

Something Rich and Strange, by Ron Rash

reviewed by [Amy Frykholm](#) in the [July 8, 2015](#) issue

In Review



Something Rich and Strange

By Ron Rash
HarperCollins

(See also Frykholm's [interview with Rash](#).)

Ron Rash delivers what he promises: something rich and strange. Each of these 34 stories, covering about 150 years in the life of a corner of the Smokey Mountains near the North Carolina–Tennessee border, gazes steadily into the mysteries of human lives and choices.

Each story is slight in itself: the characters emerge from the landscape and disappear as quickly as they come. There are Civil War widows and meth orphans, abandoned lovers and grieving mothers, people trying to make something of their lives and people trying to undermine their lives. No matter how dark their circumstances, the protagonists often reach for a mystery beyond their own understanding.

In one story, a child finds a downed plane in the mountains and is drawn to it again and again, keeping company with the dead, not speaking of what he has found. In another story, a man slashes his wife's tires while she is at a college class and struggles to make sense of this rash act and what it will cost him.

The source of these stories seems to be wondering rather than knowing. While Rash carefully observes life, he doesn't pretend to understand it. His stories often leave the reader with more questions than answers, and the questions can be profoundly disturbing: Why did that young man withdraw all of his money from an ATM and leave it on his meth-addicted girlfriend's table? Was Marcie right to take Carl, a lonely drifter, as her lover and husband? Will Lauren's family succeed in tearing down what she and Matt have built?

With so many unanswered questions and moral ambiguities, and so many characters, it is astonishing that the accumulated effect is novelistic. The reader seems to be following one story. Perhaps the common feature of the landscape contributes to this perception. The mountains contain the stories, comment on them, exceed them, and preside over them.

The stories also explore the same territory in the human heart. The characters keep secrets and reveal them, reach out to each other and then withdraw in a dance that seems both timeless and immediate.

This collection demonstrates Rash's linguistic, historical, and moral range. He takes us on a wild journey deep into the heart of this Carolina wilderness. We might not be comfortable with what we find there, but the trip is well worth the price of admission.