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## Where She's From: The Mystery of the Making Place

Kathy L. May

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**In lieu of** an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

### Where She's From: The Mystery of the Making Place

*Kathy L. May (bio)*

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George Ella Lyon's family tells her that she talked before she walked. She

was "a wordful child." Now a prolific writer in a number of genres and one of Kentucky's most important and widely-recognized authors, Lyon has published thirty-eight books for children and adults. Much of her work draws on family stories, her life in Kentucky, and her engagement with issues important to the region and the world.

Lyon was born in 1949 and grew up in far southeastern Kentucky, just outside the small city of Harlan. There she was surrounded by both immediate and extended family who nourished her with love, books, music, and stories told around kitchen and dining room tables.

Both sets of grandparents lived in Harlan, and for Lyon they "loomed large as the mountains." Her maternal grandfather, J. D. Fowler, called "Papa Dave," was a lumberman who owned a succession of saw mills in eastern Kentucky and eastern Tennessee. He was well-read and a member of the Speakers' Club. George Ella's mother went to thirteen schools between first grade and high school graduation because the family moved "wherever there was a boundary of timber to cut." At George Ella's mother's wedding, Papa Dave cut mountain laurel and helped arrange it. Lyon's picture book *ABCedar: An Alphabet of Trees* is dedicated to this grandfather.

Her paternal grandfather, Robert Hoskins, Sr., was a builder. He started out as a coal miner but hated it. So instead, he built houses for miners. Eventually he built many houses in Harlan. His only contract was a handshake, and he could finish a job "with nothing left over but sawdust and a handful of nails." Lyon's picture book, *A Regular Rolling Noah*, is based on a true story about this grandfather.

Both grandmothers, good cooks and meticulous housekeepers, had strong personalities and were influential in young George Ella's life. Grandmother Fowler was a southern lady born in Arkansas and raised in Tennessee. She gave her granddaughter "lady lessons: how to examine your fingernails ... or check the heel of your shoe." Lyon's picture book *Basket* is based on an incident in Grandmother Fowler's life. Grandmother Hoskins was "a puzzle"—sometimes difficult but always fascinating. She

was the source of language that stuck in George Ella's head: "blue as a fish hook" **[End Page 13]** and "the hind end of bad luck." It was Grandmother Hoskins who uttered the phrase, "It'll come a tide," when the Cumberland River was nearing flood stage. This phrase inspired and became the title for one of Lyon's best-known picture books, *Come a Tide*.

Her father, Robert Hoskins, Jr., owned a dry-cleaning store and her mother Gladys Fowler Hoskins stayed at home until George Ella was twelve. Her father was the first person in his family to graduate from college, and her mother started at Berea College but had to drop out to help her family after a sister's death. George Ella's older brother, Robert Hoskins III, was born in 1942. They lived in the house her grandfather Hoskins had built, which had a special room for books where Lyon played with the volumes before she could read.

Young George Ella, named for her mother's brother George and her mother's sister Ella, was also nourished by trips outside the region, which fired her imagination and increased her hunger for language. In her autobiography, *A Wordful Child*, she tells of a trip to San Francisco and being fascinated by the name of the Pickwick Hotel. It's easy to see how rhyme and repetition in the word "Pickwick" would intrigue and amuse a bright child.

She began writing poems in elementary school. On her website, she writes that she loved school and all things associated with it—"pencils and paper, all those books, kids to play with, colored chalk, teachers, recess, something new every day." She loved reading even though she had inherited double vision from her father, which made schoolwork something of a struggle. Surgery at age thirteen corrected the problem. Looking...

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