Author David Poyer Headlined our inaugural conference in 2019 in Wheeling, WV. His keynote described the literary desert that is northern Appalachia and how, perhaps, we have ourselves to blame.
First, we start with WCoNA's founder and president's introduction to David Poyer.

When I read David Poyer's biography, which, frankly, we don't have time to cover completely this morning, I have to ask myself if he's somehow more than one person. Many of us know how consuming the craft of writing can be. Yet this man has produced enough works to fill a small library, and he's excelled in careers in the military, academia, editing, and publishing. Somehow he finds time to tour on his motorcycle and visit events like this.

He earned his way into the US Naval Academy and served his country sailing three oceans and two seas, then spent ground time in the Pentagon, Saudi Arabia and Bah-rain. At the same time, he managed to earn a masters degree and set off writing novels.

But why David Poyer, here today? Well, he's published nearly 50 books. Yet their subject matter spans Navy stories to underwater adventures, historical thrillers to comic novels, Civil War sea tales, oral history, non-fiction. But tucked within all that is a series of novels that came to my attention about 15 years ago. The Hemlock County books—they seemed to boil right out of their place, the place of David's youth in the hills of Pennsylvania. I found something visceral and true in those novels, vibrant as the landscape, yet "dark and gritty as a gravel road," as the Pittsburgh Trib-Review said—this while the writing was so smooth your eyes slid along the pages as if they were coated with the black crude of the Bradford oil-field David Poyer knew and rendered so well. They were books steeped in place, my place. And I liked that.

But that's still not why he's here today. David Poyer is here today because of something he said to me those years ago, something that burned in my craw, though I couldn't let it go. I was new to fiction writing. My own work, too, seemed to be speaking from its place. At the time, I was going about rural northern Pennsylvania conducting book discussions for the PA Humanities Council. I'd just been contracted to do a series on PA writers, and I wanted to include something by this guy whose work was so rich, yet—strangely—so little known, even in its home.

See, I was getting tired of hearing from people in my reading groups who wanted something other than the same-old, same-old the publishers kept giving them. I knew books like David's that could bridge that divide. I'd sought them all my life, collected them, even though I didn't know what to call that part of my bookshelves. And even though I found David's books out of print, I determined to track him down. Maybe he had enough copies in a closet for my sessions. Maybe he had advice for a writer who saw a cornucopia of subject matter in his own backyard but couldn't understand why no one defined a distinct body of work by the books that took that subject matter on.

I was able to reach David Poyer. I found him approachable and pleasant. He told me things about our craft I'll never forget. And then he gave me the bad news. There were no copies of *As the Wolf Loves Winter* to be had. It might never be in print again. He said that though his

Hemlock county novels were his labor of love, his literary high notes, he'd had to return to his naval books, which sold better. And then he said this: "PJ, I've found that New York doesn't want to hear from the hinterlands."

This man, who knew the ropes of the publishing business inside and out, who had some serious creds, a lot of energy, and was one smart fellow. He was turned away.

It was that day that I said, "we gotta do somethin' about this." And so in a way, we're actually here because of this man. Please welcome David Poyer.

David's Keynote

KEYNOTE for WCoNA, Sept 6, 2019 David Poyer

Good morning. Thanks, PJ, for that glowing introduction. Hope I can live up to it!

Let me say first how honored I am to be here. Addressing, perhaps, the final generations not to be genetically modified or digitally enhanced. Classic humans! Thank you all for inviting me; and thanks especially to PJ, an old friend from the days of the Pennsylvania Humanities Council; and to the planning committee, who volunteered the hours and days to put this first conference together. I've organized these things myself – believe me, I know how much work it must have been! Please, let's show them some appreciation.

As PJ said, the hills of Appalachia are my home. I grew up in Western Pennsylvania. On my mother's side, I'm fourth-generation, with ancestors from what is today Slovakia and Ukraine – I visited our home town, Ubresh, last month. And boy, does it look like where I grew up! My father's family dates back even farther in America, on the frontier of western New York state.

But my own inheritance here was not initially one of pride. My father, a World War II vet, was in and out of state mental hospitals. He hadn't held a

job since I was five, and we moved around among various small towns, attempting to find a permanent home.

We lived on a monthly welfare check and surplus cheese and flour, with all the stigma of being "reliefers." In junior high, I was immediately assigned to the vocational ed track. What was the point of preparing someone for college when he'd never be able to go there?

Not that I was averse to vocational ed. However, it still seemed to me that they were deciding my future a little too hastily.

I was rescued by the school system's being swamped by the postwar baby boom. Their answer was "split sessions." The college prep students would attend classes from seven to noon. The shop kids would go from noon to seven.

"How about," I proposed, "If I do them both?" The administration didn't much like the idea – they and I had a running battle my entire time in high school. But they couldn't find anything that forbade it.

So I persisted, because I had a dream. Actually, several. I wanted to get out of Bradford. To have a family. To go to Mars. And I wanted to write books.

I had to leave town, because as long as I stayed there I'd never be seen as anything but the son of a failure. I wanted to have a happy family, because my own was not. I wanted to go to Mars because all through school I read science fiction. And I wanted to write, because the highest destiny I could conceive was to belong to the great world of literature that meant so much to my favorite teachers.

This led to a memorable interview with the guidance counselor, early in my senior year. This intimidating lady had been on the job for decades. She grudgingly admitted "Your grades aren't bad." (I was #2 in the class.) But, after reviewing my family history, which she seemed to know intimately, she advised me with every appearance of suppressed glee that there was no point in my applying to ANY colleges. On the other hand, the US Government was holding open a position for me carrying an M-16 in the Mekong Delta. "Better to enlist in the Navy," she advised.

Instead, I took the entrance exam for the military academies. And got the offer of an appointment to Annapolis.

The Naval Academy was a big turning point. But a problem loomed: I couldn't swim. So . . . I started getting up at 0500 and swimming laps every morning before reveille. I took a SCUBA course, memorized partial integrals, and concentrated hard on acting cheerful and aggressive.

I made it through. Only to emerge into the Navy of the 1970's, which was falling apart with drugs, worn-out equipment, and poor leadership.

I really did enjoy going to sea, though. And I got to travel, one of my goals. But I also began to realize that I wasn't admiral material, nor, after meeting several admirals, did I really want to be.

How did I go from a secure career as a naval officer to that of a broke, struggling freelance writer? After I fell down a ladder aboard ship, the Navy hospitalized me for an operation. I was looking at three months off duty, in a cast up to my waist. So I bought a typewriter and started my first novel.

THE HILL, set in western Pennsylvania, is about a handicapped boy who falls in love with his English teacher. No one's ever read it, though some of

the characters appear in my later novels. That was the deal I made with myself. To have no fear of failure, because no one would ever see it. All I had to do was get down sixty thousand words. I found I could, and that it was fun.

I freelanced for magazines for a couple of years, then wrote a second novel. Sent it out to fifteen publishers, and got it back fifteen times, sometimes along with notes asking me not to send them anything else. This was when I got good at finding free food. Urban renewal was going on then, so I raided abandoned buildings for the Civil Defense rations in the basements. A press card let me scarf up hors d'oevres at the wedding receptions of people I didn't know. And I worked nights as a security guard, outside a warehouse of microwaves and color TVs. I could write all night, and I was soon on a first-name basis with the local pimps, whores, and dealers. I was shot at a couple of times, too. It was easy to stay awake, knowing that if I fell asleep I'd wake up with my throat cut.

But eventually a newspaper guy persuaded me to pull that second novel out of the drawer again and send it to a book editor friend of his in New York. The Lippincott guy didn't like it, but his secretary was an agent's mistress. She stole my manuscript out of the return pile and made her agent lover read it. The first publisher he sent it to bought it.

Since then I've published nearly fifty books, with four – THE DEAD OF WINTER; WINTER IN THE HEART; AS THE WOLF LOVES WINTER, AND THUNDER ON THE MOUNTAIN – set in Hemlock County. Hemlock is located in an imaginary Western Pennsylvania; a dark and remote land, with declining oil and gas extraction and a few wealthy families who dominate everyone else. It's told primarily in the voice of aging widower W. T. "Red" Halvorsen: retired oil well shooter, semipro boxer in his youth, and a man

savagely determined to see justice prevail no matter what the cost to himself.

Out of the woods, right? Nothing but success from there on? Afraid not. My first six books sold so badly I had to go back to work as a marine engineer and rejoin the Navy Reserve. It helped pay the bills. Even working fulltime and drilling on weekends, though, I kept writing.

And finally, gradually, my novels began to sell. THE MED was the first to reach bestseller numbers. Universal Studios bought PHILO MCGIFFIN, and Columbia took options on the diving books. THE CIRCLE was selected as required reading at Annapolis. After ten years at it, I was an overnight success.

Two marriages, however, did not succeed. Then I met Lenore in Florida. We've been married for 28 years now, and we have a daughter who was just hired at Harvard. And she still likes us! So I got the happy family I always wanted, too.

So now, looking back on my early goals, in a rather roundabout way I've reached them all. Except going to Mars. But then again, Elon Musk is still working on that. So who knows?

The point I hope comes through here is that I'd never have reached ANY of my goals if I'd stopped the first time I failed, or the second time, or even the fifteenth. The question that interests me now is: why? Why did I keep trying to write, over and over again, in the face of poor sales, hostile reviews, and discouraging rejections from publishers and agents?

One answer might be to say I was some sort of stubborn genius. But I don't think that explains it. I believe it has more to do with place. That it's really about where all of us here came from, and how we grew up.

Appalachians are a people set apart. I gradually realized that, as I lived and traveled in other states and to foreign lands. We are a people of the hills. Throughout history, in various parts of the world, people like us have hovered at the edge of the great lowland empires. We endure. We continue, in our quiet way. Only occasionally do we sweep down out of our mountains, and change the course of history.

Those mountains seem to breed a sort of dogged persistence you don't always find in the cities. Maybe it's the isolation. Or the self-reliance you have to develop up here. The sense that, if the worst happens, there's no one else to depend on – only ourselves, and maybe just, our kinfolks.

"Our Kinfolks" – That sounds like a great segue into talking about Appalachian writing!

As this conference's call for papers testified, "Writers from, living in or writing about the region of northern Appalachia have yet to be distinguished with a regional identity. While the people, places, culture, folk traditions, history, landscapes and geography of northern Appalachia are uniquely inspiring, their stories have been underrepresented and undervalued in the traditional literary world."

I won't speak to what we should call ourselves. Though others have pasted names on us – hillbillies, ridge runners, yahoos, jobies, and most recently, deplorables who live in flyover zones.

Instead, let's talk about regional literatures. Which is a fairly recent idea, propelled, probably, by the gentrification of Southern literature in the 1930's as a separate and somehow less important body of work than "real" American literature – which back then was dominated by the northeast, New England and New York.

In general, I dislike the whole idea of labeling things by genre. Good writing is good writing, period. It can be romance, fantasy, science fiction, detective fiction, memoir . .. As long as it's heartfelt and well rendered, and penetrates to the realities of the human heart, it's literature. As the canon has proven, over the centuries, by gradually transforming what were once romances, ghost stories, and thrillers into "classics."

But there's also no denying that the centralization of publishing and reviewing in the metropoles - London, New York, Paris, Berlin - means those places are over-represented. As PJ mentioned in his introduction, I myself experienced great frustration when trying to pitch NY editors on any story set in the "hinterlands." We all know the East Side from the West Side, Brooklyn from Flatbush, Staten Island from the Bronx. But the coal fields, the hills, the woods, the hollows, are unfamiliar territory to those who select and print what Americans read. Worse yet, their inhabitants are easier to ridicule or caricature, than to present as fully evoked characters. You've read this stuff. You know what I mean. And this in and of itself can lead to a marginalization of ALL liminal voices, whether of color, religion, gender, sexuality, and, yes, of *region.* I found that, for me, writing about where I grew up would have to be a labor of love rather than a path to riches.

But when one prepares to write or talk about our region, it's necessary to ask: where exactly IS it? The Appalachian Mountains sprawl across thirteen states, from southern tier New York to the northern counties of Mississippi.

Northern Appalachia, since the Civil War's division of the states, would then cover parts of West Virginia, Maryland, New York, Ohio, and Pennsylvania. I don't posit that as a hard boundary. But there's no doubt at all that the mountains are one of the undeniable sources of our identity as Appalachians. In the words of perhaps the greatest writer ever to emerge from our region, "The mountains were his masters. They rimmed in life. They were the cup of reality, beyond growth, beyond struggle and death. They were his absolute unity in the midst of eternal change." – I quote of course from novelist Thomas Wolfe.

How about ethnicity? Oh, now, there's quicksand at our feet. Start with the Native American tribes: Seneca, Susquehannock, Algonquian, Cherokee and Iroquois. Layer atop them the English and Scots, and violently kidnaped here, African Americans. Then Germans, Irish, Scandinavians, and as the nineteenth century ended a huge tide from Central Europe - Italians, Slavs, Russians, Poles. And most recently, Hispanics, Indians, Pakistanis, and Middle Easterners are filtering in. Did I leave anyone out? The point being . . . We can't really look to a single ethnic group or culture or religion to define our region.

No, I think the single unifying factor in our regional consciousness is – has always been – economic.

The Appalachians, from north to south, have served the United States almost entirely as a source of raw materials and as a sink for waste products. And that, in my view, is hugely significant, both for the people who live here, and for us, specifically, as writers.

For the real unifier of our varied peoples, beyond those mountains, our real shared history, is exploitation. The land itself was torn from its original inhabitants by war, fraud, massacre, and broken treaties. The forests were

toppled for hardwoods and building timber. Coal was torn from the hills, and open-pit strip mines wrecked rivers with acid runoff. Those rivers themselves were diverted and dammed. Oil was pumped from beneath the ground, gas burned off into the air, and the profits were fought over violently by producers and shippers. We can't forget the workers who marched and were dynamited and machine-gunned in actions hardly mentioned in American History: Hawk's Nest, Blair Mountain, Homestead, Hershey, Lattimore, and dozens of others.

Though there are bright spots here and there, that long tragedy continues today. Fracking of the Marcellus Shale, sucking profits from the ground for the owners while poisoning the water table the people of this region depend on. Mountaintop removal, and the destruction of whole ecologies. Garbage and toxic wastes, exported here and dumped in once-lovely valleys. The ruthless pushing of cheap opioids, regardless of human costs. The turning of wet gas into millions of tons of . . . get this . . . plastic. And through it all, for three centuries, the victimization of human beings: used as cheap labor, recruited as cannon fodder, robbed of their land. We came or were brought here from many countries, seduced with promises of freedom and plenty. Instead we've been squeezed dry, then abandoned.

So, yes, we are in deep trouble. Our whole region is in a crisis that's been deepening for over a century. It's not just opioids and resource extraction. It's not just lung cancer deaths, or AIDs, or meth, or child mortality, or welfare dependency. It's all these, and more. Our best and brightest graduate so deep in debt there's no way they can afford to return to the communities they grew up in. Tax money flows out, but it seldom comes back as our towns grow shabbier, our schools less competitive, our hospitals close. This other America is more likely to suffer from obesity, diabetes, and other health issues. Hospital coverage is scarce and insurance is still out of reach for too many. Fouled air and water, lead and

carcinogens and selenium from factories, dumps, and mines abandoned decades ago, make us sicker, earlier.

It's not a pretty story. But you have to admit, it IS a story, one that features some of the greatest drivers of literature: anger, rage, betrayal, murder, and revenge. Blame it on Rockefeller and Carnegie, on faceless economic forces, on Wall Street or Washington, coastal elites or corporations or local owners. There's enough blame, I think, to go around. But I think this is the real uniting factor for our region, and it's fantastic material. Entire literatures have been built on tragedies much like ours.

But then . . . why have so few actually written about our region? Why are we nearly invisible? Why is it that our only art form that has gained anything like national recognition, is a rich tradition of music?

Is it possible that . . . it's OUR OWN fault?

Perhaps we should ask ourselves: Have we, as writers, desperate to be published, accepted, and paid – have we re-slanted and self-censored our work, and set it elsewhere? Or worse yet, condescended to our own fellow sufferers, portraying them as the same yokels, grotesques, slatterns, and gun-happy bubbas that others stereotype them as – to make our work more acceptable to New York?

I will accept a part of that blame. True, I did write four novels set amid these hills. They chronicled the battle of the oppressed and forgotten against local elites and out of state forces. And they are still in print. But then I moved on, to craft two series set in a different arcanum – that of the sea. Which I also knew well - but which was a setting more acceptable and marketable to those gatekeepers who dispensed contracts.

And for that sin of omission, I hereby apologize. I WAS gaining recognition. Being nominated for the Robert Kennedy prize. Getting starred reviews in Publishers Weekly. By the time Thunder on the Mountain came out the reviewers, I blush to say, were comparing me to Steinbeck. I could have kept on, and continued to set my stories in Hemlock County. But I didn't. It was a career choice. Not really as mortal a sin as some are. But it WAS a species of betrayal.

Perhaps I can retrieve my error now, to some extent. Put frankly: it has to be OUR mission to establish Northern Appalachia as a literary region. This conference is a major step toward that goal. But only a first step. We need to establish a canon. A brand, like Southern Literature, or Cowboy Poetry, or Romantic Fantasy. We need to encourage general readers to choose, read, and respect books, short stories, poems, plays, screenplays, and films about our area. And the emergence of regional presses, such as Bottom Dog and Sunbury, are wonderful signs of progress.

Another concrete way forward might be to establish a new literary magazine, to showcase quality new prose and poetry set amid the hills we love. It could be called *The Appalachian Review.* I understand that after our final conference session tomorrow, the Committee will encourage you to stay on just for another hour or so, for a moderated discussion of where we go from here. And perhaps, if there's enough interest and enough volunteers, publishing an annual Review could be part of the discussion.

But some kind of effort, to further our purpose of understanding and promoting northern Appalachian writing and culture, is a timely mission . . . for great change is turning its face upon us. In the next fifty years, we will witness titanic upheavals in our long-stagnant region. They will be driven by ethnic migration, climate change, and disruptions in the energy economy. We will see massive influxes of new populations, as they flee the

flooding coasts and the sweltering midwest and deep south. Our climate is temperate and our land is high and – so far, anyhow – still cheap. But already vast tracts of the area where I grew up are being quietly purchased by faceless land consortiums. See? THEY'RE planning ahead. Amid this turbulence, there will be a great hunger for stories of this new land, this ancient yet renewed frontier.

All of us here, and especially, you younger poets and novelists and short story writers and screen writers and playwrights and creative nonfiction writers and oral historians – all of us can be part of it.

For if I have gained any secret knowledge in forty years of writing, it is this.

You can act on your dreams, and become anything you want, *as long as you're willing to accept and endure enough failures along the way.* If you're willing to screw up and be rejected and ridiculed, and even have to go home again, but then go back out there and try some more, using what you learned in your failure to do it right the second time, or the third time, or the fifteenth.

For if, as we Appalachians have always done, you stick to that one rule – *never stop trying* – if you weld yourself heart, soul, and mind to your dream – you will gain your heart's desire. Though it may not arrive in the exact form you imagined.

Today is your day. You writers who are just beginning, you mature ones who are still persevering, you are the shining stars of dawn. You are the people of the hills; and the future is yours.

I will close with a quotation from the man who first climbed a mountain for fun. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe.

“Whatever you can do or dream you can, begin it. Boldness has genius, power, and magic in it. Begin now.”

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See Poyer’s website at www.poyer.com.