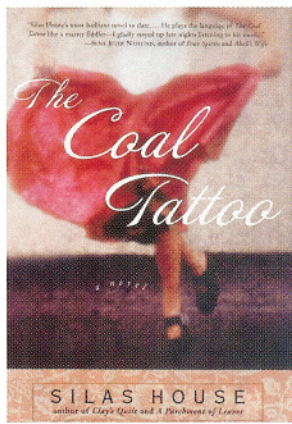


Although Bill Neal is no longer creating in the kitchen, and La Residence is closed, the tattered recipe cards have been preserved in this tender look back by his forgiving ex-wife. The majority of the cuisine in the book is fairly calorie dense, and would most likely be reserved for a special occasion. For Bill Neal, they were all special. Read. Eat. Enjoy. (For it's all just time in between meals.)

- Allyson Hawks Moody



## “THE COAL TATTOO”

BY SILAS HOUSE  
336 PAGES, ALGONQUIN BOOKS  
OF CHAPEL HILL  
\$24.95

It was common for survivors of a mine collapse to have greenish blue scars as evidence of their ordeal. Any wounds suffered in the catastrophe were blanketed in coal dust and permanently tinted. To many mountain folk, coal tattoos were symbols of survival and good luck. To others, the marks were a sign of the sacrifice of men risking their lives to feed their families. Silas House's new novel, "The Coal Tattoo," is a story of survival and sacrifice, but from the perspective of two sisters left orphaned by a mine collapse. Instead of wearing visible coal tattoos, the sisters have deep scars on their psyches as a

result of their early childhood trauma.

The novel is set in the mid-1950s in the ruggedly beautiful Appalachian Mountains of eastern Kentucky. The sisters, Easter and Anneth, lose their father in a mining accident, and consequently, their grief-stricken mother to suicide. The orphans are raised by their loving, but enigmatic, grandmothers. When Easter is barely out of high school and Anneth still in junior high, their grandmothers die, and they're left with nothing but each other and their beloved mountain home.

Although they share a mystical connection, the sisters are in constant conflict due to their contrasting personalities. To cope with her sorrow and fear, Easter cocoons herself in the Pentecostal faith in the misguided belief that strict adherence to those tenets will protect her from further grief.

Anneth, on the other hand, attempts to outrun the pain by living life as fast and furiously as she can. She tries to drown her internal demons in alcohol, cigarettes and sex. Through marriages, pregnancies and threats to their mountain home, the sisters learn to survive by sacrificing for each other.

House weaves a story full of symbolic contrasts. Besides the obvious difference in the sisters' personalities, there is the irony of dangerous, ugly mines burrowed into the bosom of majestic mountains, self-serving survival versus individual sacrifice and the basic battle of life over death. The author sets the characters' struggles amid the larger stage of nature and eloquently enfolds nature's balance of opposing forces into the plot. The land and the people are intimately entwined.

The narrative is full of aromas, colors, textures and temperatures to the point that it doesn't seem like reading as much as absorbing sensations. The simple, sparse dialogue expresses raw and vivid feelings, making the novel entrancing but emotionally exhausting. House has won several awards for his previous novels, "Clay's Quilt" and "A Parchment of Leaves," including the Kentucky Book of the Year Award and the James Still Award from the Fellowship of Southern Writers. With its powerful description and poetic symmetry, "The Coal Tattoo" is sure to be another winner.

- Kim Zachman


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