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Betty J. Bruther  
*Marian University*

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Montgomery, Jess. 2020. *The Hollows: A Novel, Volume Two of the Kinship Series*. New York: Minotaur Books, 352 pp. \$17.99 (paperback), ISBN 978-1-250781-69-7

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Reviewed by Betty J. Bruther

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Jess Montgomery's novel *The Widows* is a classic origin story and mystery tale. The novel recounts the events of the year 1925 in fictitious Bronwyn County, Ohio, a part of western Appalachia. The story is told through the words of two women, both widows, as a result of the mining practices and venal corruption of the Ross Mining Company. One is Lily Ross, the widow of the murdered county sheriff (Daniel Ross), and she serves as the newly appointed sheriff of the county. The other is Marvena Whitcomb, the common-law wife and widow of a coal miner and union organizer (John Rutherford), and she works as a union organizer and bootlegger. Each woman confronts the basic conflicts of the age—corrupt government officials, organized-crime bosses, and exploitative mine owners. They discover it is difficult to escape the political and economic chicanery of the era. They are forced to compromise their own ideals, so that the people of their county can lead lives of dignity and peace.

The tale opens dramatically. Ross Mine #9, known as the “widow-maker,” explodes, killing five miners and two rescuers. The explosion is witnessed by a red-tailed hawk. The mine had been closed in the late nineteenth century because over forty miners had been killed due to a methane build-

up and explosion. The mine owners, Luther and Elias Ross, have reopened the mine, so that they can make a profit from its deep veins of anthracite coal. They care very little for the miners and their families who live in the company town of Rossville.

Elias Ross and his nephew, Luther, believe that miners and their families are inferior beings, unimportant foreigners, and “white trash.” As for Daniel Ross, the mining family see him as a useful member of the family, but one who is not truly a Ross, given his First Nations mother. They own the town of Rossville—its school, its stores, and its housing. None of the miners are free to leave Rossville; they have no U.S. currency in their accounts, for they are paid in company scrip, good only in Rossville. Miners in debt to the company lose their housing, and are forced to live in tents near the mine. Since they still owe money to their employers, they cannot leave the company. As for their children, Luther Ross has closed the school, as an unwarranted extra expense. He ignores both the federal and state safety regulations and child labor laws. He is willing to use the infamous Pinkerton Detective Agency agents to enforce his will.

Daniel Ross, the sheriff, works to mitigate their violent intimidation of the miners and the union organizers. He hopes to avoid another Matewan Massacre (1920) or Blair Mountain Battle (1921) in his county. He promises his friend (and former lover) Marvena Whitcomb that he would contact federal authorities at the U.S. Bureau of Mines about the situation in Rossville. Yet before he can contact his friend at the bureau, Daniel is killed. According to Luther Ross, he was killed transporting a miner, Tom Whitcomb, to the county jail. Lily Ross is asked to fill her husband’s remaining term in office as sheriff. Lily Ross enters the office, hoping to discover the truth about her husband’s death. Over the course of the novel, she uncovers a host of mysteries involving her late husband, the mines, and the violence and secrets at the foundation of her community.

Montgomery’s second novel in the Kinship mystery series, *The Hollows*, introduces the Midwestern Ku Klux Klan to readers. The tale takes a deep plunge into the role of virulent racism in

Lily Ross's community via the Women's Ku Klux Klan, returning to a theme of her previous mystery, the importance of women's agency in Appalachian communities, for good and evil. This story concerns itself with the murder of an elderly woman, Thea Kincaide, on September 21, 1926. A long-absent member of the Kinship community, she has returned to her old hometown, as a resident in the Hollows Asylum for the Insane. On a dark autumn night, she escapes from the facility on a mission, one from her childhood in antebellum America. She makes her way toward a home; she remembers a murder, a lynching, and a baby. She must deliver the baby to a safe haven. Her falling body stops a freight train in its tracks. Sheriff Lily Ross is called to the scene—she determines that the unidentified woman was murdered—there are signs above a railway tunnel that there was a scuffle and the woman was thrown down to her death on the tracks. As Lily Ross tracks the woman's journey, she discovers Klan masks and robes (for women) in an abandoned cabin, once used as stop along the Underground Railroad. She is horrified "evil has a way of slithering forth again and again, its old form disguising itself in new masks, its ancient pretexts of hatred rewritten with new justifications" (p. 64).

Each of the characters is haunted in this novel, and their narrative arcs trace the necessary pain needed to address and acknowledge the cancer at the heart of this Appalachian community, both in terms of its hidden specific history of violence and its legacy of white supremacy.

When Montgomery discovered the life of Maude Collins, the first female sheriff in Ohio history, she felt inspired to create the hero of her novel, Lily Ross. She dipped into her knowledge of Appalachian history, creating Marvena Whitcomb, who was loosely based on the famous union activist of the 1920s, Mary Harris "Mother" Jones. She also wrote the novel as a tribute to the women of the region—their quiet courage and endurance in the face of terrible events. She taps effectively into the folklore of the region. Daniel Ross has a totem animal, a red-tailed hawk, which appears periodically in the novel, highlighting his First Nations heritage.

Montgomery's Kinship series introduces readers to a particular corner of Appalachia, its history, its culture and its people with more books slated for the series. Montgomery joins other writers in the regional history genre. Well-researched and well-executed, the Kinship Series will give literary scholars of historical fiction and regional literature much to consider and discuss.

*Betty J. Bruther is an independent scholar and instructor emeritus of history at Marian University in Indianapolis.*