

MARY LEE SETTLE'S LITERARY LEGACY

- “The Clam Shell: Opening to Life and Resolute Passion.” **h**
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Meredith Sue Willis

Settle's strength as a novelist is fully displayed in *The Clam Shell*, published more than fifteen years after her first novel. Her characters are seen clearly and in the fullness of their humanity, her ensemble scenes are skillfully written, and her delineations of the layers of social standing are insightful and strong. The novel is narrated through one consciousness in the present tense. It is not that single narrators or present tense make the best novels, but rather that this strategy works extremely well for an eighteen year old's story. A lot happens in *The Clam Shell* as events are built up with psychological exactitude from inside this young woman.

At the time I first read *The Clam Shell*, I was overwhelmed by its breathless full-speed-ahead Faulknerian style. Settle was a fan of Faulkner, perhaps never more obviously than in this novel. In her hands, the dense, impressionistic writing style works well to create the world as seen by a young woman making false starts and finally breaking for freedom. In Settle's hands, the style is about the information of the senses, the way the world comes at us as sensation, color, and sounds. That newness, that surprise at the familiar, is one of her main strategies in this novel. She writes near the beginning, before the coming-of-age story proper begins, how the narrator has come back to visit some of the people she grew up with. This is a Sunday afternoon in suburbia with some couples gathered around the television. Except for the narrator, these are people who never left the old home town or the country club milieu. The couples were leaders of her society when she was a girl, and seeing them again, she feels finally free of them, and thus everything is different, everything is new— even the television and the flames in the fireplace:

The fire, breathing pale blue from time to time, makes the light waver and tremble. Against the paleness, the television flings color, orange faces, color of comic books, cheap candy, plastic flowers, and reflects dancing white, maroon, and gold on the window-panes.

According to Settle in her introduction to the University of South Carolina edition of *The Clam Shell*, the novel grew out of a World War II discussion with the well-known literary man, Archibald MacLeish during a walk through Hyde Park in London. MacLeish did not take Settle seriously at first, but in the end, she proudly tells us, he confides in her that he has spent his life finding out that what he knew at eighteen was true. Settle says she held that remark in her mind and years later, made her own exploration of the idea in *The Clam Shell*.

The point I want to make—aside from recommending that people read that essay as an excellent short introduction to Settle's creative process—is how she boasts of making a male literary figure take her seriously. By the time she finally writes her own study of an eighteenth year, she is very interested in power relations between men and women, as well as between social classes and between Appalachia and the Old South. The novel offers a striking portrait of a young woman coming of age between the World Wars by breaking out of the social setting she was trained for—a milieu that constricts young women, damages the moral fiber of young men, and turns old women into jailers of the young.

The story line is that the narrator leaves her provincial West Virginia city to go to a women's college over the mountains in Virginia. The country club strivers she lives among look to the South, especially to Virginia, as the exemplar of the good life, and to the hollows of West Virginia as the thing to avoid. People in Virginia, however, look down on all West Virginians. There is a painfully funny scene in which the young narrator makes fun of her own background to amuse her roommate:

"West Virginia!" [the roommate] says, and that way of saying it, that edge of amusement, will diminish me over and over again at moments of triumph or exhilaration. The coal-trains, the sad-faced men, my father, the Jenny Lind shacks, the sumac, the manners as tight as muscles, the flowers that grow near trestles, the iron wheels shunting, the waterfalls, the tall trees, the wild sharp cliffs, oh, I am them all, coal and green leaves, slag and shale, dirty river and blank-faced mountain silence. I turn into the light, casting for a self presentable enough. Cunning with stupidity. I walk into the mirror of her dull eyes. I hate what I see there: I see, for the first time, parody. I play for safety, placate, become my own jester.

I strum my hands across my stomach, banjo fingers, and lean against the cabin trunk, turning it into the porch of the company store. I stare into the distance, an old hunter. "Waay down in West Virginny lived a girl named Nancy Brown..." I offer the song Young Uncle sings when he is drunk and at the end I am dressed in laughter.

There is great psychological acuity in this scene—the intense love of home, the equally intense yearning to be accepted by the dominant culture—in this case, a snobbish college created to make leisured wives out of energetic girls. Later, there is a Christmas meal at the narrator's grandmother's table that gives her both a sense of where she came from and, perhaps, the beginning of the strength she needs as modeled by her grandmother. This grandmother, like the Passmore matriarch in Settle's first written though second published book, *The Kiss of Kin*, is a version of Settle's real life grandmother. In one passage, *The Clam Shell* grandmother is pictured eating with her family around her:

At the end of the table, my grandmother eats. No one watches her do this. They are repelled by it. To cover her noise they keep up a counterpoint of conversation across the table. I have to glance at her. She sits, her old eyes close to her plate, tearing at her turkey, stuffing it into her mouth with her fork. She is a savage, hungry child, self-comforting, self-pleasing, who has been hungry in a creek-side cabin forgotten by us all, eating sow-belly and cornpone when they could get it, the father away at war. The child she feeds so urgently was born in 1861. Now, taking a pickle from the Waterford glass in front of her, remembering that there is someone else, she leans over, her face covered with turkey grease, and presents it to her great-grandson, who takes it and squeezes it in his hand.

Here is the contrast between the super-gentility of the one generation—the narrator's mother's generation—and the unselfconscious grasping at life by the grandmother's generation. What the narrator wants is exactly everything: to be beautiful, learned, loved—but also to go out in the world and do things. She wants to include in herself the "shacks, the sumac...the flowers that grow near trestles" plus all of the great world she hasn't seen yet. Settle writes: "Out of that year was the opening of a clamshell of a mind in a world no longer feared, and the resolute passion to keep it open...."

So we have here the story of a girl determined to seize life, and opposed to her are the young men who want to use her for sex and the older women who want to dangle her before the men and get her married before the goods are damaged. The climax of the story is precisely about that clash of wants. Twice in the course of *The Clam Shell* the narrator gets elaborately dressed for a fancy date and is sexually assaulted. This is the underside of the hard drinking youthful club life that is supposed to pair off the right kinds of boys and girls. But most shocking is not the physical assaults, which she fends off, but how she is treated by the adults. The entire emphasis is put not on the narrator's experience, but on the "goods"—whether or not the narrator managed to escape with her hymen intact.

One of the most telling scenes of the novel is when the president of the college invites her and her mother for coffee after her gynecological exam.

I hear my mother's cup shake in the saucer until she puts it down. The unmarried woman by the fire recites her creed as she has so many times before among the coffee-cups. "It is, after all, a great responsibility. If they—how can I say it?—go off the rails while they are here, they cannot know what power they have lost. They become evasive. We can't control such girls." She conjures up shadowy laughter behind her back, secret worlds where she cannot go. She is, for a moment, a girl herself, rigid with fear. "They run away, they are out of our hands. It spreads." With the firelight glinting in her eyes, she looks a little mad. "Everything goes to pieces. No control..." I glance at my mother. She is caught in the fear. "She was all right?" my mother has to ask. "Of course!"

What matters to the president of this college is only social control. Mary Lee Settle and her protagonist want above all to get out from under that control. By the end of the novel, it is obvious how many people are hurt by this kind of social life. The men, too, are damaged: the narrator's father is lovable, but kept ignorant of the climactic incident; the alluring but predatory Jack Story is sunk in misery; and there are two suicides by young men. Even an inspiring professor has a nervous break-down.

The novel ends with the narrator's determination not to return to the college. She goes out in the early morning and finds her professor wandering in the dew, chattering about fertility rites and Sir James

Frazer's *The Golden Bough*. They recline in the wet grass and laugh at the hypocrites who come to interrupt them. *The Clam Shell's* final line is a triumphant "We can't stop laughing." They are laughing at convention, at a world that makes a commodity of a scrap of tissue, at everyone who would try to keep girls from becoming women and artists like Mary Lee Settle.

