

## DEAR READER,

Several years ago, I was leaning in the office door of my friend, mentor, and freelance editor, Jason Fry—a native son of Logan County, West Virginia. Among the wall decor hung a black-and-white photograph of a one-armed preacher holding aloft a rattlesnake, his empty sleeve tucked into his waistband—an image that helped inspire my novel *Gods of Howl Mountain*. It seemed we were always bringing up some such Southern stereotype or American myth for research, debate, or deconstruction. On this day, the term *redneck* came up.

“You know where that word comes from?” asked Jason.

I touched the back of my neck. “Sunburn, from working in the fields.”

Jason’s eyes sparked over his great ironshot beard, and he leaned toward me, rubbing his hands together. “Boy, you don’t know the half of it.”

So began my long personal journey into the history of the Battle of Blair Mountain, the largest armed uprising since the Civil War. In 1921, ten thousand coal miners rebelled against the coal companies, which had been using an army of private detectives (“gun thugs”) to keep the miners from unionizing. A million rounds were fired, bombs were dropped on American soil, and only the arrival of the United States Army stopped the violence. The miners wore red bandannas tied around their necks, and people called the miners “rednecks.”

Blair Mountain is located in Jason’s home county of Logan, and he’d spent his childhood hunting for shell casings on the mountain instead of arrowheads. He knew the history from growing up there, but I was astounded that a battle of such scale and cultural implication was scarcely known outside of southern West Virginia. My mother’s side of my family, who hail from the neighboring state of Kentucky, hadn’t been taught the history in school, and in speaking to readers on book tours, I found very few folks had even heard of Blair Mountain or the Mine Wars.




Here was a rich seam of buried history—a story thundering in the earth, waiting to be told.

Today, Merriam-Webster defines a redneck as “a white member of the Southern rural laboring class,” while other dictionaries add a “bigot” (*Dictionary.com*), who “has little education and has strong conservative political opinions” (*Oxford Learner’s Dictionaries*), and “is seen by others as being uneducated and having opinions and attitudes that are offensive” (*Britannica*).



Photo Credit: Addie Jo Bannerman





In stark contrast, the “redneck” miners of the 1920s were a diverse lot, significantly more so than popular depictions of coal mining would have us believe. In fact, by 1900, one in five West Virginia coal miners was Black, and one third were foreign-born (wvculture.org). Politically, they were pushing for social progress and economic justice, workers’ rights, and the freedom to unionize.

In 2017, I wrote a short story for *The Bitter Southerner* that braided the history of Battle of Blair Mountain with the story of a march a century later—a contemporary timeline in which a young man gets involved with an anti-racist, anti-fascist community defense organization that takes its inspiration from the redneck miners of the 1920s. Then I began to expand that story into a full-length novel.

As my sixth novel, *Rednecks* wasn’t my first rodeo, but I’d never undertaken a book that required so much historical and physical research. I wanted to write the definitive novel of the Battle of Blair Mountain as best I could, almost exactly one century after it occurred, both timeless and with all of the contemporary echoes that, as *The Bitter Southerner* said of the short story, “feel as relevant as the news.”



I went to West Virginia and explored the old Hatfield-McCoy feud lands where much of the story took place. I touched bullet-shot walls from the Matewan Massacre, which opens this novel, and took my '78 Yamaha motorcycle high and deep to find the old Blair Mountain battle sites where a car could never go—and where coal companies still restrict access to the land.

At the same time, I was finding contemporary echoes everywhere, resounding through our streets and valleys. Here was an alternative origin story that seemed at once timeless and blisteringly contemporary, begging to be told.

Five years later, I turned in a draft of the novel to my editor, who rejected it. He felt the dual timelines were too much for a single book. While I came to see that he was right, it felt like a sledgehammer blow at the time. Five years of work and more than 90,000 words—every single one written and rewritten again and again—possibly gone.

Writing is not for the faint of heart. It’s an emotional and psychological crucible, which tests the depths of your faith, resilience, and resolve on a semifrequent basis. The words of my late father kept coming to me, quoting Churchill: *If you’re going through hell, keep going.*

So often, if you keep putting one foot in front of the other (marching?), even in darkness, you will find your way. If you’re willing to find a light, you will. The most important thing is that you don’t quit, nor close your eyes to your vision.



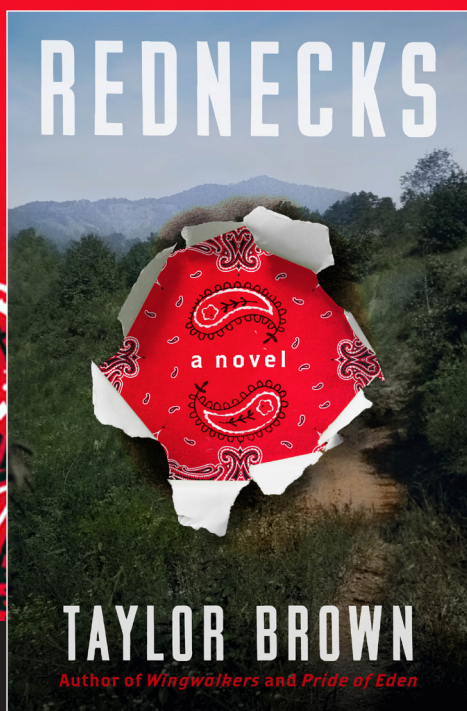
With the contemporary storyline stripped away, the reader needed characters they could sympathize with beyond historical figures like Mother Jones and Sid Hatfield. My editor was intrigued by one of the book's side characters, *a Lebanese-American physician*. . . .

At the time, he had no idea that I'd based this character on my own great-grandfather, Dr. Domit Simon Sphire—a figure of lore in the family, who'd sailed to America from Mount Lebanon in 1889, just fourteen years old and without his parents, and graduated from the University of Kentucky College of Medicine. He'd eloped on horseback with my great-grandmother, Buddeah Muhanna, become a well-respected physician and medical examiner in rural Kentucky, and even earned a place in a 1920s history of the state.

All my life, I'd had an inside view of my mother and uncle's struggle to hold together the family farm in Kentucky, just three miles from where my great-grandparents lived and where my grandmother grew up. I'd studied Arabic in college to connect with my Lebanese heritage, and I've always had a special connection with my great-grandfather. After all, we share the same birthday, though he was born 107 years before I was. I'd wanted to write about him for years—I just hadn't found the right angle of approach.

In the midst of rejection and disappointment, this was the proverbial "eureka" moment, the light bulb in the darkness. Over months of rewriting, Doc Moo took his place at the heart of the novel, and Big Frank and Miss Beulah stepped up beside him—all side characters who'd been waiting in the wings, ready to assume their place in the spotlight.

Without the darkness, I would not have seen the light, and the book you're holding would not have the power, weight, and heart I believe it has. As a writer, it was a hell of a battle, but maybe that's just how it should be.



SINCERELY,

TAYLOR BROWN