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Book Beat

Lynchburg Native Writes the Blues

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Because Lynchburg native Bryan Krull isn't a musician, he can't play the blues. "I've never been skilled in that regard," he said. "I can't play a lick."

Fortunately, Krull found another creative entry into his favorite musical form-writing the blues. This past spring, his first novel, "Lil' Choo-Choo Johnson, Bluesman" was put out by Dog Ear Publishing of Indianapolis. So far, the book has been praised for its attention to detail and historical accuracy.

"A nimble history of the blues," said Jim Santella, who hosts a blues radio program on a Buffalo, N.Y. station, "designed to entertain, inform, and spread the details of this bedrock style that lies at the heart of American popular music. It succeeds and then some."

Added the Blues Audience Newsletter: "This is a story that is so factual and close to home, you believe that these events really occurred. Robert Johnson, Charley Patton, and all sorts of blues characters are brought to life in these pages."

The historical accuracy is not an accident- for the past eight years, Bryan Krull has worked as a college and high school history teacher.

Just not right now. When he and his wife had their first child, a daughter, nine months ago, Krull elected to stay at home and care for the baby. In between daytime feedings and diaper changes, he used the time to transfer "Lil' Choo-Choo" from his imagination to paper and computer screen.

"I've always been fascinated by the blues," said Krull, who now lives in Spencerport, N.Y. "My dad used to keep a Muddy Waters tape in the car, and we'd listen to it on trips."

At some point, like all serious American music lovers, Krull was hit between the eyes with the realization that many of the songs performed by British groups like Cream, the Yardbirds, the Animals, and the Rolling Stones were actually written by itinerant musicians- most of them black- from the Mississippi Delta.

I started listening to Robert Johnson, Howlin' Wolf, guys like that," recalled Krull, who has a Ph.D in history from the University of Wisconsin.

Child prodigy Earl "Lil' Choo-Choo" Johnson is an imaginary vessel that Krull uses to transport his readers through the blues world of the 1930s, '40s, and '50s, from the whiskey-soaked Mississippi juke joints to the raucous clubs in Memphis and Chicago. Real-life bluesmen like Johnson and Howlin' Wolf wander in and out of the narrative.

Krull attended Paul Munro Elementary School and E.C. Glass High School before moving to upstate New York. His younger brother Todd, who now lives in Richmond, did the cover art for "Lil' Choo-Choo."