



## John Sloan

### WINNER OF THE 2023 WRITING APPALACHIAN CONTEST

#### MAJOR

Psychology

#### HOME

Inwood, West Virginia

#### ESSAY

For most of my teenage years, I was ashamed of being from West Virginia. I think part of it might have been because the stories I was reading and writing never took place there. I write predominately horror, so most West Virginian representation was in stereotyped and borderline offensive antagonists. Personally, I hope this story reaches other upcoming writers from West Virginia and inspires them to write stories in their home state.

#### WHY WRITING MATTERS

Writing is unique in its way of creating emotions. A strong story or powerful essay has the power to evoke joy, heartbreak, sympathy, change minds, bend perspectives, or, since I write horror, create fear. In my essay, writing is how we change the view of Appalachians. It is how we create the picture of ourselves for the world to see. Simply put, writing has the power to change the world.

## The Stories They Tell

I don't know when I began feeling ashamed of being from West Virginia.

I know the first specific memories of that feeling happened sometime after learning *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow* does not take place in West Virginia. I'm not sure why I thought it did. It was in high school when I learned *Sleepy Hollow* is nestled in upstate New York, not amongst the valleys of my home state. Perhaps the old librarian sitting in her creaking rocking chair at Mill Creek Intermediate had said West Virginia when she first read a picture-book version to my class around Halloween one year. Perhaps I simply misremembered or just was not paying close enough attention.

As a child, I loved that story, and it felt unique to me as a story from home. I read a lot back then, often going through a book in a couple of days, and stories did not take place in West Virginia.

Our state comes stocked with stories, and yet they are rarely the ones told. Instead, we get films such as *Wrong Turn*, wherein inbred hillbillies brutally dismember the college kids who made the titular mistake. Characters in stories about West Virginia have rarely been respectable. At best, they are typically "poor, illiterate, and strung out," as Bette Midler so eloquently put it; at worst they are the savages of *Wrong Turn*.

These are the stories told about us. These are the stories people pay to see. People who have likely never been here write stories for us, full of misrepresentations and misunderstandings. But those were what filled my head about my state, and as an angsty teenager I believed it wholeheartedly. My peers around me all felt the same, and I remember the venom spat at an AP English teacher who suggested most of us would remain in West Virginia. I was stuck in an echo chamber of my own making, with reinforcement surrounding me on all sides, a snow globe that swirled existential dread instead of faux winter.

I wanted so badly to get out of West Virginia, and I don't know why I was filled with that desire other than it felt like what I was supposed to want. This was how I went through high school. It was how I entered college. Even as I began reading and writing horror, famous for its locations, I never thought of West Virginia as somewhere stories could take place. There was too little going on, too few people here. The sedentary nature I believed the people of the state had did not make for good stories. A good story needs things to happen, people to go places, and an end goal. To me, West Virginia had none of these. It seemed that the outside world agreed, a mutual understanding between myself and other writers the world over.

I was here, at WVU, before it occurred to me stories could take place in West Virginia. The epiphany occurred after I read Daniel Ray Pollock's *The Devil All the Time*. A part of me felt vindicated as I read that book. It is not a pretty story by any means. Few characters have any redeeming qualities, and at points the story is nothing short of disturbing, but it is a story written by someone who had actually spent time here, someone who had taken the extra step to know the problems and the peoples of the region. I felt seen through fiction. It was the kind of thing I wanted to write, but never knew I could. Put simply, it felt liberating.

I wonder what would have happened if I had been introduced to a book like that sooner. Perhaps, I would have started my contributions to the Appalachian library sooner. As a child, I was full of belief and love of my state because I falsely thought a story took place there. As an adult, I found the same joy and freedom in a different book. I feel like it speaks to the power of stories. West Virginians need to reclaim the storytelling of our home, and take it back from those who may otherwise squander or disparage it. I think story may be how we change minds, how we keep people here, how we convince others it is no better or worse than anywhere else. People outside of these borders only know what they read and see, so we need to give them something new to consume.

The shame of being from here lifted upon reading a singular novel that spent half its time in West Virginia. I began to write stories here, and I felt cleansed. For the first time, I wanted to stay here. I could call this home.

I think we all need more of that feeling, and I think we need more representation of our home. Storytelling is entrenched in our culture, and it seems to be a part we have abandoned. We have turned our backs on our stories. I think that is one of the most destructive things we can do. Sometimes I wonder what would have happened to me if *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow* really did take place in West Virginia. Maybe I would have clutched onto that story, a little gem of pride, and try to follow its lead. Maybe I would not have tried to write my way out of West Virginia; maybe I would not have been a junior in college before I wrote my first story set here. As a child, the ability to escape into Narnia with Lucy or Middle-Earth with Frodo was a necessity, it was a part of my being and remains as a piece of my soul. But to be able to escape into one's own backyard, that seems to me to be something far richer.