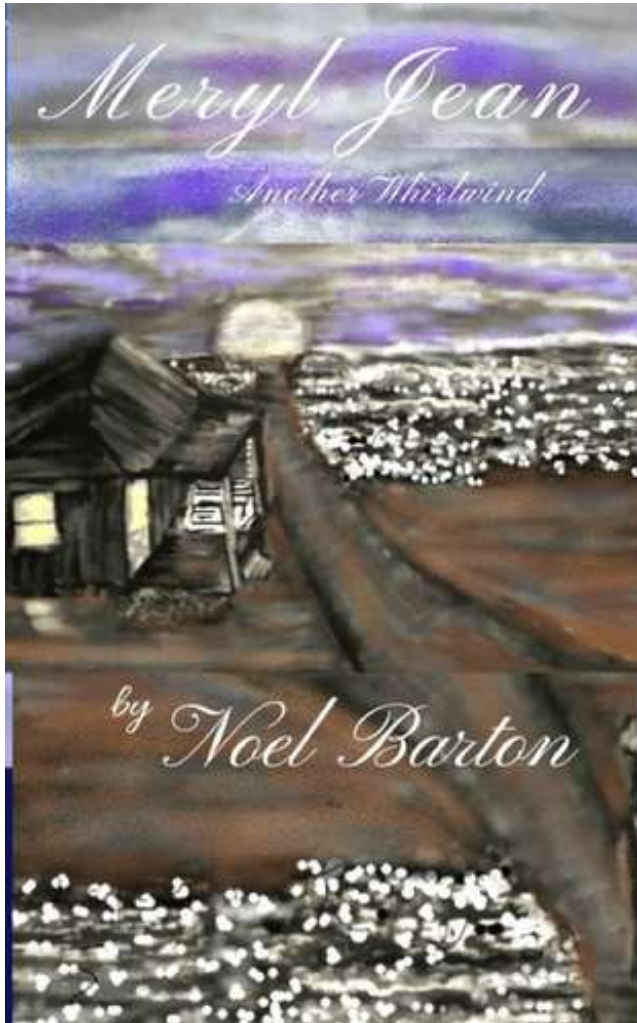


## A Cherished Treasure: Barton's Sequel Doesn't Disappoint

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*"Meryl Jean Another Whirlwind" by Noel Barton. Bowling Green: Noel Barton Author, 2019. 504 pages, \$16 (paperback).*



“When I turned to the voice behind me, I saw my pursuer was not an enemy at all – it was my mother,” Noel Barton explains at the beginning of “Meryl Jean Another Whirlwind,” her amazing second novel. “How could this be? She’s been dead three years.”

“This couldn’t be real,” she continues. “Rubbing my eyes for clarity only made the vision more vivid. I reached toward her and wanted to run and feel Mama’s warm embrace, but my feet felt frozen to the cave floor. ... The void on my heart that only a mother could fill remained empty. My eyes welled with tears, as when I stood by the shell of Mama lying in the casket. Her vision slowly faded, and I found myself looking at – me. Then I awoke.”

If those words don’t pierce straight to the heart I’m not sure you have one. But if you’re going to read anything by Barton, be prepared to encounter this kind of raw, in-your-face, no-holds-barred emotion on almost every page. The woman doesn’t hold back when it comes to creating a hauntingly realistic portrait that touches the human psyche in profound ways. Of course, it helps when you are able to relate to the mostly bygone era that she meticulously recreates in such striking detail – something that

comes naturally to those of us who came of age during the time in which her “novels” are set. Make no mistake, a lot of Barton’s life is reflected in her stories.

OK. I admit it. I am somewhat biased when it comes to this author. I absolutely loved “Watch for the Whirlwinds,” her first foray into a world that many of us grew up in and one that is still very familiar to those of us of a certain age. In fact, as many followers of the book review section know, I reviewed her inaugural release in the Oct. 25, 2015, edition of the Bowling Green Daily News. As noted in that review, I was exceptionally impressed with her skill as a wordsmith. A lot of people can write coherently about how the past still resonates in the hearts and minds of those who lived through a simpler time; it takes real talent to bring that past to life in a visceral way that affects the reader on multiple levels. And it is obvious from the very first page that Barton has real talent.

Barton's sophomore effort picks up where her first book left off. The storyline will be familiar to those who were mesmerized by her prose in "Watch for the Whirlwinds." And unlike many Hollywood blockbusters, I am happy to report that the sequel doesn't disappoint. As I noted in my testimonial at the beginning of the current volume, there were times I laughed out loud, and there were times I felt my eyes getting misty. Barton has once again managed to elicit the full spectrum of possible emotional reactions in "Another Whirlwind." As was the case with her previous book, you won't be able to put this one down either. In fact, when I read the original manuscript, I told her that I believe her stories should be made into a miniseries or a major motion picture. Now that I have read the finished version, I am more convinced than ever that either work would make an excellent drama on Netflix or perhaps Hulu.

"Another Whirlwind" consists of 74 relatively-succinct, somewhat self-contained episodes that collectively form an unmistakable narrative that winds its way through the nearly 500 pages that form this masterpiece. Again and again, I found myself reminiscing about my own upbringing as I made my way through the surrealistic but unchangingly familiar snapshots through which she reveals her journey to the present moment. Honestly, there were times I thought she must have been raised in my hometown; see if you can relate to this passage from Chapter 64:

"I expected Daddy would be making plans to move on too when his job with Asa slowed down – but he didn't. When he wasn't hanging out at the Blacksmith Shop he mingled with another pack of drunkards and do-nothings over around Five Points. Talk there was everything from gambling, to moonshining, to chicken fighting, to prostitution going on there. Grandma's name for them was 'that rough bunch.' She'd say, 'You put a rough bunch of drunks, slow minds, and fast tempers together and stir in a mess of bad women, and you get nothing but – trouble.' Grandma was right."

Confess, those of you who claim to have grown up in Mayberry. Just below the surface of any respectable rural community in the South was exactly what Barton is describing here. We all knew it; we just didn't talk about it much.

Barton, in addition to being somewhat of a local celebrity, is a twice-widowed mother and grandmother who is best friends with her little dog Zacchaeus. In a former life, she was a travel counselor who spent her teen years in the bootheel of Missouri. She is very active in her church and credits God for her writing ability. Since her debut novel four years ago, we have become friends; she has found the best way to get in touch with me is through Facebook, as I probably spend more time there than I should.

On the final page of the book, Noel explains her primary motivation for writing "Another Whirlwind," as well as its predecessor: "It is her wish that those reading her novels will find peace to cross off some of the 'never's in their lives. And she hopes that during their nostalgic journey down memory lane, her readers can see how her stories could remind them of some of the Whirlwinds in their own lives."

After spending a couple of nights staying up way too late because I didn't have the fortitude to put it away and turn off the lights, I can confidently report that she has succeeded beyond her wildest dreams. You really need to pick up a copy of "Another Whirlwind." Once again, Barton has written a treasure that will be cherished for generations.

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