

Carolina Dreams:

Kerry Madden and the Saga of the Weems Family of Maggie Valley

“Lord help this family that has been reared on false hopes and pipe dreams.”—Grandma Horace in *Louisiana’s Song* (p. 225)

In 2005, Kerry Madden published *Gentle’s Holler* to much critical acclaim. Two more novels in the Maggie Valley series—*Louisiana’s Song* and *Jessie’s Mountain*—have quickly followed. In *Gentle’s Holler*, we meet Olivia Weems. Livy Two, as she is called by her family and friends, is coming of age in the early 1960s in Maggie Valley on the North Carolina side of the Great Smoky Mountains. She is surrounded by nine siblings, music, the natural beauty of the Smokies, books, and poverty. A gifted storyteller, Livy Two describes the saga of her family as they struggle to overcome the constant hurdles life puts before them.

In *Gentle’s Holler*, Livy Two introduces us to the members of her family. Her father Tom sells encyclopedias and baby food to try to make ends meet, but his true love is his music. He spends his time writing country songs and picking his banjo while he dreams of Nashville. Her mother Jessie’s dream has already come true. As an only child, Jessie had longed for a large family. While we admire her ability to juggle the responsibilities of raising this family, we also recognize the toll the ten children



and the perpetual poverty has taken on her. The size of the family affects the other characters as well. Tired of his father’s lackadaisical attitude toward supporting the family, Emmett, the oldest brother, has a heated argument with his dad and eventually runs off with an erstwhile uncle to work at Ghost Town in the Sky, a newly opened amusement park. As she grows older, Livy Two assumes more responsibilities around the house, including caring for her blind younger sister Gentle. The transition from child to teen is difficult for anyone, but Livy Two greatly struggles with her identity. At one point in the novel, she repeatedly sings, “Who am I? Who am I?” (27). To make matters worse for everyone, Grandma Horace—whom Livy Two calls the Wicked Witch of Enka—moves in to help with the children. Life for the family becomes even more tragic when Tom Weems is in a car accident and suffers a severe head injury. He lapses into a coma, and the

family falls deeper into poverty. The novel ends with Livy Two and her family standing around the hospital bed, hoping one day that Daddy can return to Maggie Valley.

Tom Weems does return home in the first chapter of *Louisiana’s Song*, but he is not the same man. His brain has been injured, and he struggles to find words and memories. Ever the pragmatist, Jessie knits sweaters and baby blankets to sell, but she still has more

About Author Kerry Madden

Kerry Madden has written plays, screenplays, features (for publications like the *Los Angeles Times*, *Salon*, and *Sierra Club Magazine*), and six books, including *Offsides*, a New York Library Pick for the Teen Age in 1997, and *Writing Smarts* (American Girl). In 2005, she turned her hand to children's literature with *Gentle's Holler*, the first installment in what became the award-winning Maggie Valley Trilogy. It earned starred reviews in both Kirkus and Publisher's Weekly and was the featured children's book of North Carolina at the National Book Festival. The next book in the trilogy, *Louisiana's Song* (2007), was equally well received, being named a Bank Street College Book of the Year and a finalist for several other awards. The third installment, *Jessie's Mountain*, was published in 2008 to strong reviews. Most recently, Madden has published a biography of *To Kill a Mockingbird* author Harper Lee in Viking's Up Close Series (March 2009). She has taught creative writing at the University of Tennessee, Ningbo University in China, UCLA, and elsewhere, and has visited schools across the country as a guest author. Her website is www.kerrymadden.com.

bills than money in the family's "Everything Box." Although Becksie—the oldest girl—and Livy Two both find part-time jobs, there is never enough money to go around. Emmett had promised to send money from Ghost Town, but he seldom does. Grandma Horace threatens to move the entire family to her house in the mill town of Enka.

Then there is school. Since Livy Two and her younger sister Louise were born in the same year, they are in the same seventh-grade class together. At school and on the bus, they find themselves the target of constant bullying because of their poverty. Louise is so traumatized by her experiences that she refuses to attend school, preferring instead to remain home to paint and help with Daddy and the little ones. Only after her teacher threatens to send the truant officer does the shy and anxious Louise return to school. In the novel's climactic scene, Livy Two hikes the children and Daddy into the mountains; he wanders

off in the mist and becomes lost. Louise remains calm enough to find him. As readers, we have already seen Livy Two start to come of age in *Gentle's Holler*. In *Louisiana's Song*, we watch as Louise grows from an anxious and withdrawn child into a stronger, more confident teen.

At the beginning of the third book, things have gone from bad to worse for the family. They have hit rock bottom financially. They are way behind on the rent and face eviction. The electricity has been cut off, and Grandma Horace is more determined than ever to move the family away from Maggie Valley. She hopes that Jessie can find work either at the textile mill or the paper plant in Canton. In an effort to save the family from financial ruin, Livy Two hatches a plan to run away to Nashville to sell her songs and secure a recording contract. She has saved enough money from her bookmobile job to buy a roundtrip bus ticket. She wakes up early one morning and sneaks off without telling anyone. However, she is followed by her little sister Jitters. The two sisters argue, and finally Livy Two agrees to let Jitters come along. Naturally, they find nothing but misfortune in Nashville. Livy Two returns home dejected, having betrayed the trust of her family and friends by pulling this stunt. However, all is not without hope for the Weems family. Jessie does find a secretarial job in Canton, so money is not as scarce. Grandma Horace returns to Enka alone. Daddy has even started playing his banjo again. While riding through Maggie Valley, Livy Two spies an old building and dreams another dream. What if the family opened a music hall? A place where the tourists could hear real mountain music? With the help of her teacher and some local musicians, the Weems family opens Jessie's Smoky Mountain Music Notes. At the end of the book, Livy Two shows her maturity with these words, "It'll get lean again come winter, but if we can watch our money and be careful, we can eke out a living. . ." (p. 303).

I first met Kerry Madden at the 2006 Children's Festival of Reading in Knoxville. I later heard her speak at a roundtable discussion at the Southern Festival of Books in Nashville in October of 2007. After a couple of emails back and forth, we decided to work on an interview about Livy Two's family and the books Kerry has written about them. The following interview took place via a series of emails from November 2007 until January 2008.

TAR: Your Maggie Valley novels are such a departure from *Offsides*, your first book. *Offsides* details a teenaged girl's coming of age as the daughter of a college football coach. You are the daughter of a college football coach, so the autobiographical connection is obvious. These stories are set in the Smokies in the 1960s. Livy Two's experiences with life and family are no doubt quite different from yours. How did you come to write *Gentle's Holler*?

KM: I began writing *Gentle's Holler* when I was missing the Smoky Mountains. I had lived in Tennessee throughout high school and college from 1977–1986, and it was home. Seasons are subtle here in California, and I was longing to write something that I loved and cared about. It also came out of a dark period. *Offsides* came out in 1996. I had had three more books rejected—two novels and a collection of short stories. I was writing pieces like “How to stay healthy if you sell insurance,” stroke victim stories, and aging parent stories. I was writing shadow soaps,¹ ghostwriting, too, and struggling to figure out how to begin again. I grew up drawing pictures of mountains and big families, and when I met my husband, Kiffen Lunsford, one of thirteen children, with roots deep in North Carolina and Tennessee, I knew I had found the love of my life. In 2002, I finally returned to my love of big families and mountains, and I began something called “Smoky Mountain Girl,” which became *Gentle's Holler*.

TAR: In *Gentle's Holler*, you include a statement from your agent, Marianne Merola. After an early draft, she wrote, “The kid's blind, the dad's in trouble, and they're broke. How about a little hope?” When I heard you speak in Nashville, you discussed some of the difficulties you had with the early drafts. Could you describe some of the revisions you made in the story?

KM: When I first began *Gentle's Holler*, I had the great misconception that because I was writing

¹ A “shadow soap” is where the producers give a writer a highly detailed breakdown/outline of the show's plot-line a month in advance, and ask the writer to write a particular episode from that outline to see how well they can adapt to the format of writing the dialogue and characters.

for a younger audience, I could write it fast and get it done and get it published—all the *wrong* reasons. I did write a fast, furious, and treacly first draft that was rejected by everybody. I sent it out too early, and the rejections stacked up. My son, Flannery, 13 at the time, told me, “Nothing happened too exciting in the book, and kids want excitement and adventure in books.” We argued as

I drove him to a friend's house. Finally, he said, “Fine, Mama. Don't change a word. Leave it just the way it is.” I knew then how wrong I was, and I had to go back and really spend the time and write the draft that scared me to write and take all the time I needed and not rush it. I had intended originally to write a book from every Weems kid's point of view, but fortunately, my editors saw the folly of that idea and suggested I keep Livy Two as the storyteller because I'd established her voice as the family's eyes and ears. I am still so grateful for that advice.

TAR: Why did you choose Maggie Valley as the setting for your novels?

KM: In 1994, my three-year-old daughter Lucy had a meltdown on Thomas Wolfe's front porch when we were visiting his home in Asheville. She screamed, “Dis is so boring!” Kiffen tried to console her, but it was no use, so we left, and I looked at a map and said, “Let's take the back roads to Knoxville through the mountains. On Highway 19, there's a town called Maggie Valley.” At the time, we'd been traveling cross-country, and we were on our way back to California. I was visiting old football towns to write *Offsides*. The name “Maggie Valley” sounded like some kind of old-fashioned oasis. We drove the kids there and spent the day playing, exploring creeks, and climbing trees. We went to the

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Pancake House and saw Ghost Town in the Sky. We had a wonderful time, so in 2001, when I began writing about the Weems family, I decided I'd plant them in Maggie Valley and hope for the best.

TAR: In *Gentle's Holler*, Livy Two tells us the origin of her name. Her older sister Olivia died at birth, and her parents "didn't see no use in wasting the name, so as I was the next girl born, I became Olivia Hyatt Weems too. Livy Two for short" (3). Where did the idea for Livy Two's name come from?

KM: My husband had a brother, Alfred Kiffen, who died at birth. When my husband was born years later, they named him Alfred Kiffen. They never called him "Kiffen Two," but it always struck me. Who would Kiffen have been if the baby had lived? Then I found out that Salvador Dali had a brother who died at birth named Salvador, and one of my children's babysitters, Rose, had three older sisters named Rose, all of whom died at birth. That's how I got the idea.

TAR: With her Uncle Hazard stories, Livy Two proves she is a natural storyteller. I read on your website how you often told stories to your younger siblings. How much of your storytelling is in Livy Two's character and in her stories?

KM: Because I was the oldest of four children, I was the designated family babysitter. I made up characters and stories, but it was all geared toward performance. When I read Laura Ingalls Wilder, I had my brothers and sister dress up like prairie children. I made gruel for them to taste and dressed them up as *Oliver Twist* orphans. Sometimes, I blended stories—an orphanage might have shifted into a boarding school with a cruel Miss Minchin twin at the helm. I played evil train conductors, dying mothers who made miraculous recoveries . . . I grew up in football stadiums in football towns, and I longed for other stories besides ball games. My sister is a born actress, so she played every role with great passion, but my brothers

rebelled, especially when sports were on TV. Livy Two is kinder to her younger siblings than I was, but storytelling was a huge part of growing up.

TAR: Part of the appeal of the series is Livy Two's narration. Many of the conflicts—Gentle's blindness, Daddy's accident, Louise's shyness and truancy, the problems with Emmett and Uncle Buddy, the constant lack of money—are not hers to resolve. Yet she describes these conflicts with near pitch-perfect voice. What are some of the characteristics in Livy Two that make her an ideal narrator?

KM: I always begin with voice . . . so I worked on her voice, wrote pages and pages in her voice, trying to get to know her . . . I think if I had to choose one thing, I would say it was her curiosity. She has a great curiosity and a need to make things right by doing, at times, the most wrong, stubborn thing. I think, for instance, spicing up Louise's shyness with exotic diseases was irresistible to her. She was so much fun to write, because she is a combination of impetuosity and worry and yet absolute belief that she is doing the right thing. With Livy Two, I had the freedom to listen to her and figure out what she wanted to do and add plenty of drama . . . Sometimes, the plot came to a grinding halt, but when I gave her trouble—Grandma Horace, Uncle Buddy, Jitters—then she had something to fight against. Charles Baxter says, "Get your characters up a tree and throw rocks at them." When I wasn't throwing rocks at Livy Two, things went along fine, but the story was dull-dull-dull.

TAR: While she might be the perfect narrator, she is far from the perfect child. Many of her decisions are highly questionable and often have negative consequences. Part of coming of age is making mistakes and learning from them. How do Livy Two's mistakes change her as a character?

KM: I think she realizes it when she pushes it too far, but never until it's too late. What's done is done. But I could feel her growing up in *Jessie's Mountain* and changing into a more compassionate person. In *Gentle's Holler*, Jitters was mainly an irritant to her, but when she was forced to deal with her in *Jessie's Mountain*, she began to respect her sister more.

Livy Two's heart is filled with good intentions, but some of those good intentions backfire, and when they do, she can hear the suffering in the voices of those she's hurt. That's part of growing up—it was also hard for me to let these Weems kids grow up, but they were doing it whether I liked it or not—like my own children.

TAR: *Louisiana's Song* tackles many issues—Daddy's return and his recovery from his accident, Grandma Horace's influence over the family, Becksie winning Maggie Queen. However, Louise truly drives the plot in this story. Louise is a talented painter; she is also very shy and anxious. She experiences many awkward moments as she matures toward adolescence. She stays home from school and avoids the bullies on the bus. As the story progresses, so does her confidence. Describe how you came to develop her character.

KM: I wrote forty pages in Louise's voice, and this helped me discover her as a character. I was terribly shy as a girl. I wasn't shy at home, but I was horribly shy in public, and I had to ride a bus not that different from Louise's experience. The mean boys dominated the buses in Pittsburgh and Knoxville, and I could not eat breakfast, knowing I had to face them. I carried a book at all times. I was also huge—so I took that shyness and towering height (I was 5'7" by 5th grade and then stopped growing) and gave that to Louise. I think Louise finds her passion in painting, and with her passion comes confidence. She slowly discovers the thing she loves best, and this gives her hope.

TAR: The series is written in Appalachian dialect. As a child, you moved around quite a bit. Although you spent many years in Knoxville, you now live in Los Angeles. How difficult was it for you to write the novels in dialect?

KM: North Carolina is the first place where I have real memories, and Tennessee is the place I stayed and stopped moving with my family to the next football town. Being shy, I always listened hard to mimic the dialect. My father has always spoken with a southern accent, and one of my brothers does, but not the other. One of my most favorite

films is *Coal Miner's Daughter*, and I've watched it through the years and listened to the language of that film. I was an exchange student in England at Manchester University for my junior year, and I did not want to return to Knoxville to graduate. I traveled throughout England, Ireland, and Scotland, and I loved every bit. However, I knew I had to go back, so I decided to treat Knoxville as another exchange year. I paid very close attention to how people talked and discovered southern writers. The following year, I started my MFA at Tennessee and taught Voice and Diction, and I loved the different accents of my students.

TAR: Along those same lines, you do a wonderful job with the pacing of the novels. *Life in Southern Appalachia* moves at a different speed, a different cadence. How were you able to capture that element of the story?

KM: I was homesick for seasons and the mountains. I thought about the books that filled my heart as a child and found myself wanting to write about characters that I loved and cared for deeply as a child and then a teenager. I also wanted to create a world for children. Los Angeles is where we've made our home and raised our own children,



but it will never truly be home for me. I love our friends here, but I miss the mountains, and when I lived in Tennessee, I began to bring friends to the mountains. I was proud of them . . . I also

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grew up where life moved slowly at times, long hot summer days in Leavenworth, Kansas, visits to grandparents that stretched into weeks and weeks. . . I also remember when I first started dating my husband, we visited his mother for the weekend, and we said good-bye to her at noon on Sunday, but we had to make the rounds saying good-bye to so many folks around the town of Lynchburg that we didn't end up leaving until hours later, because each good-bye meant long, looping discussions of weather and crops and music and college and standing outside the car, just talking. . . . That's the South for me You begin to gradually let go of time, because something else is discovered in the hours of not getting on the road, of not making "good time." We finally left for Knoxville around 9:30 p.m.; I felt like I had lived a whole lifetime in that day.

TAR: Like many families in Appalachia in the 1960s, the Weems family lives in extreme poverty. The family was poor before Tom's accident. After the car wreck, their financial situation becomes even more desperate. They are behind in their rent. The electricity is cut off when they can't pay the bill. The girls carry potatoes from their garden to school to barter for their lunches. Yet they persevere. Could you speak to the theme of poverty and the role it plays in this series?

KM: I guess I thought of Kiffen's family. . . . His father really did sell encyclopedias and baby food door-to-door while working as a musician. The family always struggled financially, but when I asked one of my seven sisters-in-law, Eppie, about the happiest time in her life, she said, "When I was nine living

on the farm with everybody." They were poor and struggling, but it was then when she was the happiest. Then her father died suddenly, and she had to go live with the well-to-do older sister in Memphis and leave her siblings. She has a rich and fascinating life today living in Istanbul with her family, but her most favorite time of life was being a kid, growing up with all those siblings playing together, climbing trees, making birthday cakes, exploring the woods. I've also worked with teen moms and seen the poverty firsthand, and I wanted to show that even without money, books and stories can be sustaining when there is little else. Books are Livy Two's lifeline to the world, as is Miss Attickson and her bookmobile.

TAR: One character that really stands out for me is Grandma Horace. There is no doubt that Grandma Horace loves her family and makes sacrifices for them, but she certainly has a strange way of showing that love. How did her character develop?

KM: After Uncle Hazard, the family dog, finds and rescues Gentle in *Gentle's Holler*, I was stumped. The dog could now stay, Gentle had lived . . . now what? Then Grandma Horace came calling, and she stayed. My grandmother, Elizabeth Baker, was very outspoken, mostly about cleanliness and respect and religion. So I think she's a bit of Grandma Horace. Kiffen's grandmother was also tough, though I never met her; I only heard stories. I also came from a family where being practical was everything. So I think Grandma Horace came from bits and pieces of all the strong women in my life who had advice and plenty of it, but they also had tremendous capacity for love. I do remember my grandmother Elizabeth listening to a country music demo of my brother's. I played it for her, and I was so proud of him. She listened and said, "Is that the only song he knows?" That sort of sums up Grandma Horace—it's all very well to dream, but who's going to put food on the table?

TAR: The oldest generation—that of Grandma Horace and Uncle Buddy—can be seen as antagonistic. Uncle Buddy suffers from wanderlust, gambles his money and Emmett's as well, and runs moonshine.

He is certainly a negative influence on Emmett. He and Grandma Horace are almost polar opposites. Could you explain how you derived his character?

KM: Uncle Buddy is a character I've written for years, but he really sprang to life in the Weems family. Emmylou Harris's song "Greenville" reminds me of Uncle Buddy. Her lyrics are: "*You drink hard liquor, you come on strong, you lose your temper someone looks at you wrong . . . oh, looks at you wrong*" and "*Empty bottles and broken glass, busted down doors and borrowed cash . . . oh, borrowed cash.*" I have had relatives with short fuses and long lists of grievances. At times, this behavior was excused or smoothed over as "he's sensitive," and I never liked this excuse. There would be blow ups, and then the air would clear and all was supposed to be forgiven. I think scraps of my childhood and watching certain boys and men rage all came together in Uncle Buddy. To me, Emmett is Uncle Buddy before the bitterness and meanness sets in . . . when there is still hope for this beautiful and loving boy.

TAR: There is another conflict that I find particularly intriguing. Grandma Horace wants the family in church on Sunday mornings. She refers to them as heathens. Tom Weems thinks the family is better served "admiring God's work in mountains." Discuss for a moment the religious conflict between Grandma Horace and the family.

KM: I think it's a universal conflict that so many families endure. Tom is spiritual and finds his "religion" in the mountains whereas Grandma Horace is adamant about regular church attendance. They both are good people who want the best for their family, but they go about it in different ways. Naturally, Tom thinks his way is right, and Grandma Horace is certain she is right, so it was a natural conflict to explore when two characters are absolutely positive of one thing—being right!

TAR: There is a particularly heart-wrenching moment in *Jessie's Mountain*. Mama has just started a secretarial job at the paper mill in Canton, and Grandma Horace has moved back to Enka. Emmett is no longer working at Ghost Town in the Sky. Mama

demands that he go back to school and that Becksie as the oldest girl stay home to take care of Daddy and the children. That is a powerful scene. Could you elaborate on this incident?

KM: At first, I wrote to where Becksie and Emmett shared the responsibilities; this was not working at all, and I knew it wasn't accurate or believable. My editor, Catherine Frank, noted this, too. I also thought about how Francie Nolan in *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* had to leave school and go to work while her brother was encouraged to stay in school. I realized that it was surely like that everywhere. But I felt such pain for Becksie having to be the one to stay home when she'd worked so hard to become the Maggie Queen, but I knew it was the right thing to do . . . Mama's become desperate, and she's forced into making such hard choices, even sacrificing a child's education for a while.

TAR: A turning point in Livy Two's life comes when Grandma Horace gives her Mama's diary. We could see that as a malicious act by Grandma Horace, but the diary truly helps the children understand their mother. Please comment on the role the journal plays in *Jessie's Mountain*.

KM: At first the journal was just for me to get to know Mama better, and then I began to realize that it was part of the novel. It was a bridge between Grandma Horace and her grandchildren, and I think she knew that when she gave it to Livy Two. Grandma Horace, as difficult as she is, has her own hopes and dreams for this family, but it's grounded in practicality. I also discovered Jessie's love of birds in the journal, and my own daughter Lucy sketched the birds that appear in the book. It was wonderful to collaborate with her on the book.

TAR: Other writers have written young adult novels set in Appalachia. Cynthia Rylant, Ruth White, and Bill and Vera Cleaver are just a few. Did any other

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I do hope to write more of these novels.

authors (adult, children, or YA) impact your Maggie Valley books?

KM: I love those authors, and I really discovered

even more of their books after I'd given a talk at Hollins College in Virginia when Tina Hanlon (Ferrum College) and Amanda Cockrell sang their praises. Dr. Hanlon also introduced me to the Jack Tales. Rylant's *When the Relatives Came* is so funny and wonderful. I have read much of Cynthia Rylant, Shutta Crum, Delia Ray, May Justus, James Still, and Ruth White aloud to my youngest daughter, Norah. I grew up on Betty Smith, but it was Lee Smith who gave me hope as a young mother with two babies in Los Angeles. I read *Oral History* and *Fair and Tender Ladies*, and they filled me with such joy. I also loved Fannie Flagg's *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Café* and Jill Ker Conway's *The Road from Coorain*. As a teenager, I deeply revered *Christy* by Catherine Marshall . . . so these books and so many others influenced me.

TAR: Gentle, Louise, and Jessie have all had books named after them. Can we expect more novels about the Weems family?

KM: I do hope to write more of these novels. Jitters came to life in *Jessie's Mountain*, and I certainly could see her having her own story. I'd also like to know what happens to Gentle. I want to write more of Emmett, too. I don't want the books to be "manufactured mountain" tales by writing them too fast. I was so thrilled to be able to write a biography of Harper Lee for young adults, but now I am missing the mountains again, and I would love to go back to the Weems family.

Scot Smith is the librarian/media specialist at Robertsville Middle School in Oak Ridge, Tennessee. He also teaches courses in children's and young adult literature for the College of Communication and Information at the University of Tennessee-Knoxville. He serves as a member of the selection committee for Tennessee's Volunteer State Book Award (YA division).

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