



The Secret Wisdom of the Earth

Christopher Scotton

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After seeing the death of his younger brother in a terrible home accident, fourteen-year-old Kevin and his grieving mother are sent for the summer to live with Kevin's grandfather. In this peeled-paint coal town deep in Appalachia, Kevin quickly falls in with a half-wild hollow kid named Buzzy Fink who schools him in the mysteries and magnificence of the woods. The events of this fateful summer will affect the entire town of Medgar, Kentucky.

Medgar is beset by a massive mountaintop removal operation that is blowing up the hills and back filling the hollows. Kevin's grandfather and others in town attempt to rally the citizens against the "company" and its powerful owner to stop the plunder of their mountain heritage. When Buzzy witnesses a brutal hate crime, a sequence is set in play that tests Buzzy and Kevin to their absolute limits in an epic struggle for survival in the Kentucky mountains.

The Secret Wisdom of the Earth Details

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From Reader Review The Secret Wisdom of the Earth for online ebook

Janieh Hermann says

I had the delight of seeing Mr. Scotton read from his novel at a publisher's breakfast and then also have dinner with him later on in the same conference. As an author, he is as down to earth as the characters he has crafted in his debut novel. Knowing that the inspiration behind this novel is based on a true life event and that it took Mr. Scotton 15 years to complete the manuscript had me reading the story through a different lens than normal -- one that enhanced the experience.

At its simplest, this is a coming of age story, but it is much more complex than that. There are lessons to be gleaned, but the book is not didactic by any means. The setting in the Appalachians is wonderfully detailed in description as are the characters in the book.

I read this immediately upon receiving an Advanced Reading Copy and I could not put it down until I was finished. I predict this will be a breakout hit of 2014.

Pouting Always says

Kevin and his mom move to Kentucky to spend the summer with his grandfather after his little brother dies in an accident. Kevin's mother can't cope and his father takes his anger out on everyone for what happened, blaming Kevin. During his stay in Kentucky, Kevin becomes friends with a local boy named Buzzy Fink and is taken under his grandfathers wing. Over the summer some local tensions come to an apex with Buzzy witnessing a hate crime that ends up putting Kevin, Buzzy, and Kevin's grandfather in a precarious situation. I really enjoyed this book more than I thought I would. The writing was so good, there were so many sentences that were eloquent and poignant and just so gorgeous that they really resonated with me especially (view spoiler). I think the only thing that ruined it for me was the ending because it felt dragged out, the author should have totally ended it way before that, we didn't need a glimpse into the future really. But other than that it was very good. A lot of the topics talked about are hard ones and the characters come off very real, at least they did for me, and make everything happening feel so personal. I also enjoyed the whole story line with the mining company and the tension it added, keeping us guessing if the company itself was behind everything that happened. It only enhanced my anxiety and helped me lose myself in the book.

Melki says

Fourteen-year-old Kevin and his mother are sent to spend the summer with a beloved grandfather in eastern Kentucky. Kevin's mom is nearly catatonic, traumatized by the death of her younger son. His dad frequently hints that Kevin is in some way responsible for the tragic accident. Luckily, he heads back to Indiana, leaving Kevin to have, if not *the* greatest, certainly the most *unforgettable*, summer of his life.

He and his new pal, Buzzy, will indulge in mud baths, hang out in tree houses, explore caves, share secrets and go a-hellin' through the woods. Kevin will also spend his time helping his veterinarian grandfather remove bull testicles and serving as bartender for Pops' cronies. Good times, good times, indeed! Unfortunately, everyone in town is concerned about the mountaintop removal mining that is happening all around them. While many are thrilled at the job prospects, others see only the devastation the operation will bring. It's a simmering pot that will come to a boil during that summer and Kevin will be there to witness the whole thing.

This book reminded me, in a good way, of EVERY wonderful, coming-of-age, magical-way-I-spent-my-summer-vacation, boy's-big-adventure book I've ever read. It's also one of the few books that features young adult characters that I would actually encourage young adults to read.

Keep 'em comin', Scotton!

Kelly (and the Book Boar) says

Find all of my reviews at: <http://52bookminimum.blogspot.com/>

“Evil doesn’t have to be loud, son. In fact, it reserves that for the merely boorish. Evil is quiet, stealthy – it sneaks up on you, smiles, and pats you on the back while pissing down your leg.”

Let me tell you the tale of how this ended up on my TBR. It was a cold and snowy New Year’s and the family was all in the reading room to ~~make as much noise as possible in order to distract me from my ‘puter~~ watch me churn out one of my super professional book reviews when my husband (the non-reader) began pelting me with “Have You Read [fill in name of book]???” questions. After the fourth title (two of which were quality reads of mine last year and two of which I had never heard of) I asked where the eff he was getting these selections. He then informed me it was his co-worker’s “Best Reads Of 2016” Facebook post. Recognizing that two of the choices came from my own brilliant mind I thought I should take his other two suggestions seriously as we appear to have the same taste and asked my husband to repeat the titles – which I then looked up on Goodreads. The only thing I saw when *The Secret Wisdom of the Earth* blurb came up was **APPALACHIA** and I was all

Which led my husband to have a “You Serious, Clark?” moment. Yep. Dead serious. I’m a cheap sell.

Now that **that** overshare is over, let’s talk about the book

“Heard your momma’s gone crazy cause your little brother died,” he said, looking hard at me.

“She’s taking it kind of bad.”

That’s the reason young Kevin and his mother are spending the summer with his granddad Pops. The rest of the story is a mix of a coming of age tale in the spirit of Harper Lee where Kevin learns that unfortunately people don’t always believe that

With a little Jack London, Bill Bryson and *just a hint* of Barbara Kingsolver's eco-warrior thrown in for good measure.

Since I'm not a fan of humans, I don't even know the name of my husband's co-worker, but I owe him a thank you. I would have never heard of this book were it not for his recommendation and that would have been unfortunate because

Note to everyone with normal human emotions: This one is a real gut-wrencher. We're talking a brutal accidental death and a hate crime and black lung and poverty and abuse and everything else that's wrong with the universe that might make you have the feelz. You've been warned.

Greg says

Wow.

I don't know what to say about this book.

According to the little author blurb on the ARC he runs a software company and started this book fifteen years ago.

That's a long time to be working on a book. And one might argue that genius percolates slowly but I think there is a tendency sometimes to romanticize a long process of writing and put a fetish on the tortured process that lead to the creation of the book rather than on the work itself (which makes me think of *The Tunnel*, which in my slightly educated opinion is a fucking train wreck that is only even notable as a curiosity because the author spent so many years working on what was a bloated and unremarkable novel. It succeeds as high-concept comedy just because of the absurdity behind its creation and the almost universal crickets sounding in the night that welcomed the book to the world).

Secret Wisdom of the Earth is a better novel than *The Tunnel* and took quite a bit less time to write. I have a feeling that the author also didn't really spend all that much of the fifteen years on the book. I have a feeling he started it, then decided to go make some money and returned to the book from time to time and at some point got serious about getting the thing done. Which is cool because the ROI on the time spent writing literary fiction fucking sucks and any thoughts about creating for posterity can probably be summed up fairly well by Marcus Aurelius when he says, "One who feels a passionate desire for posthumous fame fails to recognize that everyone who remembers him will die very swiftly in his turn, and then again the one who takes over from him, until all memory is utterly extinguished as it passes from one person to another and each in succession is lit and then snuffed out. And supposing for the sake of argument that those who will remember are indeed immortal, and the remembrance is immortal, what is that to you? I hardly need say that praise means nothing to the dead; but what does it mean to the living, unless, perhaps, it serves some secondary purpose? For you are rejecting inopportunely the fit that nature grants you in the present, and are setting your mind on what others may say of you."*

So I think this dude has it right, make some fucking money and then write your literary novel.

Of course I might just be reading too much into the little bit of information given in the author bio and what might have been an offhand comment that Karen made tonight in the Duane Reade when we were talking about this book. I could Google, but it's so much more fun playing Russian Roulette with facts about an author (best made up fact I ever ranted about? The gender of Avi, and I didn't just use that in one review, but in multiple reviews, yeah I felt a little stupid when I was called out) (Just clicked on his goodreads author page and he is a venture capitalist, not that I had a reason to doubt Karen who might have never actually uttered the words venture capitalist out loud, together ever before in her life before that moment in Duane Reade (again I have no idea if she has or not, I really am just talking out of my ass. My opinion on *The Tunnel* is accurate, so far as it is my opinion about book I read over ten years ago)).

But this is a book. And it has made an impression on me and I should share my impressions because that is why you are here reading this review. Correct?

Let's start with the first 257 pages of the book.

These pages are great. They have all kinds of words on them that when put together create a great picture of a small Kentucky town that has prospered, declined and been ravaged (I was going to say decimated, but I have no idea if 10% of anything was destroyed) by the realities of how how difficult it is to mine the coal there is near the town and the whims of the company that owns the mines.

There are quirky characters, and dynamics of people trying to survive while also hoping that the land they grew up on doesn't turn into a toxic wasteland from predatory mining practices.

This town is seen through the eyes of a 14 year old who along with his mother come to live with his grandfather after they both witnessed the traumatic death of the narrators three year old brother (If there were an award for weirdest death of the year in a novel it might win, or at least be nominated).

It feels like Donald Harington in his creation of a town and its people and you want to care about them because the writing makes it that you'd have to be a heartless monster to not care about this town. And it's filled with enough slightly fucked up people that it doesn't feel like a Jan Karon, let's give a shit about a small town sort of thing, but like the kind of place you don't feel embarrassed to care about.

It's good, in the way that so much grit-lit, Appalachian based fiction seems to be, but with a little less of the criminal pathos that runs through so much of this genre (even though the book took place in the 80's, when crank/meth was not as big of a thing as it would become, the word only pops up once in the book).

I suck at telling you why a book is good. I guess you could just trust and me and believe me that the first 257 pages of this book are good reading and if you like words that read good when you put them together you might like these pages. They are much better words put in a much better order than anything in this review.

But...

If the book figured out a way to wrap up on page 257, I probably would have complained about there being some unresolved plot points and bellyached about what was the point of it all, but then maybe thought, hmmmm maybe he just decided to go with the abrupt, 'let us just end it here,' that the film version of *No Country for Old Men* did (because I can't remember how the book ended), and I would have thought that ok, I'm not in love with this bizarre sudden ending that happened on page 257, but it's probably just a nod to the Coen Brother's interpretation of the granddaddy of Grit-Lit, so cool.

Instead it goes on to page 258, and then 259 and on and on until it reaches page 460 .

It isn't that these pages are necessarily awful, they just fail to deliver on the promise of the first 257 pages. Those pages were like, hey I can write and tell a story and I'm going to be a force to be reckoned with in the world of books.

After page 258 the writing keeps slipping into didactic passages describing how to do things in the woods (including one description of how to set a snare trap, which includes a diagram of how to set one up. Why do I need a diagram of setting up a snare trap in a novel? You already gave me a bit too much information in describing how to whittle all the pieces, and no where else in the book are there diagrams, even though there could be, so it's kind of awkward, weird and unnecessary to the book). Where in the first 257 pages of the book there was natural sounding dialogue and great characters, after this point too much dialogue becomes one character describing step by step how to do something out in the wilderness, or questioning someone with all the naturalness of Socrates engaging in some banter out and about in the *agora*. Or else a character who was a wonderful character for the first part of the book turns into a one-liner spouting parody of himself.

This all sounds worse than it really is. It was just jarring, kind of unexpected and disappointing after such a strong first half of the book. It was like some Duke Basketball game I watched last year where they were on fire for the first half and then went to the locker room and came back out as if they were some after-school intramural team.

I have a feeling that the first part of the book was written at one time in the authors life and then the second half was written at another time. For the sake of future literature I hope that the younger version of the author wrote the survivalist / action / thriller part of the novel, and then the older and wiser version of the author wrote the strong opening as a way to frame the later portion of the novel into a workable whole. But I fear that it is probably the other way around, that guy who was busy venturing capital was busy writing the second half of the book in moments he could scrape together after his younger self had toiled to create something really special.

And then...

The book also awkwardly comes to an end. To me there were a couple of natural winding up points in the last thirty or so pages that the author gracefully wrote but then came back with a bit more information that wasn't unwelcome, but not entirely necessary either. Kind of like the guest who just doesn't know when to leave (or me in real life sometimes). It felt like the book was saying goodnight, and then turning around and saying, oh, and I almost forgot let me tell you about this stuff, too. I get this, I do this all the time to Karen, and one whole side of my family could have nothing at all to say to one another for hours but once it became time to put on the coats and leave, out came all the stories and the things that should have been talked about in those other hours before it was time to say *Adieu*.

I feel like such an asshole for bashing parts of this book, but it's only because I care. It was so close to being a great novel (view spoiler). I want people to read this though. And then to go read some of the other great grit-lit/war-novels that have been published in the past year, because there is some great stuff out there. If the bar wasn't so high from some of these I probably would have given this a higher rating, but it's a very loving three stars, and it's much better than William Gass's *The Tunnel*.

*That was kind of pretentious to quote a whole passage of some ancient philosophy, right?

Bam says

I found this book in the library of our cruise ship! I had been meaning to read it since it was first published and knew the timing was perfect since there would be several long days of cruising at sea.

It is just the kind of book that I love: a coming of age story set in the hills of Kentucky, with a wise old grandfather, and plenty of heart-breaking problems and a bit of mystery and danger to keep the plot moving forward steadily.

Kevin Gillooly and his mother leave their home in Indiana to spend the summer with Pops in Kentucky to try to recover from the death of Kevin's three-year-old brother in a hideous home accident. Kevin's father blames Kevin for the death, which adds the burden of guilt to the young man's grief. And mom is almost catatonic in her own grief. Will being in her childhood home help her recover and return to life?

The story is also about the issues surrounding modern-day strip-mining for coal or 'mountain-top relocation.' Bubba Boyd, the big money guy, wants to buy Pop's old boyhood homestead in Jukes Hollow for storing his sludge. "Men like Bubba Boyd think the earth owes them a living. They take whatever wealth they can from the mountains and move on. He can't for the life of him see the simple beauty in a waterfall or understand the importance of history and place." How far is he willing to go to get his hands on that desirable property?

When Paul, the local hair dresser and the leader of the environmental group against the mountain-top mining, is brutally murdered, Kevin becomes aware that his new best friend Buzzy knows who committed the crime and may be in danger himself. Pops plans a tramp up the mountain to Jukes Hollow and takes the two teens along but trouble follows them and results in a "Deliverance" style scenario that requires courage, strength, and ingenuity from all three.

It's hard to believe this is Christopher Scotton's first novel--it is that good! The ending could have used some polishing but my rating still falls somewhere between 4.5 and 5 stars. I hope the author has another gem in the works that we'll see someday!

Cathrine ?? says

4.5★

I love books centered in Appalachia + I'm a tree hugger = Biased spin starts here.

I love when an author can tell a great fictional story that also draws the reader to a real life issue that is close to his heart and mine; writing and reading with a cause if you will. Ron Rash and Barbara Kingsolver are very good at this. Now I can add Christopher Scotton and his debut novel to that list. A debut? Wow!

A few years back I had looked up images of mountaintop removal after seeing a film narrated by Sissy Spacek about Appalachia. I looked up those images again in the midst of reading. "*How can they think of destroying this place? I just don't get it.*" I don't either.

This is another boyhood entering manhood tale and quality stuff in my opinion. As the mountains crumble, so does a way of life for many in the hollows of Kentucky as the story weaves around family, love and loss,

friendship, betrayal, and greed. A bit of reality is suspended for the sake of drama and I didn't mind at all. My kind of book written to order and I was sad when I ran out of pages to turn.

In sharing his thoughts about it author John Hart wrote: "*Atticus Finch meets Deliverance.*"

Pamela says

I don't really know where to begin. Like a chamois through a wringer, my emotions have been put through it. Love – Hate – Rage – Joy – Compassion – Sorrow – Pain – Hope – Fear - Vindication – Disgust..... Just to name a few.

Poignantly lyrical and gritty, "The Secret Wisdom of the Earth" packs a wallop of a punch.

It's a genre kaleidoscope. Grit-lit, southern-fiction, family-drama, mystery, suspense, Appalachian culture, environmental-lit (and the list goes on) in the guise of a coming-of-age story. A seriously mature-audience coming-of-age story delving into bold and controversial subject matter – some of which is exceptionally graphic, violent, and disturbing.

A few passages made me so nauseatingly ill I had to set the book aside and take a breather.

Even now, after putting off writing this review for a couple days, I'm still rattled by what I read. Those who know my personal story know how upsetting certain topics are for me. And there's a fair amount of expletives. Though in most incidences, it was reasonably justifiable based on character and/or circumstance. And even though I struggled with numerous unpleasant passages, I thoroughly enjoyed Kevin's relationship with his grandfather, and found the overall story captivating.

Moreover, my seeing this book through to completion says much about the overall intrigue, quality of writing/prose, literary prowess, suspense build, fluidity, and importance of underlying themes of hope, healing, love, friendship, forgiveness, and the will to rise above adversity.

Four – poignant and gritty, discretion advised - Stars

Dianne says

Good, if slightly overlong, coming-of-age tale set in a coal-mining town in Kentucky. Hard to put down - the author does a great job with creating atmosphere and helping you to see the beauty of the Appalachian mountains, as well as the horror of what modern coal mining does to those mountains.

A 3.5 for me. The story dragged a little at the end and some of the characters were a bit too archetypal for me, but rounding up for a good story well told.

Diane says

This book is a lovely blend of several things: a boy's coming of age, a family in crisis over a child's death, a small town's struggle to survive, a fight against prejudice, and a wilderness adventure. The author was juggling a lot and I think he pulled it off well.

Our narrator is 14-year-old Kevin, who moves with his mom back to her hometown in Appalachia. His mother is mad with grief after losing her 3-year-old son in a terrible accident. Kevin's grandfather tries to care for them, and Kevin grows fond of him. Kevin also makes friends with a boy named Buzzy, who introduces him to their mountain ways. The boys end up facing some bullies, and Kevin is pushed into a dangerous situation.

Meanwhile, the small town is having its own troubles. The coal mining company is pressuring families to sell their land, and threats are made to those who refuse, including Kevin's grandfather. The town boss picks on Paul, a homosexual man who runs the local beauty salon, and it causes even more tension in the community.

There are so many elements to this grand novel that I was reminded of numerous other books and movies, including *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *Tell the Wolves I'm Home*, *Coal Miner's Daughter*, *On Golden Pond*, *Harlan County U.S.A.*, and *The Most Dangerous Game*. I don't think it's a bad thing to think of other works — Scotton's book is just so rich in events that I couldn't help be reminded of similar stories.

Scotton's prose is lovely and he had some beautiful descriptions. I knew I would like this book as soon as I read its opening passage:

It was always coal. Coal filled their pantry and put a sense of purpose in their Monday coffee. Coal was Christmas and the long weekend in Nashville when the Opry offered half-price tickets. Coal was new corduroy slacks and the washboard symphony they played to every step. Coal was a twice-a-month haircut. Coal was a store-bought dress and the excuse to wear it. Coal took them in as teenagers, proud, cocksure, and gave them back fully played out. Withered and silent.

Coal was the double-wide trailer at twenty and the new truck. Coal was the house with the front porch at twenty-eight and the satellite dish. Coal was the bass boat at thirty-five and the fishing cabin at forty. And then, after they gave their years to the weak light and black sweat, coal killed them.

And began again.

One small frustration I had with this novel was with Kevin himself. Since he was 14 and was a fish-out-of-water in this small southern town, he could be remarkably dense and naïve. I recognized it as a critical element of the plot that he had to ask lots of questions and would make mistakes, but occasionally it was overdone. But by the end of the book, he has grown up considerably and I liked his story arc.

I would recommend this book to those who like literary fiction or sprawling family stories.

Favorite Quotes

"It is always strange going to a friend's house for the first time, as if you are invading a secret world they try to keep apart from you."

"Men like Bubba Boyd think the earth owes them a living. They take whatever wealth they can from the mountains and move on. I actually feel sorry for him, I really do. He can't for the life of him see the simple beauty in a waterfall or understand the importance of history and place. If I have one hope for you, Kevin, it's that you never become one of those men."

Melissa Crytzer Fry says

This book has received a great deal of pre-release accolades – all well deserved. I suspect, however, the spell it cast over me is a bit different than the one cast for others, mainly due to my own geography and relationship to mining (not in Kentucky and not coal mining, but in southern Arizona where copper mining “is king” as was quoted recently in our local paper over a mining ‘victory’ that will scrape away sacred Native American land).

This debut is a fabulous coming-of-age story about 14-year-old Kevin, who bears witness to a horrific family tragedy and upon going to Kentucky to live with his grandfather, “Pops,” does a great deal of growing up. In many ways, the story reminded me of the popular Stand By Me film (originally a Stephen King novella titled, The Body) in its depiction of a simpler life and boyhood friendships (Kevin falls in with local Hollow kid, Buzzy Fink). But while Kevin is introduced to the slower pace and spiritual connections of the earth, he is also witness to the ravages of coal mining on the environment. And to the brutal ignorance of members of a small town.

This book is cocooned in so many layers of moral/ethical/environmental themes, yet it is not in any way preachy. It does what today’s journalism should do: it presents an unbiased, two-sided story illustrating that the world’s appetite for natural resources isn’t cut-and-dry. It’s one of many themes tucked neatly into Kevin’s journey, through the lives of multigenerational mining families and opponents who appear in the story as flawed and realistic characters. Mining presents a fitting backdrop that parallels the personal loss suffered by many of the characters within this book.

Scotton has created a novel that entices readers to think – one that challenges the “it’s ok as long as it’s not in my backyard – or as long as I can’t see it” mentality toward large-scale mining operations – all in a way that is not the least bit overbearing.

During an extended mountain trip with Pops, Kevin is explaining the wild beauty of the mountains surrounding him: “The trees were lush and large, with holly, mountain laurel, and dogwood filling in the forest floor.” And then he notes the sight as they come toward the evidence of mountaintop-removal mining: “As we came over a gentle rise, the trees ended abruptly. What lay before us was a scene of unimaginable devastation.”

Midway through this whopping 480-page book, I had already decided it was going to be passed along to my 14-year-old nephew: for its wisdom, for its introduction to the redemptive nature of nature (a concept completely foreign to so many young people today) and for its entertainment value (Pops has some good one-liners).

Yet for all of the environmental takeaways I personally experienced, this is just a GOOD story: a book offering lessons of hope and forgiveness, acceptance and tolerance, loyalty and trust.

If you are a fan of young adult fiction (while the story is a recollection of an adult Kevin looking back, it reads in his 14-year-old point of view until the very end), and enjoy coming-of-age stories, this is the book for you. Could it have been shorter? Sure. But despite its heft, it is a quick, satisfying read with true substance. I look forward to this author's future work. Bravo to this debut author!

Mary says

There has been a lot of buzz building around the debut novel of Christopher Scotton titled, *The Secret Wisdom of the Earth*. The publisher has announced a print run of 100,000 — unheard of for a first novel — and many of the early reviews have been gushing. I picked up an ARC a few weeks ago, and trust me -- the hype is justified.

The Secret Wisdom of the Earth is one of the most beautifully written novels I've read in many years. The prose is breathtaking at times and the imagery transports you to the hills and hollows, the small towns and coal seams of eastern Kentucky in ways few writers can master. The characters are pitch-perfect, genuine, real, and stay with you throughout the next day after reading the book the evening before. Even weeks later I am thinking about them, about their lives...hard to believe they are not still living in Medgar, Kentucky, but only exist in the pages of this captivating story. At the book's conclusion I wanted to plan a roadtrip to witness the beauty of the region, cringe at the horror of flat-topped mountains, glimpse the waterfall at Juke's Hollow, or slowly cruise past the porch at 22 Chishold and see who might be sitting there....

The impeccable pacing of the novel propels the story to a suspenseful, shocking conclusion. It's one of those delicious books I have stayed up all night to finish, wanting to know what happens, yet not wanting it to end!

Yes, it's a coming of age novel...but its themes go so much deeper. It's about love, loss, prejudice and the connective tissue that joins us to each other and to the earth — all of it wrapped in a gripping, page-turning story of survival and redemption in the back woods of Kentucky.

Christopher Scotton is a huge new talent and this is a novel that will be discussed and dissected for years to come. I cannot wait to see and hear more about this book and his future ones once published. Fantastic!

Judy Collins says

Coming in Paperback 1/5/2016!

Top 50 Books of 2015 "Best Coming -of-Age Debut."

THE SECRET WISDOM OF THE EARTH by talented *Christopher Scotton*, is a highly recommended compelling, multi-layered coming-of-age epic debut, crossing many genres.

A deeply-moving story, with a powerful voice of adult Kevin, main protagonist, telling his story--with a

"heart of gold", and as big as the mountains; matched perfectly by audio narrator, *Robert Petkoff*, delivering an award-winning performance! *This southern classic is a "must read" and guaranteed to win your heart.*

Set in Kentucky in the 1980s, after the horrific death of Kevin's younger brother, now 14 years old, he moves with his distraught mother to the rural Kentucky home of his grandfather. It is here he meets a local boy Buzzy and they two become friends; introducing him to all things the rural mountain area has to offer, *from fishing, hunting, and country living.*

However, what he does find is troubling, making him confused. The people are backward thinking, narrow minded, filled with hate, rage, racism, and bigotry. This pair slowly is drawn into the local politics of the good ole' boys at the heights of the coal mountaintop removal mining in the rural Appalachia Mountains, *and the death of a local gay guy, (and much loved citizen).*

A small town mix of good and evil; from witty, humorous, rednecks, hillbillies, racists, activists, gays, bigots, and those without education and forward thinking—a murderer. *A variety of viewpoints, in one small town --spells TROUBLE.*

An emotional and heartfelt journey of a grandfather and grandson. Pops, Kevin's grandfather, a veterinarian and a mentor for Kevin introducing him to a world he knows nothing of, along with his friend, Buz. With an array of characters from Boyd's Mining (*trying to buy up the land from locals*), Paul, the local hairdresser (loved him), and environmental activists, for a fight which escalates, becoming personal and dangerous with a brutal murder. With many hard lessons, a young troubled boy, learns of wisdom, tolerance, beauty, hope, and courage; *in a world of ugliness, devastation, and hatred.*

From the vivid settings, descriptions of the land, mountains, and nature combined with beautiful narrative, Scotton delivers an extraordinary tale which will remain with you long after the book ends

A gifted new author with a "winner out of the gate," takes readers on a journey of "human compassion, resilience, redemption, and the power of family." *An author I look forward to following, for years to come!*

Judith D. Collins Must Read Books

Jennifer says

"I guess I learned that even though most people are good, they can be talked into doing bad things by one or two jerks...And I guess, people sometimes need someone who can stand up and remind them that they are good people and they know what's right."

4.5 stars

The prose in this book created a song in my heart like the tunes that have been sung throughout the Appalachian Mountains for the last few centuries. Author Christopher Scotton has created a beautifully-written novel which I couldn't help but think of as a modern-day "To Kill a Mockingbird". He has combined a coming-of-age tale with stories of tragedy, the power of love over hate, the complexities of the coal mining economy, and a deep reverence for the beauty of nature and a sense of place.

The characters in this book are well-developed, and I imagine readers will have their favorites, as I did. The plot may get a wee bit fantastical toward the end, but first-time novelist Scotton is forgiven because the rest of the novel is so strong (note for the author: next time one or two catastrophes are enough -- they don't need to pile on each other).

Highly recommended.

Diane S ? says

After the horrible death of his younger brother, 14 year old Kevin and his mother come to a small mining town in Kentucky, within the Appalachian mountains. His mother is nearly catatonic with grief and it is hoped that returning to her Father's house will help heal her.

Kevin quickly makes friend with another boy, Buzz who lives in one of the hollows, and their days are spent hanging in a tree house, tromping through the woods and camping in a cave said to be haunted. Though everything is thought to be wonderful there are deep undercurrents of anger and mistrust running through this community. The mines have been closed and now the man from the family who made a fortune from the mines, is blowing the top off of the mountains to access the coal from the top and a local man, who is also gay, is the main person standing up to him.

These things will come together in a horrifying way, a way that will leave Kevin and Buzz no longer children. This is a beautifully written book, the description of the hollows, the mountains are at times beautiful and at times devastating as we see what the mining has done to this beautiful place. What fear, anger and suspicion does to this community and the people within. It is an adventure story, an ecological lesson and a social injustice all combined to make this a wonderful if at times sad story.

For everyone who has loved a time and place that has been changed by progress or greed this is the book to read. At the finish of this book I felt nostalgic and angered about how much people are willing to sacrifice for reputation and money. Things that can never be replaced, things we should value, but don't.

This is the first book by this author but I have a feeling he will be around for a long while, I certainly hope so anyway.

Carol says

OH. MY. GOSH. Don't think I'll **ever** be able to erase the horrific description of Joshua's tragic death from my mind. *(no spoiler here)*.....**And**

I want to begin by stating I absolutely love Pops **and** Kevin **and** Buzzy **and** Rudy Rae.....these wonderfully well-drawn characters who fill the pages of this touching coming-of-age story.

It's 1985 in the eastern Kentucky Appalachia during a time of land destruction, and fourteen year old Kevin is burdened with the blame and guilt of his little brother's death until the amazing Dr. Peebles (Pops) comes to the rescue giving him the loving attention and positive encouragement he needs to ease his pain.

This magical story takes the reader on a wild adventure of survival with a killer on the loose and vividly

describes a brutal hate crime, but aside from the evil acts of violence and prejudices, the main theme of the novel revolves around love, loss, and redemption.....**And**

"What happened was not your fault."

Annet says

Now we both were silent, staring into the fire at the dancing light of the single flame and at the flame's reflection on the sweating walls; listening to the slow drip of water somewhere down in the cave and the irregular popping of dying coals; fresh friends from completely different worlds faced with the hard shapings of truth and deceit, of right and wrong, and of the equivalent damage when high expectations and low expectations are devastatingly unmet....

A beautiful, tender and sad coming of age story of Kevin, who goes to live with his pops in a small mountain town, together with his grieving mother, having lost his young brother in a tragic accident. In town, pops is involved in a fight of the people saving the mountains from the destroying and even criminal mining activities. Slowly involved, Kevin start a healing process, helped by his new mountain friend Buzzy and his wonderfully wise and tender pops. Wonderful read, gearing between still and tragic moments. Lots of beautiful wilderness images come vividly to mind while reading.... reminds me of my many hikes in the Rockies wilderness mountains in US and Canada. Beautiful writing. 4+ stars & recommended! *One of my highlights in 2017!*

Men like Bubba Boyd think the earth owes them a living. They take whatever wealth the can from the mountains and move on. I actually feel sorry for him, I really do. He can't for the life of him see the simple beauty in a waterfall or understand the importance of history and place....

Lori says

This was one of the most atmospheric novels I have read. I felt like I was walking every step with these boys. The characters were very well developed... every thought and emotion felt authentic. My only complaint is that I found myself skimming through several parts starting about 3/4 of the way through. It just seemed too drawn out for me with too many unnecessary details. The first half was really really good... second half not so much. Still a very strong debut and I look forward to reading more by Scotton in the future. 3.5-4 stars.

Phyllis says

A horrible accident at home sends this fourteen year old boy and his mother to her father's home in a small mining town in Appalachia. In this debut novel, the author brings you into the heart and soul of mountain living. You feel like you know every character. I thought this was very well written and would recommend it to anybody. Loved it.

karen says

so, i just loved this book.

it's an incredibly strong debut, and i want this guy to quit his job at his venture capital firm (!!!???) and focus full-time on writing, because he is a natural born storyteller, and this book was fantastic, and i don't even know why!

because there's not a lot that is "new" here. i've read gritty coming-of-age novels before. i've read about dysfunctional families who have experienced tragedy. i've read about the way small communities huddle together and share a history and know each other's secrets, even if they don't publicly acknowledge them. i've read about hate crimes. i've read about the devastation following the "development" of rural areas. i've read all kinds of appalachia.

but there's just something about this book that is so fresh, so appealing. and i think a lot of it comes down to narrative flow. there's an ease to the writing of the first 2/3 of the book (more about that later) that is... delightful. it's not particularly sparkly-luminous prose, but there is something *charming* about his storytelling that sucked me right in and kept me completely immersed in his story.

but.

around the 2/3 mark, the action moves up into the mountains, where the characters are going on a "tramp" through nature, and that's where it started losing me a little. it's not that nothing happens while they are up there, because it surely does, but it got a little more didactic than it was up to that point. a little too on-the-nose preachy about the evils of mining companies raping the earth. within the situation it makes sense, but to a reader, it's a little too much telling at the expense of showing. and there are also some awkward insertions of mountain medicine that seem clunky. from that point on, i found myself a little less engaged in the story than i was in the parts leading up to that transition, but it didn't run the book for me - it just brought it from a five star "best book ever" to a very respectable four star "loved it" rating.

the ONLY other thing i was conflicted about was the main character, kevin. he is supposed to be 14, but he reads a lot younger. he's a little naive, and comes across more like 12. i understand why he is older, since he needs to be physically strong enough to handle some of the later scenes, which would be unrealistic for a 12-year-old, and i loved the way he shades into understanding through his experiences, so i wouldn't sacrifice that by having him be more savvy, but it's just something i had to adjust in my head while i was reading. a flaw, but not a deal breaker.

not at all.

it's a little reminiscent of stephen king's "the body," which is me paying a compliment, not crowing "derivative," because if there's one writer who does a strong coming-of-age book, it's stephen king.

i definitely recommend it if you are into these kinds of stories, because despite my caveats and quibbles, i enjoyed so many of this book's quiet moments, and the poignancy it evoked in my robot heart.

seriously, dude, stop venture capitaling, because no one even knows what that *is*.

come to my blog!

