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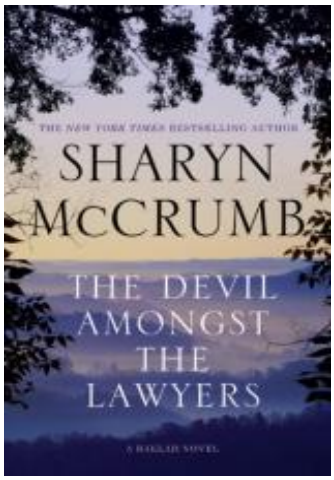
The Devil Amongst the Lawyers: A Ballad Novel

by Sharyn McCrumb



About the Book

In 1934 all the national publications sent their star reporters to remote Virginia to cover the trial of Erma Morton: a beautiful 21-one-year-old mountain girl with a teaching degree, accused of murdering her father --- a drunken tyrant of a man.

Four seasoned journalists descend upon the small town --- nothing sells papers better than a wronged woman on trial, or descriptions of ?backwards? mountain life. Yet instead of rundown shacks and horse-drawn buggies, they found gas stations and coal company executives?but the truth can always be manipulated to suit the audience.

Except that among them is Carl Jennings, an 18-year-old novice journalist from Tennessee who accurately reports on the trial and the citizens of the town. So when their articles conflict, Carl is condemned for perjury, while the other journalists sell Erma Morton?s verdict to the highest bidder. Soon, it is not the actual murder that is of interest, but the vultures attracted to the death. In the midst of all this, Carl continues to search for the truth, relying on his younger cousin, Nora --- gifted with the ?sight? --- for help.

A stunning return to the lands, ballads, and characters upon which she made her name, **The Devil Amongst the Lawyers** is a testament to Sharyn McCrumb?s lyrical and poetic writing.

Discussion Guide

1. In this novel, national reporters stereotype the rural mountain community. In what ways do the media or people from other regions misunderstand your hometown or your culture?

2. The Devil Amongst the Lawyers is set in 1935. How do the issues of that time compare with today's problems in health crises; national disasters; international relations; the economy, etc.?

3. How does the prologue (about the hanging of the elephant) relate to the Erma Morton trial?

4. Reread the story of Urashima Taro, told in Chapter Five of the novel. Does this folk tale remind you of similar stories in the folklore of other cultures? Why do you suppose so many cultures independently developed some form of this story?

5. Carl Jennings, Harley morton, and Shade Baker are all young men with rural origins. How are they alike and in what ways are they different?

6. Henry Jernigan is condescending and prejudiced against the Appalachian culture. He is prejudiced in favor of the Japanese. Discuss this disparity.

7. Nora Bonesteel is a young girl coming to terms with the Sight. Have you or anyone you know had experiences similar to hers?

8. The chapter headings in **The Devil Amongst the Lawyers** are taken from ?Oku No Hosomichi,? a 17th century Japanese poem by Matsuo Basho. (The title in English is: ?A Narrow Road to a Far Province.") How does the journey of Basho through the mountains of Japan compare with Henry's journey in southwest Virginia?

9. The year 1935 came amidst the Great Depression. Would you rather have lived in that era in a large city or a rural area? Why?

10. Author Sharyn McCrumb has said "Cities are judged by their richest inhabitants, and rural areas by their poorest." Is this true? What evidence can you show to support or refute this statement?

Author Bio

Sharyn McCrumb is the *New York Times* bestselling author of the acclaimed *Ballad* novels. She has received numerous honors for her work, including the Mary Frances Hobson Prize for Southern Literature, the AWA Book of the Year, and Notable Books in both *The New York Times* and *LA Times*. She was also named a Virginia Woman of History for Achievement in Literature. She lives and writes in Virginia?s Blue Ridge Mountains, fewer than 100 miles from where her family settled in 1790.

Critical Praise

"Sharyn McCrumb re-creates this time and place with such precision, the reader forgets that seventy-five years have passed since that faraway event in that isolated place where the outer world clashes with superstition and folklore. This is storytelling as those Celtic bards meant it to be: lyrical, haunting, and truly unforgettable."

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