel Daniel said he would just this once.

And with that, Samuel Daniel McElroy climbed down off his wagon, told his mule to stay put, took the bat from Rooster's hands, kept his eyes to the ground to avoid the eyes of any white women who might be still around, and ambled to home plate which was a pink-flowered flour sack filled with sand from Amos Henry's white-sand quarry that marked the boundary in right field.

Red Cummings, who Sugars Spring claimed was the best pitcher west of the Mississippi and east of Red River, took one look at this tall young man—skinny as a stray dog with shoulders as wide as Red River and eyes as sleepy looking as a Saturday night drunk's—and decided he'd have hisself a little fun. Red turned his head to the left, shot a mouthful of spit and tobacco to the ground with the force of a bullet and said now that we got Sammy

Dan the great mule trainer up here, let's make it worth sump'n. You manage to get a hit off what I'm gonna throw at you Sammy Dan and we'll declare you Chickenham boys the winner. That all right with y'all? Red gave a sweeping look to his team in the pasture. No one disagreed.

That all right with you Sammy Dan? Red asked with a smile that turned up the left corner of his mouth but left the right corner sitting there. Samuel Daniel McElroy, who carried another name for himself inside his head, didn't say a word, didn't even nod his head. Instead he wiped his forehead—dark and wet looking as molasses—wiped it with the back side of his hand, looked Red Cummings smack dab head on in the eyes with eyes no longer carrying the look of sleep, eyes wide open as a deer's, eyes so black they were purple, for just one second before they eased almost shut again.

Everything seemed to come to a standstill. The colored women under the cottonwood trees quit laughing, and the children grabbed pieces of the old women's dresses and twisted them tight around their hands, tiny and dark as acorns, or buckeyes, or walnuts.

The women parading up the road toward town proper were at least a hundred yards away when they heard the stillness and stopped and turned around. Miz Abigail Huff shifted her slate-colored umbrella to her left shoulder signifying she would stand there in the middle of the rose-colored road to



watch. The other women put their hands to their bonnets to extend their view. The girls said what's happening Ma. And the women not knowing the answer said be silent for just one minute please.

The small boys standing around the water bucket quit their game of splash and the smallest one put his hand in his pocket hoping to keep his pond frog, who often croaked at awkward times, quiet.

The men out in the field were thankful their backs were to the sun. It wouldn't do for a nigger like Sammy Dan McElroy to get a lucky hit because they were blinded by the sun that was so bright it was white. Buckner Rose, the first baseman and veteran member of the team, found himself asking the Lord to let Sammy Dan ground out to him. He wanted a chance to tell his friend Ernest Stone Junior, that nigger you say can outwork ten of us couldn't hit no futher than first base—an old codger like me put him out.

Floyd Dillard, the second baseman, already had his mind on paying an after-dark call to May Ellen Huntley whose sashaying, he surmised, was intended more for him than for anyone else. And as his intended—a girl with a well-to-do father and a thin line for a mouth—was visiting cousins in Mineral Springs, there'd be no call to explain his whereabouts.

William Burl Cane, the third baseman, who seemed bound and determined to end up sorry even