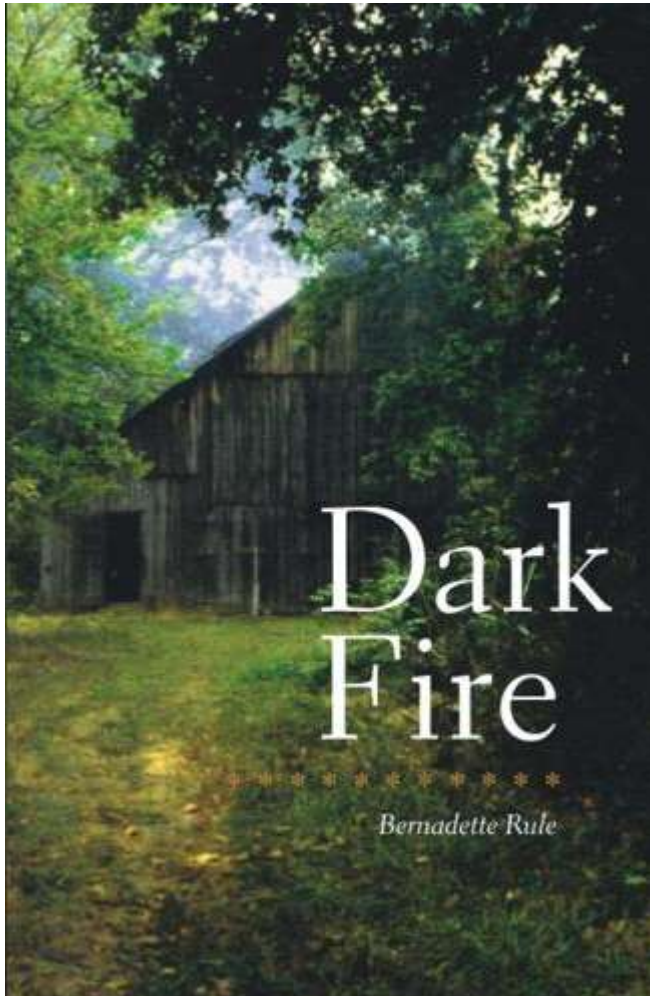


A BYGONE TIME

Author gives fictionalized account of dark episode in Kentucky history

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“Dark Fire” by Bernadette Rule. Morrisville, N.C.: Lulu Press, 2021, 226 pages, \$19.95 (paperback).



“By 1911 when (Theodore) Roosevelt busted the tobacco trust and assured farmers a fairer market, the few court cases against Night Riders fizzled out and the movement went into remission,” Bernadette Rule explains near the beginning of “Dark Fire,” her fictionalized account of one of the darker episodes in our collective history in the commonwealth. “Until after the First World War, this is. The war had boosted tobacco prices considerably (Cigarettes for our boys in the trenches!), and farmers were feeling the happy effects when, in 1920, the market suddenly plunged again. Ever watchful, Felix Ewing and other old union leaders began calling meetings and a second round of Night Riding commenced, this time with many returned soldiers in its ranks, newly graduated from the ugly academy of war.”

“The Drews and Lawrences were victims of this second round of Night Riding,” the author continues. “When, as an adult, I returned to Daddy’s story and began to research it for myself, I discovered that his version, so graphic and frightening to me as a child, had been softened and amended. The truth was much more brutal, and more complex than I had imagined. I also discovered that the aftermath

of World War One in Wills County, as in many other places, was a period of history marked by violent change and by so much grey it is almost impossible to define the good guys and the bad guys.”

So begins an in-depth foray and descension into a time that is almost hard to fathom these days – although there is some evidence we may be headed back toward the kind of less-civilized and primordial world that forms the backdrop for the current novel. I am old enough to remember both my grandfathers talking about the Night Riders with both positive and negative characterizations. It is intriguing – and somewhat depressing – when you realize that we are not as far removed from those dark days as some would have us believe.

“Dark Fire” consists of a prologue, 15 chapters and an epilogue – and is supplemented by additional resources that serve to give the story Rule is telling a framework and context that helps the reader

gain a more poignant understanding of the significance of the events she is so eloquently describing. I especially appreciated her inclusion of a 16-page gallery of black and white legacy photographs at the center of the book that serves to bring the narrative to life in a way that would not have been possible otherwise. Her prose is fluid, visceral and often magically transports the reader to a time and place that simultaneously seems both unfathomably distant and yet eerily contemporary.

Specifically, “Dark Fire” chronicles what happened on June 25-26, 1921, when 11 members of the Drew and Lawrence families (four adults and seven children) were savagely murdered in a violent struggle between the growers association and tobacco company owners. At issue, as always, was economics. The owners kept prices so low that the growers literally could not survive. To fight back, they formed a union; the Night Riders were their armed enforcers whose purpose was to keep the growers in line. After all, a boycott would only work if growers stood together and unanimously refused to sell to the owners at the mandated prices.

Even though the historical significance of the book is its main draw, what really kept me up past my normal bedtime was the sheer authenticity of Rule’s prose. It is obvious she knows her subject matter intimately – because she literally lived it – and this resonated with me on several levels. Many of the colorful characters who populate “Dark Fire” reminded me explicitly of family members I can still vividly recall from my childhood. For example, witness the following passage and see if you can relate:

“She didn’t respond for a few minutes as she finished hanging the diapers. Then, as if he hadn’t spoken, she said the children’ll be wakin’ up soon. Keep an eye on ‘em. She slipped some clothes-peggs into her apron pocket, and went down the back porch steps, running through the rain across the yard, and disappearing into the henhouse. Ernest watched as she emerged, carrying a chicken. Bringing the old hen a little distance from the henhouse, she took hold of its nobbly head and gave a sudden twist, feeling the snap of the bones as much as hearing it. She twisted again and again as if wringing water from a rag, then pulled hard. When the head came off, the chicken’s body slid to the ground and lurched around the yard, spurting blood.”

If you’re cooking chicken for dinner tonight, you probably bought it at the grocery store. But I recall the scene Rule describes here in such detail playing out many times when I was visiting my grandparents on their farm in rural Tennessee. In fact, most of the dialog could be lifted straight from my childhood. At several points, I felt physically teleported to a bygone time in my increasingly distant past.

A former professor of English at Mohawk College as well as the host of Art Waves, a weekly collegiate arts-interview radio program, Rule grew up in Kentucky but has spent her adult life in Canada. She is also on the executive board of the Hamilton Association for the Advancement of Literature, Science & Art, one of the oldest cultural institutions in North America. And although she has published seven award-winning collections of poetry, this is her first novel – although you wouldn’t know it from this finely-crafted contribution to the creative nonfiction genre.

As Bobbie Ann Mason, author of “In Country” and “Dear Ann,” so astutely notes, “The story is mysterious, exhilarating, sad, horrifying and unforgettable. We come to know the families so intimately that their story breaks our hearts.”

I could not have said it better myself. Highly recommended.

Reviewed by Aaron W. Hughey, University Distinguished Professor, Department of Counseling and Student Affairs, Western Kentucky University.