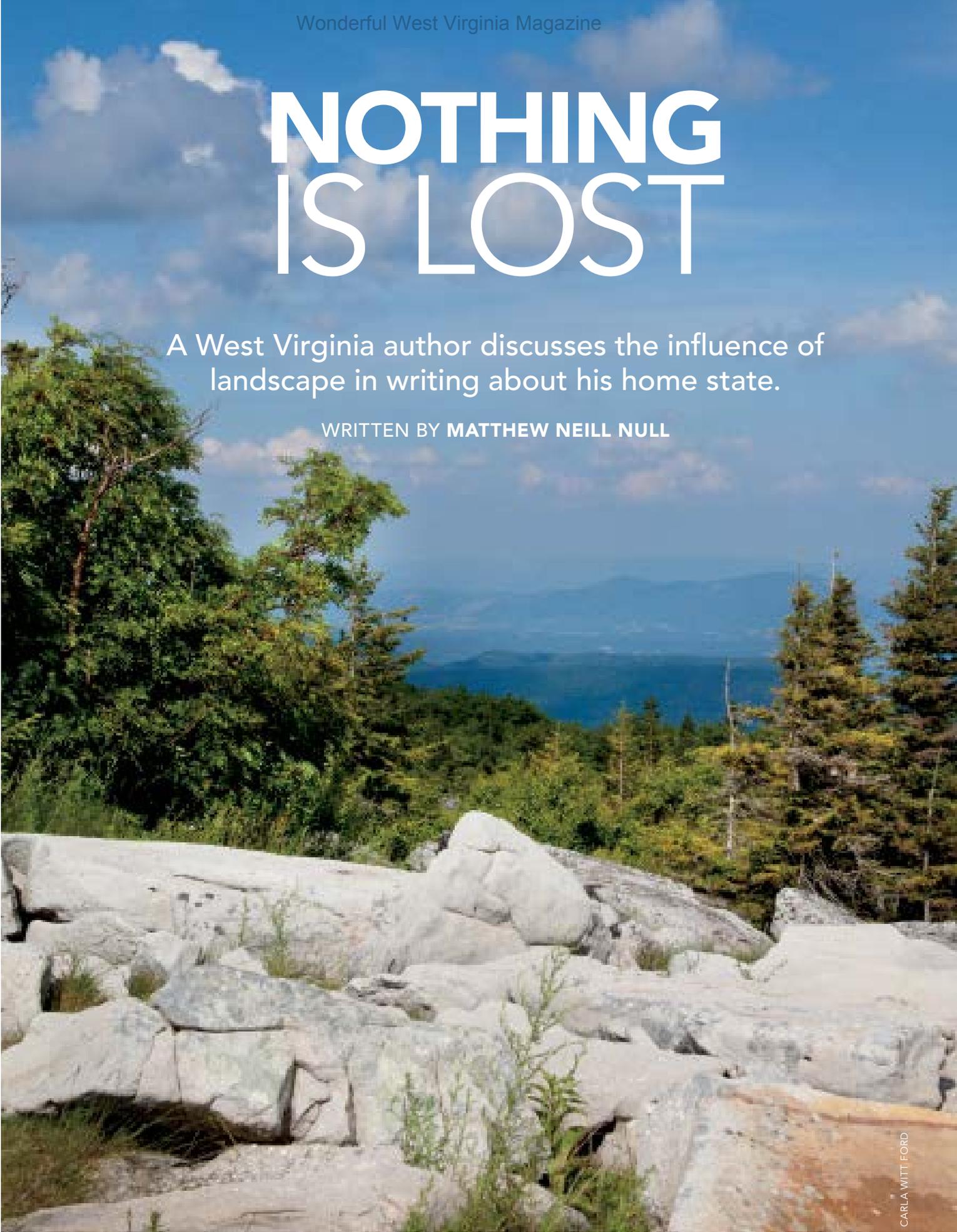


NOTHING IS LOST

A West Virginia author discusses the influence of landscape in writing about his home state.

WRITTEN BY **MATTHEW NEILL NULL**



CARLA WITT FORD



This 1939 photo of Davis, West Virginia, taken by John Vachon, shows an abandoned paper mill sitting on fully cut-over hills.

When I read from my novel, *Honey from the Lion*, audience members always ask me about my methods of research. The book takes place in the high-altitude timber camps of West Virginia, circa 1904, and seeks to recapture a forgotten world—the world that created us. It surprises my audience when I tell them time spent in a library or in front of a computer was unimportant and that the best “research,” if you can call it that, was simply living in West Virginia and looking closely at its landscape, structures, and remnants of the past.

Walking in the Monongahela National Forest as a child brought me face to face with our collective past for the first time. In writing *Honey from the Lion*, I was able to revisit the few scraps of timber camps and boomtowns I saw as a child while hunting and fishing in the forest: the bottle dumps, the piles of rusty peavey-heads, the torn-up tracks, and, just once, a scorched foundation of a

mill. It’s not much, considering that thousands lived and labored in the old camps. When loggers moved camp, they disassembled their bunkhouses, stacked them on cars, and reassembled their lives a few miles up-track. Logging was as mobile an enterprise as whaling from ships, and loggers chased the forest down to the very last tree, each man an Ahab or an Ishmael. Still, as a kid I could see the faint tracings of what remained, usually off the established trails, if I paid attention. This taught me to look at the land and see how different human experiences have been embroidered onto a single piece of ground.

Take, for example, Dolly Sods. When a Hessian ex-soldier named Johann Dahle found the place in the 1780s, he saw it as an untouched wilderness (the Shawnee had already been pushed west) and yet a promising place to run livestock—something hard to imagine now, looking upon its boulder fields and bogged soil. On that wind-scoured mountain, Dahle became a farmer and a miller and, in American fashion, became John Dolly, living out a reasonably happy life, from what I can tell, despite bad weather.

But Dolly Sods’ wolves and lions were soon exterminated by the bounty system. The passenger pigeons, once considered inexhaustible, were eaten to the last one. Later, Dolly Sods was logged to bare earth and burned over, as



This 1938 photo shows logs ready for the sawmill in Preston County's Erwin, near the Cheat River.

much of the state was, and then purchased by the federal government for pennies under the 1911 Weeks Act for purposes of fire control and soil conservation. By then the deer, bear, and turkey had nearly been killed out. Not much happened until the Civilian Conservation Corps replanted the vanished red spruce in the 1930s—an effort that might never have occurred if not for the national crisis of the Great Depression. And then a new crisis came, this time an international one, and administrators shifted their eyes once again upon this lonely place. In World War II, Dolly Sods was used as an artillery range in preparation for the war's European theater, and even now live shells are sometimes found rusting among the boulders. An artillery range is on level with a garbage dump: No one wastes good real estate on that.

When the shelling ended, the local people returned to hunt what they could, gather huckleberries, and admire wild azaleas. Deer, bear, and turkey slowly increased as

a new forest grew back, a forest starkly different from the old one. Later generations would come to appreciate Dolly Sods' strange ecosystem: a sliver of northern tundra left behind when an ice age came to its end, a place of rare plants living in a precarious balance of delicacy and resilience. When writers began to articulate the value of an American wilderness, most eloquently in Aldo Leopold's 1949 *A Sand County Almanac* and Wallace Stegner's 1960 "Wilderness Letter," they had places like Dolly Sods in mind. What was considered worthless in the early 1900s became precious, and in 1975, after much debate in print and in the U.S. Congress, Dolly Sods became one of the first federally protected wilderness areas in the eastern United States. Today it's beloved. License plates from dozens of states decorate trailheads. Hikers and hunters and skiers and photographers cherish the sods, project their individual desires upon it, and try to use it well.

A novelist must take a long view of history, beyond the narrow strictures of a single human life, and

"Bound to become one of the most admired and influential fiction writers of his generation . . . Null has the chops to represent the American past in a way that is richly credible for its period and yet is stylistically daring."
—JAIMY GORDON, author of *Land of Mirrors*

Honey from the Lion

a novel

MATTHEW NEILL NULL

explore the clashing desires of different eras. The virtues of one generation may be considered chauvinism by the next. Life in West Virginia is shaped entirely by the land and the debate over how it should be used; each generation grapples with the struggle anew.

I chose to focus my novel on the loggers of the late 19th and early 20th century as they grappled with the issue of extractive industry for the very first time, without the benefit of hindsight or experience. It's easy to forget how radically new that world was to them, how little it resembled their collective past, and how sudden the change. When the work ended, loggers were taken to boomtowns like Thomas and Richwood to draw their pay and spend it. They were local men and immigrants, black and white. Tavern-keepers would have dozens of beer kegs lined up for them outside town stores. It had to be overwhelming for loggers to step into such crowds, after months on the mountains. A few days later, they were driven back to the mountains and put to work again,

pulling crosscut saws called "misery whips," telling jokes, nursing grudges, missing women, and talking of the birds and animals around them.

When the land was exhausted, the men went on to other lives. We don't know what these lives were; for all we romanticize them, common workers are the first to be left behind by written history. We can assume they pursued other trades or left for other states. Novels are written for myriad reasons but, in part, I wanted to tell the stories of forgotten people born, by a trick of geography, into precarious positions. In fearing for their disappearance, I feared my own.

Other trades, other states—that's also the experience of my generation, who grew up in West Virginia of the 1980s and 1990s. The mines were closing, Marcellus Shale fracturing had not yet been developed, no one expected flush times ahead, and many of us graduated high school and left the state for employment or the military. A hardy few stuck around to eke out lives in a crippled economy. To stay or to go was a difficult decision to make.

These stories are still being written. Wells are drilled, old farms are set aglow by the rig fires, workers are hired and laid off and hired again, and new people come from Oklahoma and Louisiana, Texas and Arkansas. Maybe some will stay. It's too soon to tell. Regardless, their dreams are now written on the landscape, just as the landscape authors their dreams.

E.L. Doctorow wrote, "The historian will tell you what happened. The novelist will tell you what it felt like." In my way,

I've tried to create an emotional geography of West Virginia, one that bridges the gap between ourselves and our ancestors, to make them comprehensible to contemporary minds. 🍷

Honey from the Lion

In this lyrical and suspenseful debut novel by Matthew Neill Null, a turn-of-the-century logging company decimates ten thousand acres of virgin forest in the West Virginia Alleghenies and transforms a brotherhood of timber wolves into revolutionaries. Null's 2015 debut has been hailed for its rich language and thrilling tale of industrial West Virginia.