

Telling an old story that is still hot

By **Natalie S. Harnett**
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When I started writing "The Hollow Ground" I didn't know I would wind up writing about a major, yet little known, American economic and environmental disaster.

My grandfather had lived just east of Carbondale, Pennsylvania, an economically devastated coal city, and it was an area that had called to me ever since I'd first seen it as a child.

As I looked to start a novel, I decided to set it in Carbondale, hoping to tell the story of what happened to the coal towns after the mines shut down.

I was also inspired by a memory of something that my grandfather's neighbor had told me when I was around 10 or 11-years-old.

It was the early 80s then and she said that there were homes outside of Scranton where the floors were hot from the fires burning in the coal mines beneath them.

The image of the ground not only being hollowed out beneath those homes, but on fire, haunted me.

So when years later I went to start a novel, I remembered those fires and thought: there's a metaphor, there's a story.

Still, I wanted to write about the economic hardship of the mines shutting down in Carbondale so I thought I'll set the first few chapters in one of these "hot" Scranton homes, and then I'll move the story to Carbondale.

There was no question in my mind that the family would be Irish American.

The coal mining families I knew were Irish, and who hadn't heard of the Molly Maguires?

Though I'm not of Irish descent, I grew up in Elmhurst, Queens, which at that time had a significant Irish American population. My mother's best friend was Irish. My cousins were half Irish. I'd married Irish. Of course my novel's family would be Irish. Fiercely Irish.

Since I was a young girl I'd fallen in love with Irish myth when an Irish immigrant neighbor told me about the magical realm of Tir na Nog that could be reached only through caves, or through portals deep within ancient burial mounds.

Oh, to write about a Carbondale cave that led down into the mines and eventually into a mythical land.

I envisioned those rare, but beautiful, mine shafts that sparkled with quartz. I knew I wanted to tell the story in first person from the perspective of the 11-year-old daughter of this Irish family.

I knew I wanted to call her Brigid, after the pagan goddess of fire and the Christian saint of the same name known for her miracles related to healing.

My initial plan was to make my young protagonist a healer possessed of mysterious, yet potentially explainable, healing powers.

But when I went to research the Scranton mine fires, I found very little about them.

Instead, the town that kept showing up was Centralia, Pennsylvania. Centralia? I'd never heard of it. As I came to learn, Centralia had a mine fire so intractable that it had slowly eradicated the thriving town above it.



The author.

It leaked carbon dioxide and carbon monoxide into homes. It caused the ground to open up and a teenage boy to fall in. Further, that fire still burns and may be moving toward the neighboring city of Mt. Carmel. Wow!

On top of that, the town was cursed. As legend tells, in the mid-1800s a priest in Centralia spoke out against the violent acts of the local Mollies.

He was then attacked by three of those Mollies and in revenge the priest cursed the entire town, saying that in 100 years not a single building would stand. Amazingly, that curse has all but come true. There are less than a handful of buildings still standing.

When I read about the curse, I was captivated.

What if that priest had also cursed the Mollies and their heirs? What if my novel's Irish American family were some of those descendants?



Smoke from the Centralia fire leaking through the ground surface. PHOTO FROM WIKIPEDIA.

From there, the cursed Irish-American clan of the Howleys was born. Of course terrible things would happen to them (they were cursed after all!) but the ties of family, loyalty, Catholicism - as well as a love of story - would help the stronger of them to persevere.

Their biting world view and caustic humor would be turned on others as quickly as they'd turn it on themselves. Further, some of their personal history would come from my husband's and friend's families.

My father-in-law liked to tell the story of how his grandfather from Abbeyfeale came to New York in the early 1900s and wound up driving a truck for the Italian Mob because no one else was hiring Irish.

A friend's great-grandmother living in Sligo was the only one of her six siblings sent to an orphanage by her parents because food was in such short supply.

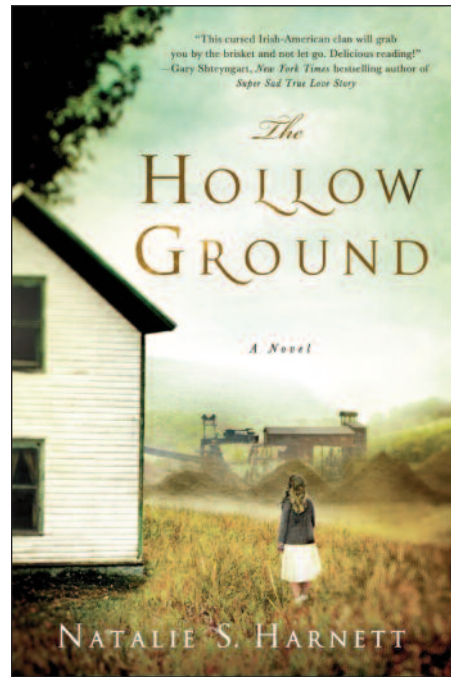
She never understood why she had been the one chosen.

These were family histories I'd make use of for my fictional Howleys.

Additionally, I knew of Irish-American persecution through my own sweet grammy's experience.

In the late 1920s she fell in love with an Irish immigrant but her German American father, who unfortunately believed in Irish stereotypes, forbade her from marrying him.

She wound up in a very unhappy marriage with someone else, and I've often thought of that Irish beau of hers with regret, as I'm sure did she. Actually it's a story I've thought of so much that it's become part of my current novel-in-progress.



But back to "The Hollow Ground." Notes in hand, outline sketched, I wrote a draft about my little girl, Brigid, the healer, who lived first in a town based on Centralia and then moved to one inspired by Carbondale.

I felt okay about the draft. I dismissed the nagging feeling that I was cheating the story by moving the family so quickly from the dramatic and disturbing happenings in Centralia.

But by then I was pregnant and felt a terrifying need to finish the book as soon as possible. I didn't want to write additional Centralia-based chapters.

Rather, I decided to complete my research of Carbondale. So I headed to the Carbondale Historical Society while it was still convenient to make the trip.

Everything changed as I sat inside that lovely church-like building on that deplorably hot May afternoon. My mother, my main researcher and editor, was there to help me.

We sat, mouths agape, sorting through article after article about Carbondale's coal mine fire, a fire that made the sidewalks too hot for dogs to walk on; a fire that brought government inspectors into people's homes at all hours of the night; a fire that would decimate the entire west side of the city.

Unlike Centralia, this fire would be dug out in an effort so vast that, by the time it was accomplished, more dirt was dug out than had been dug out for the Panama Canal.

I sat there, uncomfortably pregnant and sweating. I felt both a rush of defeat and exhilaration. My novel would have to be rewritten to also tell the story of this massive dig out. I practically wept with the knowledge of that.

Yet, suddenly, that nagging feeling that I was misdirecting the novel was gone. Finally I'd hit on the story the novel wanted to tell.

Into my mind came the saying of a friend's Irish grandmother: "nothin' will stop me."

I would, no matter what, write this story.

I knew it in my heart.

Natalie Harnett is a Long Island based author. Her website is www.natalieharnett.com. "The Hollow Ground" is published by Thomas Dunne Books/St. Martin's Press.