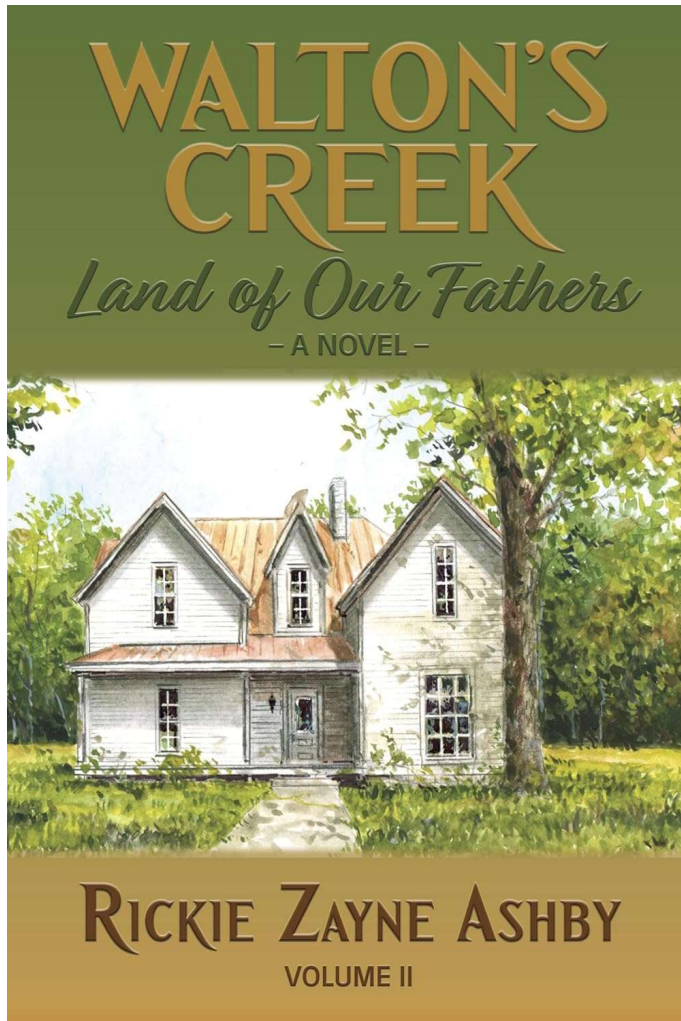


# ‘Walton’s Creek’ a plain old good read

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“Walton’s Creek: Land of Our Fathers, Volume II” by Rickie Zayne Ashby. Morley, MO: Acclaim Press, 2024, 272 pages, \$29.95 (hardcover).



“The small candy counter was generally the center of Mickey’s fascination in his uncle’s store,” Rickie Zayne Ashby explains near the beginning of “Walton’s Creek: Land of Our Fathers, Volume II,” his latest foray into subject matter he obviously knows by heart. “Rolled cinnamon candy from Reed’s Candy Company emitted a powerful aroma. Fifth Avenue, Baby Ruth, and Bit-O-Honey bars were always present. The latter was a simple blend of honey, taffy, and almonds in a flat bar enjoyed by children and adults since the 1920s.”

“The chewing gum section typically contained Wrigley’s Spearmint, Doublemint, and Juicy Fruit, plus Bazooka bubble gum,” he continues. “Ray Sawyer’s favorite gum was Black Jack, America’s first flavored gum; the licorice-laced Black Jack had been introduced in the 1880s. Clove gum became popular as a breath freshener during Prohibition, and a pepsin-based gum named Beemans was brought to market near the turn of the century as a treatment for heartburn.”

OK. If you were able to relate to the products noted in the above passages, you will find Ashby’s latest novel based on his real-life

adventures hard to put down. The sheer excitement of going to the store with your parents and zeroing in on the candy section is something I could relate to instantly. On one level, it seems kind of quaint to recall a time with such simple pleasures brought so much anticipation to children – especially given the technological distractions of the modern era. On another level, it occurs to me that perhaps we’ve lost something essential over the decades that span this exquisite little slice of Americana.

“Land of Our Fathers” consists of an Introduction followed by an inaugural chapter, “The Creek is Calling,” and then four distinct “books” which build on the original release, “Book Four: Lessons Learned,” which covers 1955 – 1957, “Book Five: The Road Divides,” which chronicles 1957 – 1959, “Book Six: Heritage and Maturity,” which takes the reader through 1969 to 1971, and Book Seven: A Most Treasured Gift,” which brings the current sage to a close – at least for now. The book ends with an Epilogue that readers of a certain age will find suitably familiar and even comforting.

Volume II is augmented with a number of heart-warming illustrations by Eric Lindgren, a local artist who many will recognize, as well as contributions by John Ward, a nationally award-winning

Kentucky artist, and Joe Vick, who was raised by missionary parents in Ethiopia; his work can be seen at shows throughout the Southeastern United States. Honestly, I found the images to be eerily complementary and even integral to the stories Ashby is telling.

I have known Ashby for about 30 years; he had a long and distinguished career at Western Kentucky University before eventually retiring to pursue his passions of gardening, reading, and preserving the past. When I received his e-mail asking if I'd be interested in reading/reviewing his latest literary venture, I didn't hesitate to respond. I loved his first book, "At the End of the Road: My Journey from Walton's Creek, Kentucky," which was published in 2017. I have been anxiously awaiting this follow-up (although it has taken me a little longer to review than usual). Suffice it to say it was worth the wait.

These days, when he is not actively submerged in his latest writing project, Ashby spends much of his time researching, traveling, attending book signing events, and keeping up with the latest offerings from his friends in the close-knit community of local authors. We meet three or four times a year at Lisa's Fifth Street Diner and relive the past as well as speculate on the future. He always brings me some goodies from his garden, which my family – especially my wife – appreciates. In many respects, he is the ideal author to write "Land of Our Fathers," you can feel his upbringing and influences on virtually every page.

One of my favorite chapters was "Television, Henry Fields, and Sears Roebuck (1957)," which was part of Book Five - probably because I could relate to what Ashby was describing more directly than some of his earlier exploits. Check this out and see if it rings any bells:

"Mickey's favorite early morning show was Captain Kangaroo with his sidekick Mister Green Jeans plus Bunny Rabbit, Grandfather Clock, and Mister Moose. Saturday mornings were geared toward school children, and Mickey spent much of the day watching Mighty Mouse and Bugs Bunny cartoons; but his favorite Saturday program was The Roy Rogers Show, the king of the cowboys, a western action adventure that featured both horses and dogs."

"Sunday afternoons some TV stations filled up time with old 'shoot 'em up, bang bang' westerns. The shortage of programs for television resulted in 1930s era comedy shorts by The Three Stooges taking to the airways. Parents and teachers alike complained the shows made young boys more aggressive. The slapstick comedy routines of The Three Stooges were never meant to be children's entertainment, but youngsters like Mickey fell in love with them."

Some things never change, huh?

Along with the nostalgia and feel-good stories are some melancholy episodes with somewhat darker overtones. But as Ashby would no doubt say, you have to take the good with the bad. What we remember inevitably tends to be flavored by the passage of time and gradually altered by our selective memory. In this regard, Ashby does an excellent job of tempering realism with our subjective understanding of a time that is rapidly receding into the past. More than anything, he makes you think. After all, some experiences are universal and not limited to specific generations. The details may change, but not the essence of the underlying truths.

Similar to his previous book, the portrait Ashby paints of what life was like in the rural South for many of us is eerily compelling – and just a plain old good read. A master storyteller who knows his subject matter intimately, once again his narrative gave me the feeling I knew his family on more than just a superficial level; it literally felt like we grew up in the same place.

As you have probably surmised, I enjoyed "Walton's Creek: Land of Our Fathers, Volume II" immensely and think many readers would, too. Highly recommended.

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