

# Speaking High Hillbilly With Chuck Kinder

## Mountaineer from Another Planet

by Michael Larkin

illustration by Ray Tabique

THERE are certain historical revisionist folks in West Virginia—Mountain State culturati, we'll call them—who would like outsiders to notice the state's scenic rivers and mountain ranges and reflect on what a great place it is to visit and conduct business. They would rather we pay no mind to their crazy, coal dust-spattered hillbilly cousin over there: the one who enjoys spinning his car through donuts in the mud alongside his doublewide, the one who starts bar brawls, cheats on his wife, sips moonshine from Mason jars, and is unafraid of looking at something ugly and daring to term it beautiful.

These revisionists are going to be none too pleased with crazy cousin Chuck Kinder's new book, *The Last Mountain Dancer*, which Carroll & Graf will drop on Appalachia and the rest of the world this fall. The book, which Kinder calls "my meta-memoir and mythopoetic travelogue to Almost Heaven," promises a kind of anti-*Let's Go* guide approach that will chronicle the lives of "genuine West Virginians"—most prominently Kinder himself—in their "totally individualistic, totally non-conformist, ugly-weird glory. A sampling of chapter titles alone reveals what's likely to make the culturati nervous: "The Girl with No Face"; "Ugly Baby"; "Crippled Flasher"; "Beerjoint Ballerinas"; "Hillbilly History"; "The Body in the Woods"; "The Ghosts of Headless Coeds." He looks at the state's amorphous shape like a Rorschach test and envisions it as "amoebic squashed roadkill" or a "damaged human heart," the characterization changing in accordance with "what manner of chemicals are raging through one's bloodstream." This in addition to the fact that the book's prologue hints at details to come about a parking lot fistfight involving the supposedly genteel Yankee multimillionaire and West Virginia Senator Jay Rockefeller.

So: How about you c'mon down and move your corporate headquarters into Charleston, hmmm?

"When you talk about the real, redneck West Virginia, it's something the powers that be are really trying to keep a lid on. Oh God, when *Dancer* comes out, I'll have to go down there armed, man," Kinder says via phone from his home in Pittsburgh, where in the background his cantankerous 21-year-old cat, Lulu, howls her agreement. He notes that one of his inspirations for *Dancer* was an award-winning documentary series by filmmaker Jacob Young called *Different Drummer*, which followed the lives of actual, sometimes strange West Virginians. "They're works of utter brilliance, genius even, and you can't even buy them now. The PBS station out of Morgantown owns the rights to them and they've taken them out of circulation. It's like image over art. They're these wonderful documentaries that you've got to bootleg to get around."

Kinder plies his trade from his yellow brick home near the University of Pittsburgh, where he is currently director of the writing program. He's been there for 24 years, writing and teaching and raconteuring while making frequent forays into his home state, the border of which is less than an hour's drive away. He's the semi-expatriate writer keeping a close eye on his beloved Planet West Virginia, as he calls it, moving back and forth from one river valley to the other.

He's the author of three novels: *Snakehunter*, a coming-of-age story set in West Virginia and told in a collagist structure influenced by the likes of James Wright, William Gass, Sergei Eisenstein and Carl Jung (you know, your standard hillbilly touchstones); *The Silver Ghost*, which chronicles a James Dean-obsessed young man's exodus from West Virginia in the late '50s, and his subsequent descent into pulling armed robberies in Atlantic City; and his most recent novel, *Honeymooners*, Kinder's much-heralded roman à clef about his experiences with future literary lion Raymond Carver and their wives during Kinder and Carver's time together as students and teachers in Stanford's writing program during the '70s.

The last novel had become something of a legend in Pittsburgh literary circles by the time it finally emerged in 2001, closing a two decade-long gap between novels for Kinder. He'd written it off and on for years, as it grew from its genesis as a joke written for Carver's enjoyment to a sprawling, out of control narrative that ran to 3,000 pages and featured aliens landing in North Beach and meta-fictional flights of fancy. During this time, elements of Kinder's life seemed to partially influence the creation of Grady Tripp, the chain dope-smoking, big-hearted lead character of *Wonder Boys*, the novel by Michael Chabon, one of Kinder's former students. In *Wonder Boys*, Tripp, a Pittsburgh University teacher and writer who has published a big-hit novel in his youth, struggles with a 2,600-page opus he can't manage to finish or get published as his life falls apart around him.

Kinder admired Chabon's book and the subsequent movie adaptation, though he sounds understandably tired of being associated with it. When *Honeymooners* was published several years later, *Wonder Boys* inevitably came up in interviews. "I kept saying that I had nothing to do with it. The only joking comment I ever make about it is that Michael Douglas was not nearly cute enough to play Grady Tripp in the movie. But my thought has always been that that was Michael's creation and his book."



In real life, Kinder had finally turned to writer friends Richard Ford and Scott Turow for help finding a publisher for his own massive opus. Turow suggested extensive cuts and put Kinder in touch with his publisher, Farrar, Straus & Giroux. After a 2,000-plus page haircut, *Honeymooners* emerged to positive reviews and, among other things, made Kinder a fascination in Italy, where he went with his wife, Diane, on a 10-day book tour ("presentations," the Italians call them). The tour took them to posh hotels and spacious villas in cities like Rome, Naples, Bologna, and Turin, and included an Italian actor reading passages from *Honeymooners* to a University of Roma audience while Kinder answered questions through a translator.

"I'm still astonished. I was on national TV and on the radio. Scott [Turow] was there at the same time. He was leaving as we were coming and he says, 'Jesus Christ, man, you're gettin' all the ink! You're gettin' more ink than me!'" Kinder chuckles at the memory. "My Italian editor says, 'Ina Italy you'rea Elvis!'" The Italian website [librerie.it](http://librerie.it) seconds his editor's

enthusiasm: "Chuck Kinder è una figura leggendaria della letteratura Americana."

An American legend in Italy—it was the kind of trip Kinder might have dreamed up. Or not, to hear him tell it. "My four books are very autobiographical. I've always admired writers of great imagination, even genre science fiction and detective stuff. I wish I had more imagination. I think I rely too much on my life for material, but that's what I do, that's what I write, and it's too late to be worried about it now. Looking back, I've never felt comfortable thinking of myself as a novelist, but I'm not a memoirist either. A lot of my writing is fictionalized, but as a starting point it's pretty much memory and letting my imagination play over the memory."

In the case of *The Last Mountain Dancer*, Kinder has stripped away several layers of the novelist's artifice, replacing the main characters of his novels—little Speer Whitfield of *Snakehunter* and literary bad boy Jim Stark of *The Silver Ghost* and *Honeymooners*—with lead character Chuck Kinder. The resulting book is something akin to Frederick Exley's *A Fan's Notes*: a fictionalized memoir or a factual novel.

"There's a threshold of reality there, but I call it 'meta-memoir' because sometimes I'd have to let the necessities of the story take precedence over what literally happened. Our oldest forms of storytelling are the historical chronicle and the fairytale, and I think the memoir, meta- or otherwise, is somewhere between that: sort of a factual chronicle, but there's also some legendary stuff in there."

Kinder adds, "Virtually everything in the book has happened in one form or another. All of it has an emotional truth. What can I say? I'll be telling some people [in West Virginia]—Southern Baptist idiots down there that I might have to confront—that they can take it that it's as literally true as the Bible, and you know what that means."

Or maybe West Virginia will welcome one of its native literary sons home. Excited by a meeting with fellow West Virginian writer Lee Maynard, the author of the novels *Crum* and *Screaming with the Cannibals* (and whose writing has also upset the Mountain State culturati), Kinder got a wild hair last year: How about he and Maynard hook up with *The Deliberate Strangers*, an alt-country band with whom Kinder had performed in Pittsburgh, and go on a reading tour of West Virginia? All three parties were game, and so last summer was birthed the "Outlaw Writers Tour," a whirlwind road show that zipped through shady bars, libraries and clubs across West Virginia, concluding with a respects-paying performance to Hank Williams in the town of Oak Hill, where a plaque marks the spot of Williams' death 40 years ago. Earlier on the tour, *The Deliberate Strangers'* Jon Manning

recorded one night's gig at a bar in Charleston, cutting an album featuring readings by Kinder and Maynard and seven rollicking songs by the band, the literature and the music blending like a blasphemous spiritual sung from a coal mountain hollow (the album is available at the band's web site: [deliberatestrangers.com](http://deliberatestrangers.com)).

Kinder describes the night of the recorded performance. "This was just a low-down beer joint in the toughest area of town. We pull up and all the windows are busted out and boarded over. And the people in there, honest to God, man, it was just utterly redneck and punk. There was a punk band that was supposed to be playin' there that night, but the thing is that they didn't show, so we were it, man," he laughs.

On the CD, Kinder reads in a voice that recalls Johnny Cash as run through an overlay of Appalachia and bourbon—listening to him, one gets a sense of what Kinder means by his comment in the prologue to *Dancer* that "my stylistic mode would be oracular in nature and pure High Hillbilly." Kinder reads from the penultimate chapter of *Dancer*, depicting a scene in which "Chuck Kinder" gets drawn into an ass kicking by a "killer refrigerator" named Baddest Bill, the fight eventually spilling into the gravel parking lot and igniting a bar-wide melee.

On the same night of the recording in Charleston, there was a real-life dustup in the bar that could just as easily have appeared in one of Kinder's fictions: "I was sporting a cane because of surgery I had on my foot. It was my beer joint cane—a big ol' club of a thing—and I almost got into a fight, man. When my buddy Lee Maynard was reading, some big ol' fat guy was up at this machine, makin' a lot of noise, and I told him to turn that fucker off. So we got into some lip, and I had my cane up and I was ready to bash him. I'm a redneck myself, kinda pissed off. And he backed off, he was sayin', 'Who's this crazy old coot with the cane?' After that, when Lee and I read, except for that one big dumb guy, you could have heard a fucking pin drop. And everyone clapped and listened and really liked it... All these rednecks were buying me drinks. We were kind of a hit."

And so it goes for the literary outlaw, returning soon to a bookstore near you—Kinder's art imitates his life imitates his art and wheels back again to life as if his writing paraphrases the old-timey hymn: The circle remains unbroken, by and by. ●●●

*Michael Larkin's stylistic mode might be termed logorrheic in nature, and pure Low Suburbia.*