

# Multiple Perspectives on Kimi Cunningham Grant's *Fallen Mountains*

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Kathryn Westcott**

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Christopher Grant is Assistant Professor of Biology, James Lakso is Professor Emeritus of Business and Economics, Territa Poole is Assistant Professor of Psychology, James Roney is I. Harvey Brumbaugh Professor of Russian and International Studies, and Kathryn Westcott is Charles A. Dana Professor of Psychology, all at Juniata College. Moderator: Philip Dunwoody is Professor of Psychology at Juniata College.

This is the first year we have required the common read for all first-year students. This year, it is Kimi Cunningham Grant's novel *Fallen Mountains*. Part of the purpose of this panel is to demonstrate something at the heart of the liberal arts: to see how the different disciplinary perspectives or different epistemological lenses of the five panelists help us understand an issue. Dr. James Lakso addresses shifting economic realities in Central Pennsylvania and how those appear in the novel. Dr. Territa Poole addresses the role of emotion in the book, which is her area of research. Dr. Christopher Grant discusses human and environmental interactions and the different types of relationships he has seen in his own work. Dr. Kathryn Westcott talks about relationships and relationship development and how they play out in the book. Dr. James Roney tackles how our history shapes our present, with reference to the William Faulkner quote in *Fallen Mountains*: "The past is never dead. It's not even past." [Spoiler alert: The end of the book is divulged.]

## JIM LAKSO: *FALLEN MOUNTAINS* AND ECONOMICS

I enjoyed reading *Fallen Mountains* very much, but I am here because I came to teach economics at Juniata in September of 1970. This book is not an economic treatise, but it does deal with the societal impact of technological change, a subject that economists have studied extensively. I am particularly interested in the way Kimi Cunningham Grant personifies technological change such that readers see the disruptive effect it can have on society. Much of economics focuses on the positive impact of technological change. Many economists would point to theory and research which show that technological change is what drives economic growth, and economic growth is positively correlated with many of the notions we have of progress. Not only does economic growth increase real income, it also increases literacy, reduces infant mortality, and increases opportunities for leisure.

You will not get economic growth if you mostly do the same things in the same ways. Technology, broadly defined, is about developing new products, new ways of producing products, and more efficient ways of delivering goods and services. Amazon's business model is based on a new way of getting goods to consumers. It's not just changes in how we manufacture things and fix things, but it is also about changes in the way we do business, the way we engage in economic activity. Economists would show that technological change drives both economic growth and all of the benefits that growth produces. They would generally support policies that encourage innovation, technological change, and economic growth. In our era, many of those policies apply to the protection of intellectual property.

While technological change is essential to economic growth, we also know that technological change can be extraordinarily disruptive. Such change alters the way people do business. As a consequence, people have to acquire new skills, incur personal economic loss, and possibly relocate. In the past, governments have sometimes tried to deal with the disruptive effects of new ways of doing business through regulation. For example, there was a time in the early twentieth century when the emergence of the A&P chain of grocery stores was perceived as a threat to every mom-and-pop grocery in the United States. The government tried to pass a law that prevented A&P from underselling the smaller local stores. This policy did not work because the A&P business model better served the needs of customers. Dealing with the disruption by preventing companies from doing business in a new and better way doesn't often work. The point is that economists have long recognized that personal and societal disruption comes with new technology, but neither economists nor government have done much but talk about that disruption.

Technological change produces winners and losers. We generally assume that if the change permanently alters the way resources are used, the gain to the winners outweighs the loss to those who are disrupted. The development of electric cars will reduce wages and profits in the manufacture of gas cars. Green energy will do the same for investment in fossil fuels. Online shopping will disrupt traditional retail. In all of these, changes in the way that business is done will cause workers and investors to incur loss and will disrupt the communities that grew up around the older way of doing business. Some workers will have to develop new skills and may need to relocate. The changes will, at the same time, produce new benefits for workers, customers, and those who invest in the change. It is inevitable.

In *Fallen Mountains*, fracking is the new technology that looms over people's lives. In the novel, the author personifies fracking in a way that makes it clear that her focus is on the disruptive impact of the change. In short, fracking is the people who do the fracking. It is Transom, who lies about buying the land when he actually plans to lease the rights for fracking the farm. So, fracking is a lie. Fracking is the people who work drilling the wells who drive their cars too fast in town, who drink too much beer and try to get local girls pregnant. Fracking is irresponsible. The frackers are people who are so uncivilized that

they use the farm as a bathroom. There are several occasions in the book when someone complains that the oil company didn't rent a portable outhouse and now the landowners are suffering the indignity of workers using their land as a bathroom. Fracking disrespects the land.

Grant's view of technology is summarized in the way she portrays the people who are engaged in this technology, but she doesn't see the good part of it. While it is true that it is disruptive and that it hurts some people, there are also long-term economic benefits for other people that come from this technology. While economists may have gone too far in explaining the benefits of new technology, Grant reminds us all that it would be good if we also recognized the unpleasant parts of the disruption that technology brings.

We need to give greater thought to how we deal with technological change or manage change in economic activity in general. Our challenge remains balancing the need to encourage and reward those who gain from new technology while, at the same time, easing the burdens for those injured by the change. Technological change is essential. We should not try to stop it. It will produce winners and losers, and the winners will win more than the losers lose. Can the gain to the winners be reduced by an amount which does not discourage innovation, and can that amount be used to help ease the cost of the transition from the old order to the new? Fracking is not just people using the land as a bathroom. Fracking is important because it brings other things into our world that would not be possible without it. Although fracking does not do much good for the county in the book, the ability to get natural gas out of the Marcellus shale has had an enormous positive economic impact on many of the people who live in Pennsylvania, especially in rural Pennsylvania. Can some of that gain be used to make the disruption caused by fracking less harmful? Can we find a way to use some of the gains that come from new technology to help ease the economic and social adjustment of those people who bear the cost?

#### TERRITA POOLE: *FALLEN MOUNTAINS* AND THE PSYCHOLOGY OF EMOTIONS

My charge is to talk about the role of emotion in the characters' motivation in *Fallen Mountains*. The author was very masterful in the way that she interwove the backstories of the characters into the time of the novel, which offers us this before-and-after structure, a comparison of how the characters behave after Transom goes missing with how they behave before. It is important to pay attention to that when we talk about their emotions and watch how the characters act.

I will offer a little background on emotions. We all have experienced emotions, and, therefore, we feel like we understand what they are, but, from a scientific perspective, it's generally not what we think. I am going to give you a technical definition first, and then I will boil it down to something more straightforward. Emotions are episodic, relatively short-term, biologically based patterns of perception, experience, physiology, action, and communication that occur in response to specific physical and social

challenges and opportunities. That is a mouthful. Essentially emotions are responses to things, people, and events that we encounter in the world and to our own thoughts. We need emotions. They are critical to us. They actually help us to attract the right things and protect us from things that are not good for us. They serve as kind of a radar and a rapid response system for constructing and carrying meaning across the flow of our everyday experience. They direct us. They help us to meet our goals and to get our needs met.

There are many theories within the science of affect. Some are evolutionary in nature, which most of us probably believe or else we have ascribed to the idea that emotions are hardwired in the brain. There is actually a seminal paper that came out about a month ago that has kind of undercut the idea that they are hardwired and that we can accurately read facial expressions as solid indicators of what people are experiencing. When we study affect, we are looking at the function that an emotion serves. We are looking at the experience and these subjective feelings that you have in your body. When I feel happy, it doesn't necessarily feel the way that it does for Dr. Dunwoody; that's subjective experience.

There is also an expressive component. How does happiness look for me versus you? It's cultural. In some cultures, it's appropriate to be kind of giddy when you're happy; in other cultures, individuals are expected to be content and somewhat reserved. Emotions are quite complex, much deeper than many of us think. Something critical about emotion is that we are socialized to regulate our emotions. It's a natural thing that we do. Regulating our emotions is basically how we change the intensity and duration of emotion to make sure that it serves us well, that it has the right function to meet the goal of getting whatever we need to help us survive.

There are many reasons that we regulate our emotions, but it all starts from the idea that something about the current emotional state that we are in is undesirable. We do things to change that state, even if doing so is out of our conscious awareness. We almost intuitively know that this is not how we are supposed to be feeling, so we do things to regulate our behavior. Some reasons that we regulate include the following: 1) We like to feel good. 2) Sometimes emotions help us get a task met; when you have to take a test, for example, you might get pumped up to take it. That is an instrumental motivation. 3) Sometimes we regulate our emotions to protect ourselves: impression management; you want to look good in the eyes of other people. 4) Pro-social motivation helps us maintain our relationships and keeps us from hurting other people.

I am going to throw into the mix the idea that gender, culture, and even community and regional norms and expectations around emotions dictate how people are allowed to express and the ways that they should feel. You do not often think about that. Typically, you assume you are managing your emotions on your own, but often it is gender, culture, and regional norms that direct our emotional regulation. The most studied strategies for emotional regulation include the following:

- Cognitive reappraisal—changing your way of thinking about a situation that you find yourself in
- Expressive suppression—when you are in church, it’s not really appropriate in most cultures to laugh out loud. You might think something is funny, but you don’t show it on your face; otherwise, you’ll get in trouble.
- Emotional thought suppression—blocking something out, making yourself not deal with it but think about something else
- Emotional disclosure—sharing with other people what is going on with you

These are not equally effective. The most effective of these strategies is cognitive reappraisal.

Suppression does not work. You get something called rebound when you suppress your emotions for a long time. Eventually, it is going to come back to the surface, and, when it does, and we see this happen with Chase, it erupts. The rebound emotion becomes something that you can’t control anymore.

In the novel, all the characters appear to have experienced some sort of trauma. In fact, a key theme about emotions in the book is this experience of trauma and loss. Chase loses his parents and his grandparents. Possum is bullied, but he also loses the chance to have this idealized family that Transom has. At one point, Possum talks about logging on to talk to the Russian girl. That behavior becomes a way that he can suppress those emotions. Transom loses his mother; even though she is not dead, she psychologically departs. We see these characters suffering loss. When loss happens, it literally changes the way that the human brain is wired chemically and physically. It changes the way that we are able to perceive emotion; experience emotion; express emotion; and regulate, control, or manage the different emotions that we encounter. Red feels guilty for not helping Possum when he was clearly in need, resulting in a loss of his sense of self. Guilt is a self-evaluative emotion, the healthy understanding that our actions have consequences for others and tells us we need to fix something. Although Red’s guilt keeps resurfacing, he consistently suppresses that emotion, which is harmful to both him and Possum. Chase is described as being the good guy, the protagonist. There is the mythical alpha male, and Chase is the opposite. He never gets into trouble, but something about losing his parents results in the incident when he kills those deer in the woods. He knows that act is wrong, and he vows that he will never let his emotions get away from him again. However, suppressing emotions actually is harmful to his emotional growth. Transom’s way of regulating is to disappear whenever something comes up that feels bad. He does not stay to deal with it. In the end, none of them can suppress their emotions, and you see the fallout of that unhealthy way of dealing with the various emotions.

The last observation I will make is that, until the characters experience some kind of loss, they are all fairly healthy emotionally. All the characters, based upon their backstories, seem to have had fairly normal, psychologically healthy experiences at one time. Even though Possum has endured bullying, there is no sense that he was always troubled. However, their loss takes them to a place where they start to

depend on suppression, but suppression does not work. They all have a period when suppression no longer works, and then the consequences of that vary for each of them. At the end of the book, Transom leaves for the final time. His pattern of leaving and coming back leads to his eventual death. That was the way that he was able to regulate his emotions at the very end.

#### CHRIS GRANT: *FALLEN MOUNTAINS* AND THE ENVIRONMENT

I will talk about the relationship between people and the environment in *Fallen Mountains*. In the book, there are many examples of people connecting to the environment in a range of ways and to varying depths. For the sake of time, I will focus on the two main characters, Chase and Transom. Both characters connect to the environment but in different ways. Chase has a strong attachment to the land where he grew up. In fact, his closeness to the land almost reaches the point where it resembles a human relationship. The farm becomes like a family member. He talks about Church Hollow and how being there revives his soul. I think this helps to explain Chase's response to seeing the industrial destruction of the landscape and helps explain why it hurts so much. It feels as though tragedy has befallen a family member when he witnesses these changes to the land.

Transom might be somewhat portrayed as the bad guy in the novel. You see that when he signs over the mineral rights and the fracking starts. However, he imagines something very different will take place than what actually happens when fracking begins. I believe Transom actually sees this as a way to save the family farm, and he doesn't realize the full magnitude of the impact. Through some of my own experiences, I have seen similar things happen to well-meaning landowners who have fallen on hard financial times.

Someone suggested to me that Transom's and Chase's relationship with the environment is a parallel reflection of their relationships with Laney, that, initially, Chase's life is going well with both the land and Laney and then Transom comes along and destroys them both. Although one of my main goals for this panel is not to impose my own feelings because I am, perhaps, too close to this subject and this novel (as you may know, my spouse wrote it), I do find that parallel to be an interesting way to think about these relationships.

Often when we talk about fracking and natural gas development, we like to put people in boxes and say, "Well, this group of people, because they are associated with it, are this way, and this group of people because they benefit from it are this way." These are landowners, and these are the tree huggers. We tend to group them all, to compartmentalize people.

In 2012, I started studying the effects of the fracking industry on stream ecosystems. Over the next six years, with collaborations at Juniata and across the U.S., we had some interesting findings that would lend themselves well to another argument over economic benefit versus environmental damage at a

later time. For now, I'll steer clear of the scientific results of what we found and instead focus specifically on some of the interactions I had with people. I remember driving a Juniata College van down a dirt road looking for access to a stream near a well pad. This was before the time they used roads to bring materials in to construct the well pad. Instead, most fracking equipment was flown in with helicopters. There are no roads to access these well pads, so we were looking for the closest access road to a stream to minimize hiking. We made our way down this narrow dirt road, and I realized we were coming to a hunting camp in the Allegheny National Forest. I couldn't back out because we had already been spotted. Four elderly gentlemen sat in the front yard, and I immediately made certain stereotypical assumptions: They are probably outdoorsmen—like me; they're probably conservative—like me; they probably subscribe to “drill, baby, drill,”—not like me. So I thought, “How are they going to respond to me asking them, ‘Where’s the closest place to access the stream to test if fracking is negatively impacting it?’”

As it turned out, all my preconceived notions about how they would respond were wrong. They had been coming to that hunting camp for over thirty years and had a strong connection to the place. Due to fracking, they saw things changing around them. They were hurt by it, both emotionally and personally, as their kids and their children would no longer come visit the camp because the spring that they used to supply their water had gone dry. They realized it's really hard to sustain a camp and comradery without access to water. They had seen firsthand a loss of interest in the younger generations in exploring the outdoors as a result of this loss of direct access to consumable water.

To be fair to the other side, I want to give a perspective of the folks the book refers to as “frackholes.” Many of these folks didn't align well with what they were doing; they were doing it because of economic hardship, as it was the best opportunity for that individual, given where they were located.

In closing, I encourage all of us to make a connection to some small or big environment or natural place in the world. Ultimately, it will change the way you view the environment, and it will help you be a conservationist for that spot. You may even commit to leaving that place a bit better than you found it by balancing economic gains with the need to leave something for the next generation so that they have a chance to attach with the environment the way we do.

#### KATHRYN WESTCOTT: *FALLEN MOUNTAINS AND RELATIONSHIPS*

Building on the remarks of Dr. Poole and Dr. Grant, my task involves analyzing the relationships of the characters in the novel. First, I want us to step back and think about human development: who we are and how that relates to our personal connection with others. Think for a moment about how aspects of you have been shaped by your experiences with others and how your relationships with others have shaped you over time. As you think about how you have become the person that you are today, keep in mind that your development, which is ongoing, is a complex, dynamic process that involves the

intertwining of your biology and environment. Who we are, including how we think, what we do, and how we connect with others, is the result of the complex interaction of who we are genetically and our ongoing interactions with the many aspects of our environments. As we think about the biological components, consider that you are who you are because of twenty-three chromosomes from your biological mother and twenty-three chromosomes from your biological father that make up your unique genes, your DNA. Your DNA is the code for all aspects of who you are: those seen outwardly, like how tall you are, your skin color, and your hair color, as well as aspects that are not easily visible to the outside, like how you react to new situations, how easily you learn new skills, and how much social interaction you enjoy. These biologically outlined characteristics, both external and internal, influence how you interact with your environment as well as how your environment reacts to and interacts with you. This ongoing interchange between your genes and your environment is greatly shaped by your relationships with others.

This complex shaping of our development through the interaction of our genes and environment is a core tenet of the bio-ecological theory of human development proposed by Urie Bronfenbrenner.<sup>1</sup> According to this theory, we, as individuals, are surrounded by five nested systems that are comprised of different aspects of our ecology. These systems directly and indirectly influence our developmental path. The systems closest to us contain the people and environments with whom we have the most direct contact, and the systems further out encompass the broader influences of societal culture and significant events in time that radically alter system functioning. These systems are ever-changing, and their influence is reciprocal, meaning a change in one system often leads to changes in the others. For example, a global pandemic results in the loss of a parent's job, which leads to increased parent stress, which leads to more conflict at home, which increases the activity of your stress-response system, leaving you feeling tired, helpless, and withdrawn from others. As we think about the importance of relationships in our development, this theory espouses that proximal processes, which is the term for the people we interact with on a daily basis, have the most influence in power and form on our development over time. These proximal processes can establish a nurturing environment that provides positive supports that meet our social, emotional, and physical needs and help to facilitate our growth. They also can contain negative experiences, things that limit our abilities, thereby providing an unstable environment that undermines our development and serves as barriers to who, how, and where we want to be.

This bio-ecological model of human development is the framework for how I thought about the characters in *Fallen Mountains*. Often when we are reading, we want to know why. Why are the characters thinking that? Why did they do that? Approaching the characters with a framework such as Bronfenbrenner's does not tell us why, but it can help to explain some of the factors that shape our

understanding of who the characters are, what they do, and how they interact with others in their personal relationships.

First, let us consider the character of Chase. He is someone who has experienced a traumatic loss as a young teen. In just twenty-four hours, he goes from living in a loving family of two parents to being an orphan living with his grandparents. The loss of his parents is a notable change in proximal processes. The positive side of this horrible event for Chase is that he goes from a loving family situation with his parents to a loving family situation with his grandparents, people already a core part of his system. He does not have to move away from his friends. He does not have to change schools. That stability is definitely beneficial for Chase. In understanding the situation, however, we also have to think about it from his grandparents' perspective. In that same period, they lose their child and their child's spouse and find themselves as the primary caretakers of their grandson, a frightened and grieving child. That would be such a difficult situation to navigate. Moreover, as we get to know more about Chase and his grandparents, we can identify a consistent lack of communication in the family relationships. As Dr. Poole said, there is no open dealing with difficult issues or situations in the family. They all may find solace in the quiet, but perhaps what is left unsaid leaves things more raw, open, and uncertain for all of them.

Good communication is central to good relationships. And, although difficult, effectively dealing with difficult emotions helps us to develop the healthy coping mechanisms we will need in future challenging situations. There are so many moving pieces in all of these systems, but it appears that the Hardy family norm is for these changes to be understood but not discussed. What Chase's grandparents likely do out of desire to protect him from hurt actually appears to limit his opportunities for growth. In living with them, he maintains his role of grandchild and helper on the farm despite his aging into adulthood. The negative effect of this is realized when Jack, Chase's grandfather, passes away, and Chase is blindsided by the news that the farm is in significant financial trouble. His grandfather's purposeful withholding of information and his shielding of Chase from difficult issues leaves Chase unprepared to deal with this situation. We can use a framework such as Bronfenbrenner's theory to understand this pattern of poor communication and the ongoing avoidance of emotional topics as being connected to who they are biologically—how they experience emotion—as well as their lived experiences over time within their family, community, and the broader culture.

Back to Dr. Poole's point, the gender and family roles and norms for interaction are influenced by culture. In this book, these behaviors are particularly reflective of Appalachian culture, which historically has espoused a "We keep it to ourselves and deal with it; it is nobody's business what our history is or what our problems are" mentality. Thinking generationally, this is likely how Jack and Maggie, the grandmother, were raised. In addition, they likely define good parenting as protecting Chase from

anything else that may be hard or difficult. It also may be some measure of how they deal with their own loss and grief. Over time, these patterns launch Chase into a very difficult scenario, one where he is trying to cope with his grief for his lost family members and the potential loss of the place that he loves, all without the shield of his grandparents.

Now, let us consider the character of Possum. Here is a kid who experiences ongoing bullying for most of his life. When his peers are not bullying him, they neglect and ostracize him. He is very alone, and we find that people rarely ever think of him. Add in the fact that, for a significant portion of his life because of his stepfather, he lives in a volatile home environment. While he has a close relationship with his biological mother, in his perception, she invites and maintains this abusive, highly violent person in their home. Simply put, his daily life is lonely and a struggle. To cope, he is driven by the dream that he will be accepted by his biological father and will finally have a safe home and the “perfect” life that he perceives Transom as having. Instead, he is rejected and once again finds no consistent, reliable support to buffer the ongoing, negative experiences of daily life. Then Possum experiences a highly traumatic event when he is doused with gasoline and shoved into the trunk of a car by his peer and half-brother. In that moment, he believes he is going to die. While his life is spared, consistent with his life experiences, Red, the person who saves him, says nothing to him or to anyone. Not a word. That day and then weeks and months go by, and he is ignored. His pain is not acknowledged, and no support is given. As has been his life experience, he relies on and has the capacity (at least some degree) to manage it on his own. It is how he survives. He demonstrates the internal grit and persistence we typically characterize as resilience. In addition, as he matures, despite his many horrific life events and persistent loneliness, he is able to reach out and build connections with others, enhancing his support systems with a few people who help to provide some social and emotional stability to his life.

There is much that goes unsaid about Laney. For example, it seems that she has a complex relationship with her mother who has left the town, and we do not know much about that. We do know, however, that Laney chooses to stay in Fallen Mountains and, despite living away from her mother, truly values the idea of being rooted there. This perhaps reflects her draw to Jack, Maggie, Chase, and the farm: generations of connection, stability, predictability. She seems to be someone who wants to have a quiet, steady life with Chase and the farm. She feels comfort and connection with Maggie and Jack and the sense of what a family is (similar to what her cousin Possum desires). She is drawn to that life and, perhaps, sees a long-term relationship with Chase as providing that, despite their inability to communicate. She knows, though, that her relationship with Transom would disrupt that future. He is closely connected with Chase and the farm, so she withholds the intimate aspects of their relationship. While Transom is the opposite of reliability and consistency, she is drawn to him, too. She seems to have an ongoing conflict between the excitement and sexual desire that Transom elicits and the constancy and

stability that life with Chase provides. Her decision to keep her relationship with Transom from Chase, however, definitely undermines the health and functioning of their relationship.

Turning to Transom, we can understand some of his behavior and the role that he plays in the book through the depictions of his father. Essentially, both he and his father bully and manipulate people to get what they want. Transom's father threatens to withhold Red's access to healthcare when his child is in need of surgery. Later, he uses the hiring of a detective to investigate Transom's disappearance to put additional pressure on Red and his position in the community. He outright dismisses Possum and Possum's mother, discarding them like an old pair of shoes. Transom's actions routinely reflect these same personality traits, which we could label high narcissism and low neuroticism. Similarly, how he engages and maintains relationships is also likely learned from his ongoing interactions with and observations of his father. Transom manipulates his close emotional bond with Chase to take over the farm. He controls Laney's behavior by using their relationship essentially as blackmail.

Throughout the book, all of the characters routinely say, for all that he does, Transom is Transom. Despite doing awful things, people are drawn to him. Countering his narcissistic side, he has a charming and engaging personality. He demonstrates qualities that people find endearing. They are drawn to him and want to be close to him even though he continually harms or hurts those around him. Again, consider those proximal processes that shaped his development over time, the behaviors that were encouraged and reinforced, particularly from a lack of negative repercussions or accountability for what he does. The intersection of aspects of who Transom is biologically and his life experiences helps to explain the cold decisions he makes as well as his uncanny abilities to manipulate others for his own personal gain. It also, to some degree, helps to explain the utter rage and contempt he feels for Possum.

In closing, as you think about your own life and reflect on aspects of how you approach the world as well as the experiences and events that have touched and shaped you, I encourage you to think about the challenge Dr. Ursula Williams posed during her Fall 2019 opening convocation speech: who will you become while you are a college student?<sup>2</sup> It is exciting to be at this significant point in time, the start of your college career. You are at an intersection of who you are based on who you have been and who you want to be. Now is a time to think about who you want to be and how you want to get there. What experiences do you want to have? What relationships (proximal processes) will best support you through this journey? Our genes are not our destiny, and our dynamic environment provides constant stimuli to push and pull us in new directions if we are open to them. Our development is ongoing and, while it can take a lot of effort to change what we have always done, how we have thought, how we think people perceive us, or how we perceive ourselves, as we look at Possum, Chase, and Laney, we remember it is possible.

## JAMES RONEY: *FALLEN MOUNTAINS* AND LITERARY HISTORY AND PHILOSOPHY

Our moderator, Professor Dunwoody, asked me to comment on this quote from the novel:

[H]e thought of his father. The man had spent his whole life working in a steel mill back in Pittsburgh; he'd quit school in the eleventh grade and been miserable for as long as Red had known him. But at night, for a tiny sliver of each day, his father would come alive, reading Faulkner aloud to Red and his brother. . . . His father's favorite quote . . . "The past is never dead. It isn't even past." . . . Red's father had their mother write it in her nice calligraphy and frame it. . . . He pictured it now, that yellowed paper, his mother's fancy lettering, because he could feel it: the past, sweeping into the present like a giant ship.<sup>3</sup>

As a cultural and literary historian and sometime ethicist, I spend a lot of time thinking about history and the ethics of human action. We distinguish between history in itself, what was or what happened, and the infinite number of metaphors, classifications, and narratives we construct to make sense of that brute reality (common or otherwise). Except for those people who believe that the record speaks for itself or that they possess the language which can describe reality as it is, most of us spend our time interpreting and critiquing the metaphors and narratives we use to form our identities and our sense of the world and human possibilities.

What does it mean to say, "The past is never dead. It isn't even past" and to imagine a character whose high-school-dropout father has used that Faulkner quote to shape his sons' attitude toward the world? Perhaps the structure of the novel can help us answer those questions. As Dr. Poole noted, the work is divided into "After" and "Before" chapters. The narrator withholds knowledge from us as we are given third-person perspectives on different characters in two times. We start in After with Red and end in Before with Possum. Our attention becomes increasingly focused on the nature of the event that answers our questions about what happened to Transom. The whodunnit becomes a more profound "what happened?" Was this event a runaway, a murder, an accident, a suicide, or an inevitable result of the historical, personal, and social conflicts driving the plot?

Two of the major traditions within mystery writing are 1) the plot of cognitive optimism, in which a protagonist, often until recently male, uses superior reasoning, male virtues, and the latest technology to uncover hidden evidence and reveal whodunnit; and 2) the noir tradition, in which a protagonist, whose abilities to know and control the world are more limited and who is often haunted by a past misdeed, tries to do the right thing in a world gone wrong.<sup>4</sup> The plot of cognitive optimism allows readers to reenact the ultimate success of liberal, scientific societies or of Victorian values. The noir tradition tends toward a tragic world in which characters are unable to stop either the discovery of an event that has already happened or the occurrence of one they may want to avoid. *Fallen Mountains* uses these two traditions to create a nice tension between the interweaving narrative threads of the book: the After chapters are about discovery in search of whodunnit and the Before chapters provide a tragic ironic

perspective on something we sense has already happened even if we don't fully know either who did it or exactly what it was.

A tragic world is one in which an event is manifesting itself in the world either by forcing characters to become aware of who they are and what they have done or by forcing them to do things they might not choose to do. Tragedy raises questions about free will and moral responsibility; about the existence of forces, processes, or beings more powerful than humans that can limit our possibilities of action; and about situations in which there is an inevitable conflict between two goods. Tragedy is the genre of mortality and limits, of situations that seem to require the sacrifice (chosen or not) of human life in order for the world to renew itself and for life to continue. The liberal narrative of historical and social progress through reason and science is often suspicious of tragedy, and some have questioned whether it can or should exist in a world without gods or in a future utopia without social hierarchies.

Yet, there are modern tragedies. They depict characters who maintain human dignity in unfortunate circumstances and plot resolutions that seem just, in the sense of being appropriate for the situation. Economic forces (the death of the family farm) and historical circumstances (the movement of the social center to urban areas and the conversion of rural ones into sources of energy) have taken the place of the gods as forces capable of limiting human choices. Hegel noted that Shakespeare created modern tragedy by changing the driving force behind tragic plots, replacing Greek conflicts over divinely grounded moral principles with human passions for particular goods.<sup>5</sup> The death of Jack, like Lear's division of his land, unleashes the human passions that drive the events leading to Transom's death. Contingent events may be a result of human choice, but, once they have happened, they form patterns that limit choices and shape a family's destiny: Red, Possum, Transom, Laney, JT, Jack, and others follow trajectories whose paths were set in the past. Vultures must feed. Bodies must decompose. Wrongs must either be avenged or forgiven.

The resolution of the plot is elegant. The whodunnit elements culminate in murders that are desired but not committed. Chase and Possum decide not to kill at the last moment. Red decides not to complete his investigation. Transom's death is part suicide, part murder through inaction, part natural event, and part the appropriate end for the family legacy of JT and Transom. The past has become past at the end. The characters let revenge go, apologize for past wrongs, and either start new lives or continue old ones by accepting reduced circumstances, a sense of tragic justice that one world has culminated so that another can begin.

I really like the ending because its ambiguity undercuts the cognitive optimism of many detective stories. The reader is forced to wonder: is it a suicide? The vultures are waiting; the natural world in some way is reabsorbing the one who has threatened it and the sacredness there. I don't want to disagree too much with Jim Lakso's comments, but something is lost in *Fallen Mountains* as urban centers and

multinational forces extract wealth from there. While they use it for a larger economy, the locals are losing their sacred place, and their farm is being changed in ways that they cannot replace. It is as if the vultures and the animals become part of a natural world that reabsorbs Transom into itself. Being present as Transom is dying allows Possum to forgive, which would be a way of dealing with his trauma, bringing it to full consciousness and realizing, “I distorted my life. I want to kill Transom, but I’ve got to let it go.” And he does let it go. I think, too, that Red lets it go. On the other hand, I do not know what I think about Chase. He is maintaining this farm and accepting the reduced circumstances. Like Red, I wonder what Chase is going to do on that property now. There is plenty of ambiguity. Even with “frackholes,” however, the tragedy ultimately doesn’t come from those people. They are, in a sense, a historic or economic force that is limiting, that is coming from the things that have been done in the past inside this community. So the ambiguity is that there is something wrong if you are blaming the outsiders. You actually have to deal with and confront yourself.

## DISCUSSION

**Audience Question:** Do you think that Transom uses painkillers to repress his emotions and his feelings about his past relationships and his pattern of disappearing and returning?

**Westcott:** The coping mechanisms that we have to deal with emotions and adversity are developed over time as well. For Transom, it’s a combination of probably having bad coping strategies and possibly an addiction stemming from misuse of a prescription to treat an injury. No matter how fast that addiction pathway is developed and maintained, whether it was designed to get rid of that negative feeling, whether he did it purposefully, or whether it resulted from taking the medication, he appears to know that the addiction is present in himself.

**Pool:** I agree with Professor Westcott and will add that, if you noticed the times in which Transom takes the pills, there are tensions in play. Emotions are multifaceted. There is a physiological reaction to any emotion. You have some underlying response, called core affect, which is basically our body’s ‘wired’ response to stimuli (fear, excitement, joy, pain, sadness). There also is valence, this idea that something feels good or bad, an interpretation of the physiological part of an emotion. Whenever Transom is having one of those tense conversations, in addition to the pain of his injury, his negative emotional responses are also heightened. He doesn’t really distinguish between the pain in his shoulder and the tension and discomfort related to the emotions sparked by the conversation. He is not thinking, “I am going to suppress these negative feelings I am experiencing by taking this pill.” Instead, the addiction neural pathway simply fires and takes over. The sensation of stress or discomfort occurs, he takes the pill, and he feels “better” (loses the negative sensation). This all occurs below conscious thought. I think he

probably did recognize that what he was doing was problematic, but, as is often the case with addiction, he probably thought he was in control and could handle it.

**Roney:** One of the things I like a lot about the novel is that Transom becomes one of those really interesting, somewhat complex villains. One of the ways that Possum can forgive him is to realize that Transom also actually has his life wrecked by Possum because of the revelation which loses him his ideal family. In addition to literature, I work on health, health policy, and the ethics of how the opioid epidemic has proceeded. It's a national disgrace. We have, in a sense, not taught people to deal with their emotions. We have a certain form of being a man that teaches you to interact in certain ways, and we have people who can make a lot of money selling pills that allow you to not realize what you're doing. I think he actually is addicted. I always have trouble when looking at a culture where the gender roles are very much sort of traditional and the women here are really trying to support the men. Transom's girlfriend Teresa is also a fascinating character because, at first, she seems to be a stereotype, but then you realize that she is trying to save him from those pills. She must see something that we don't necessarily see in him.

**Audience Question:** We heard a little bit about a system for redistribution of wealth from the economic winners to the losers. Did you have a particular system in mind, and how might it function in a capitalist society?

**Lakso:** I think the issue is that we have to think about how we use the word *redistribution*. Redistribution is acceptable when it happens as a result of a technological change, but it's not okay if we make it happen as a consequence of government policy. The only way that happens is through some form of taxation and transfer. We have to take something from one group and move it over to another group. It is probably better if you do it for a specific purpose. A tax and transfer that gives money to people to train for new occupations in the face of the decline in their skills or to pay the costs of relocation is better than a tax and transfer that simply moves money from one group to the other. While this is easy to say, we are not now at a place where public discussion of redistribution happens very easily.

**Audience Question:** Could the panel give insight into the psychological aspects of the last scene with Possum?

**Poole:** I found that scene fascinating because the mushrooms he eats are poisonous. As he watches his half-brother die and is deciding whether or not he's going to shoot him, he's eating poison. I think that was his way of resolving his own emotions: I'm going to eat this poison and then not pull the trigger. I think Dr. Roney said it very well: there is something merciful and forgiving in deciding not to pull the trigger, but I'm also not going to help him. I kept thinking, "Can't you call someone? Is there a way to get him out?" Most people would call 911 and get him to the hospital—he's still breathing. But Possum doesn't call, and Transom doesn't ask him to do that either. So even though neither one actually says, "I'm sorry," that is the moment when that forgiveness and that letting go of the emotion takes place.

I also want to say that the Faulkner quote actually exemplifies this idea that emotion suppression doesn't work. You think you are suppressing emotion. You think the past is past, but it is still there and, eventually, comes back. If you don't deal with it at the time, it comes back in a way that you have no control over. I'm sure Transom wasn't expecting to get caught in his own trap.

**Roney:** Tragic emotion is sometimes hard to get just right. There is a sense that maybe we, as readers, accept that somehow Transom should die, yet it is hard for us to accept. In a tragic universe, we should accept it; this is appropriate for him. There's that moment when he almost apologizes, but it is not quite an apology. Something passes between Possum and him, but it does not entirely feel good. It is also a harsh universe where you have lived your life in such a way that you've cost so much, and the vultures are waiting. Would you feel differently about the novel's ethics if Possum had pulled the trigger instead of leaving the gun, allowing Transom to have the choice but not doing anything to give him real choices?

**Westcott:** We should remember also that Possum has already taken a life in killing his abusive stepfather in self-defense. He experiences and lives with that event for years. At the same time, he has tremendous anger against Transom. The idea that Transom ruined his life is a central truth that Possum has held on to. However, it is one thing to unintentionally kill his stepfather in self-defense and quite another to intentionally end a life. The ending scene with Transom involves a conscious decision about ending someone's life. The reality of the moment for Possum is whether Transom's death by his own hand is truly what he has always wanted. Possum realizes that it is not. However, at the same time, he consciously decides not to do anything to save Transom either. He instead does what so many have done to him over the years: he essentially ignores Transom's plea.

**Lakso:** For some reason, I considered it more biblical. In that final scene, I thought about Possum giving Transom the means to end his own life, to kill himself but using their own father's gun.

**Audience Question:** Do you think Possum is right in placing all the blame on Transom, or should he include his father in this revenge thought process as well? Do you think he might regret telling Transom's mom about the affair, considering that she attempts suicide and that he has strong feelings for his own mother?

**Westcott:** The age at which everything unfolds for Possum and for Transom's family is a key piece of the story. At this developmental stage, in American culture it is normative for teens to be highly self-centered. Based on where they are developmentally at this stage of life, I do not think either Possum or Transom could see anything beyond how each had been wronged by the other. They can only see their own perspective, their own hurt, neglect, or betrayal. Possum, for example, thinks, "All I have to do is give these letters to my dad, and then everything will be okay." He does not attempt to see the situation through anyone else's eyes. Combine that with raw emotion, another core characteristic of adolescence, and it can quickly get out of control. Everything is raw and real and the end of the world for adolescents:

hurt, pain, rejection, anger. For Possum, the trauma is real, but he fails to see that this situation is highly traumatic for Transom, too. Particularly in adolescence, you see your life in comparison to others. Possum idealizes Transom and sees his life as perfect. However, Transom's world, and particularly his relationship with his parents, is also forever changed through this event.

Additionally, we are often lazy in how we think about others, what we call our attributions. We are quick to make assumptions about others and what their lives are like based on how they look, what material goods they have, or how they act. These can be false. For Possum, it is easier to say it is Transom's fault or his dad's fault for how things unfolded, but, in actuality, the situation is much more complex and not easily tied to two people's actions and behaviors.

## NOTES

1. Urie Bronfenbrenner, "Ecological Models of Human Development," *The International Encyclopedia of Education*, ed. Torsten Husen and T. Neville Postlethwaite, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., (New York: Pergamon, 1994), 3:1643-1647.
2. This speech by Ursula Williams, "Our (Chemical) World, Our Juniata: 'The World of Things That Change,'" is the first item in this volume of *Juniata Voices*. The quote in her title comes from Primo Levi, *The Periodic Table*, trans. Raymond Rosenthal (New York: Schocken Books, 1984), p. 229. Excerpts from PERIODIC TABLE by Primo Levi, translated by Raymond Rosenthal, translation copyright © 1984 by Penguin Random House LLC. Used by permission of Schocken Books, an imprint of the Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, a division of Penguin Random House LLC. All rights reserved.
3. Kimi Cunningham Grant, *Fallen Mountains* (Eagle, ID: Amberjack, 2019), pp. 3-4.
4. My understanding of the noir tradition has been shaped by Robert Pippins' study of American detective films: *Fatalism in American Film Noir: Some Cinematic Philosophy* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2012).
5. A good summary of Hegel's ideas on tragedy is Section 6.3.5.2: "Dramatic Poetry" in Stephen Houlgate, "Hegel's Aesthetics," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* ed. Edward N. Zalta, February 27, 2020, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2020/entries/hegel-aesthetics/>.