

Milk Glass Moon – a look at life before Oak Ridge

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column on January 13, 2009)

Every once in a great while, a book comes along that is ripe for its time and that finds a ready audience. Rebecca Carroll has written just such a novel, in *Milk Glass Moon*, telling the story of life in this area, now Oak Ridge, just prior to the Manhattan Project. She bases her story on personal family memories, but uses fiction to condense the story and sharpen the visual images she describes.

The story is told through the eyes of a young fourteen year old girl, Lydia Johnson, growing up fast and just beginning to yearn for her freedom. Yet, the story begins with Lydia at age 17, just learning what has been going on in that place now called "Oak Ridge," but to her is still Lupton.

The news of the atomic bomb project near where she played as a child, unlocks a flood of memories of earlier times when she and her best friend, Willamena, ran through the valley stretching from the Clinch River west and of times when she picked blackberries with her family.

Simple things, yet profound memories. Lydia's life quickly went from a slow and steady daily pattern to one where things she had taken for granted were no more. From having an established home to being told to move, from nothing much happening around her to seeing things that she does not understand. All the while she is growing from a child into a young lady.

Through her struggle to emerge as a woman we experience the turmoil of change and the anxiety of the unknown, yet her deep love for her family and intense respect for her "Mama and Daddy" keep her close to her family through it all. The choice of the terms "Mama and Daddy" struck a keen note with me as those are the terms I use to refer to my parents!

The story is set in the area known then as Lupton's Crossroads (now about midway along Emory Valley Road between Lafayette Drive and Melton Lake Drive) and includes Copeland's store, Scarboro, Elza, New Hope and Wheat. Eventually, the story concludes in Coalfield where the Johnson family moved when they were forced off their farm near Lupton's Crossroads.

It is a poignant story, yet has much humor and a huge amount of familiar dialog that takes one back in time to the things of the era in the middle of the previous century. Rebecca accomplishes the familiarity through the use of key words that will cause your mind to go back in time to your youth and recall similar circumstances and exactly the same expressions. She does this extremely well.

The central adventure Lydia recalls is a walking trip she and Willamena took far beyond the accepted distance which was Copeland's store. They were hoping to spy on the Reed brothers who lived well to the west of Copeland's and up on Black Oak Ridge, quite a distance for young girls' legs, but a trip they planned and prepared for.

But it is not the Reed boys that they find, but evidence of a horrible struggle with blood stains and a dead dog. They dare to explore the house where this terrible event occurred, but soon became so frightened that they run back down the ridge. Only to run into a stranger in a black car who tries to give them a ride. Not something they want, but the stranger makes a strong impression on Lydia.

In her fear to admit she was even close to the scene of the crime (after all she was not supposed to even go past Copeland's store!) she realized the stranger saw her there. This becomes a severe problem for Lydia when happenstance causes this stranger, Robert Doleman, to meet her Mama and lo and behold to get invited to dinner, not just once, but again.

By the time he came for dinner the first time, Lydia and Willamena had again seen Doleman who caught up to them during a rain and again offered a ride. This time they accepted his kind offer, being soaked to the bone.

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So, when he began to get close to her family and be invited to eat meals with them, Lydia, was just sure her Mama would find out that she not only had ventured way farther than permitted, but that she knew something of that awful murder. She worried about this and fretted about what to do to prevent it. Can't you just see her mind working out the various details of discovery and how she would react when confronted by Mama?

There are many other adventures in Rebecca's story based on her family. They obviously have roots in actual events with real people, for they strike home and seem so right for the time.

There is also the twist of fate that comes to Lydia's sister, Esther. She is older than Lydia and thus more responsible or so it seems. However, she is surprisingly independent and proves to be someone who acts on her desires. Lydia learns too late just how much so when something Lydia wanted to happen to her actually happens to Esther.

The move from Lupton's to Coalfield is not without turmoil. Lydia's Daddy, works in the coal mines and is often away from home. But when the time comes to make the decision and move the family, he takes that responsibility personally, going far and near searching for a suitable place to make a new home for his family.

It is during the move to Coalfield that the "milk glass moon" is pressed into Lydia's memory. This type moon is an unusual spectacle with "pale light at the edges, fading into the sky" as Rebecca puts it in her book. That same type moon shone the night Rebecca knew time was ripe for the telling of Lydia's story.

Through Lydia's memories, the reader can relive this life-changing drama of being uprooted from one's home and given only weeks to relocate. She also shows the strength that many young girls have which go far beyond appearances and the insight she exhibits into her family members is likely more typical than we realize. Often our children know us all too well.

I became aware of this new book a few weeks ago when Terry Carroll, Rebecca's husband and a coworker of mine at Y-12, sought me out to tell me of his wife's interest in the area's history. I indicated my keen interest in seeing the book when it was published. Terry assured me he would see that I got one.

Weeks passed and I pretty much forgot about the conversation and the book. Then one night I got an e-mail from Rebecca reminding me of our brief meeting at Chick-Fil-A and saying that Terry was trying to contact me. She came by the New Hope Center and dropped off her book for me to review.

I was going to Columbia, TN to keep three of my grandkids the following week and promised to find time to read the book during that week. We also discussed how she might distribute her book in Oak Ridge locations.

Milk Glass Moon is available at Jackson Square Gifts, Jefferson Compounding and Mr. K's in Oak Ridge and Hoskins' Drugs in Clinton. It can also be purchased online at Amazon.com.

It is a paperback and is an easy read, yet a read that holds your attention, challenges your imagination and takes you back to your youth. I enjoyed it and welcomed the opportunity to review it.

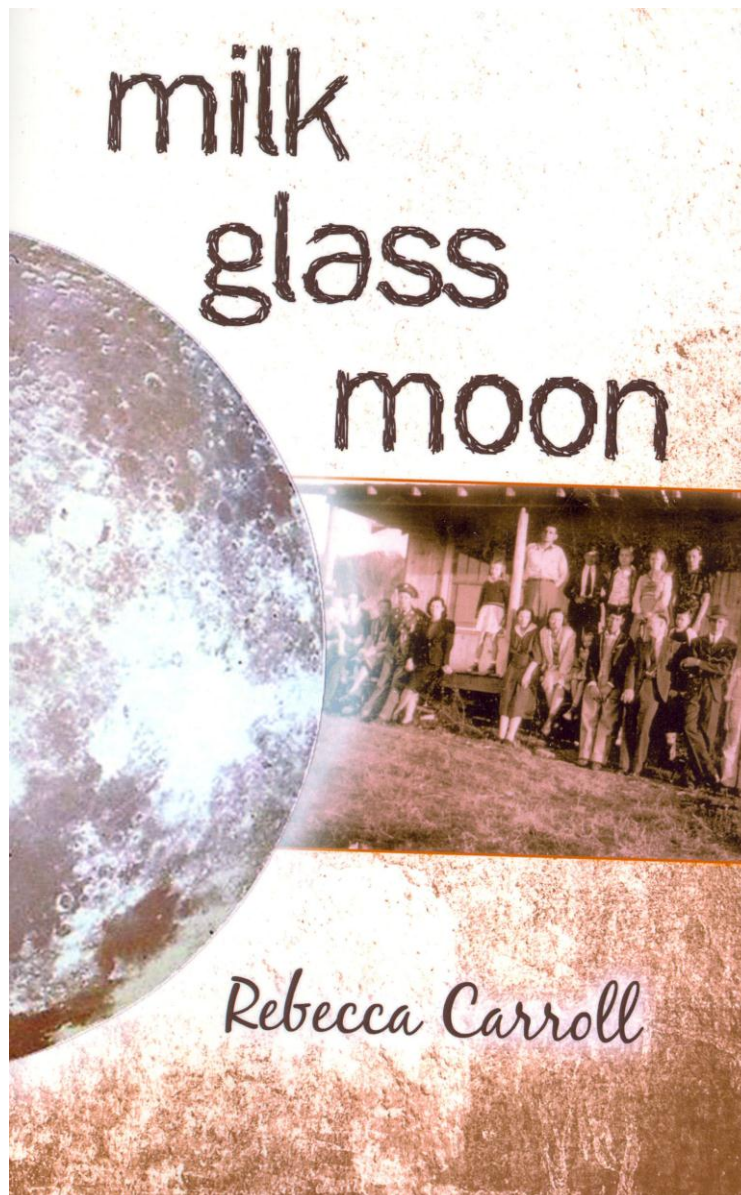
Rebecca and Terry live in Claxton, TN and she teaches English at both Pellissippi State and Tennessee Tech. She is trained as a creative writer and has written and published several short stories and non-fiction articles. She is currently working on another book with a local setting and even has an idea for yet another book, this one featuring Oliver Springs near the turn of the 20th century when it was a mineral spring resort area.

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I hope you find "Milk Glass Moon" as pleasurable to read as I did. I am sure that you will gain a better perspective of the pre Oak Ridge communities and without doubt I am sure you will grow fond of Lydia Johnson.

Rebecca will be signing her book at Jefferson Compounding Center on Saturday, January 17, 2009 from 9:00 AM until noon. Go by and meet her and get your signed copy of *Milk Glass Moon*!



Rebecca Carroll's engrossing story of a young girl growing up while the atomic bomb changed the world