



PHOTOGRAPH BY MARK DANIEL JR.

At Home With Janisse Ray

Even people whose blood doesn't run to resin respond to this author's call to preserve nature.

Tooling past some straight-rowed pine plantations, one wonders how folks in Baxley greeted forest-loving native Janisse Ray when she returned



to the South Georgia town. Franklin Ray, her father, provides the answer: "There are people here that would absolutely fight over that girl," he says. "You rattle her feathers, and you rattle theirs."

Franklin still makes his living in the junkyard where he and wife Lee Ada raised Janisse and her siblings. The Rays' ultraconservative religion required sheltering their children

from outside influences, including other people and TV. The family also grappled with Franklin's bouts with mental illness.

Leaving Home

Janisse's desire to write and her deep love for nature coalesced after she left Baxley. She attended North Georgia College and University and Florida State University, followed by a short-lived marriage and the birth of her son, Silas. She worked at a national park in Costa Rica, taught English in Colombia, and attended graduate school in Montana.


above: Janisse and Raven Ray planted longleaf pines on her family's property for future generations to enjoy. "Our people go back and back and back here," she says. "I know I'm home."

The single mother was eking out a living in Georgia when Milkweed Editions published her first book, *Ecology of a Cracker Childhood*, in 1999. The memoir/environmental treatise alternates chapters about her unusual childhood in a junkyard and her advocacy for the South's quickly diminishing longleaf pine forests.

Janisse's second book, *Wild Card Quilt: Taking a Chance on Home*, published last year by the same press, outlines the glory and pitfalls of her return to her hometown. *Wild Card* raises the question of how the author as well as all citizens of this technological age can reconnect with a rural, agrarian community.

Return to Her Roots

A jeans-clad Janisse strides out to offer a welcome, her lithe frame as agile as during her tomboy youth. Back



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then, she and her siblings played church in an abandoned school bus, floated on makeshift rafts made from discarded gas tanks, and discovered treasure among the rusting refuse of their daddy's 10-acre junkyard.

The cozy heart-pine house, previously owned by Janisse's grandmother, serves as home for the author and her husband, Raven. (Silas, 16, spends summers here, but for the past few years, he has lived mostly in Vermont with his dad.) The homeplace, described in dilapidated detail in *Wild Card*, is restored to livable, if simple, condition. "My grandfather built those cupboards," Janisse says, pointing to a corner cabi-

far left: "The hardest part," Janisse says about writing, "is nailing your dang shoes to the floor beneath your desk." **left:** The author posts a few items from which she draws inspiration.



net. "My sister made this quilt for my wedding."

The quilt that metaphorically stitches together the narrative of the second book is here as well. Janisse and her mom, Lee Ada, pieced together the colorful coverlet while cutting away their differences and pinning down common ground.

In the author's sparse back room office, oversized black journals fill built-in shelves. "I am continually torn between living this life and writing about living this life," Janisse admits with a grin. "Most of the time I just want to live it." She's now writing a book about Silas's childhood, composing another environmental book, and penning a novel about a female Georgia botanist.

She drops gracefully onto a sofa and kicks off her shoes. "I walk in this house, and it feels so completely familiar," she says. For Janisse, it isn't just the house that evokes feelings of

home. "There is something about Georgia that lives in its people's bones," she says, running a hand through her long dark hair. "No matter where people are, if they're from this state, it's in their souls. When I see the red clay roads, I know I'm home."

Covering Ground

These days, Janisse supplements her writing income by lecturing and teaching. She recently finished a stint as the John and Renee Grisham Writer-in-Residence at the University of Mississippi. Yet prestige and a public persona hold no appeal for her.

"I know how lucky I am to have a voice and to be able to speak things that people will listen to," she says. Indeed, *Ecology* won the Southern Book Critics Circle Award, the Southeastern Booksellers Award for



above: Janisse and Raven share a deep love for nature. She worked to help preserve nearby Moody Forest, and they both continue to tackle such local issues as storage of nuclear wastes.

Nonfiction, the American Book Award, and the Southern Environmental Law Center Book Award. The Georgia Center for the Book chose the memoir/environmental chronicle for the inaugural "All Georgia Reading the Same Book" campaign.

Janisse gratefully acknowledges the recognition but says, "I don't care about money, and I don't care about fame." Instead, she explains, "I want to piece together a life here that makes sense to me, surrounded by things that matter—my family and my landscape."

Therein lies the crux of her second critically acclaimed book, *Wild Card Quilt*, in which she shares her experience of re-entering the fold of her hometown.

Daughter of the South

"We live in a time of tremendous fragmentation," Janisse says. "The

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"The pine trees sing. The horizontal limbs of flattened crowns hold the wind as if they are vessels, singing bowls, and air stirs in them like a whistling kettle."

—from *Ecology of a Cracker Childhood*

rural South has suffered an exodus of people. Two-thirds of us now live in urban areas; but urban areas aren't sustainable."

Her most basic argument sounds reasonable even to those at home with the concrete sidewalks, air conditioners, and trim lawns found in many suburbs. "We all want a life that's filled with clean air, pure water, open spaces for our children, and beautiful native landscapes," she says. "I think all of us are environ-

mental activists. We want to be engaged in our place."


For Janisse that place lies below the Mason-Dixon line. "The South is changing so rapidly," she says. "We are starting to open up and welcome other people of various religions and skin colors." At the same time, she says, we are "trying to hold on to something we're losing. The things that I write about—magnolia trees, blackberry cobbles, running around barefoot as a child with my cousins,

fireflies—we know we're losing it."

She's optimistic about the region's adaptability. "We've always had a huge sense of place in the South," the author says. "But we haven't had an environmental ethic that went along with it. We are learning that now. I am so glad to be in rural Georgia at a time when I see change."

In her home state, Janisse serves as a founding member of the Altamaha Riverkeeper organization. She was instrumental in helping to create the Georgia Nature-Based Tourism Association. And she recently shared victory with The Nature Conservancy for successfully preserving the 3,400-acre Moody Forest in her own Appling County.

"When I got the news that Moody had been saved, that was one of the greatest moments of my life," she says. On a smaller scale, Janisse and Raven work on local issues such as cleaning up the Altamaha River and saving the town's remaining trees.



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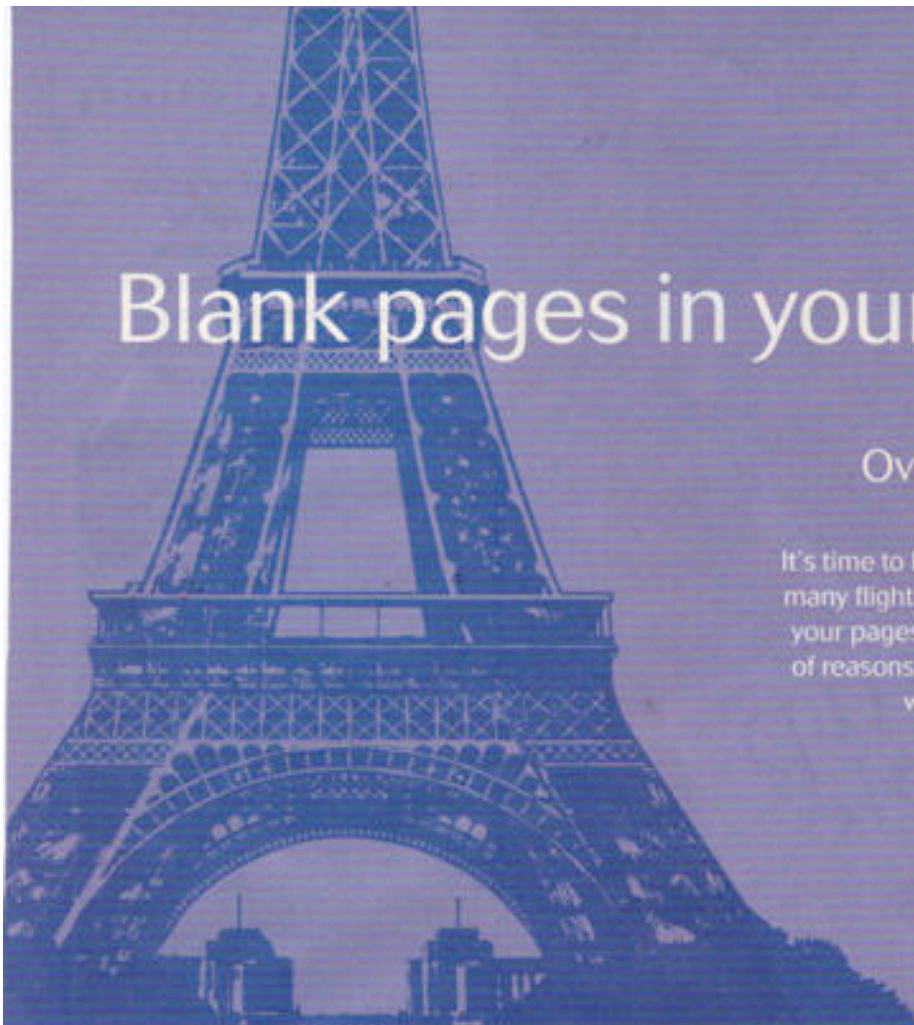
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Singing Praises

As she continues to talk, Janisse's husband, father, and mother return from an outing. Aware of the author's self-effacing nature, the three quickly step in to brag on her behalf.

Janisse, too, offers words of praise, especially for Franklin. "My father is the darkest character in *Ecology*, but he has embraced the book," she says. Before publication, she asked him to correct any errors. "He didn't change a thing," she says, beaming. "I think he realizes that my intentions are toward healing."

Franklin insists that he and the town of Baxley are delighted that their beloved prodigal daughter has returned. "She's here, at God's willing, for a good while," says Franklin. "We hope that she finds enough of her kind of things to keep her. We definitely want her here."

NANCY DORMAN-HICKSON

Longleaf Longing

Janisse continues to champion the South's longleaf pine ecosystem, attempting to slow the rate of logging in the region's natural forests.

"With the first book," she says, "I'd go to bookstores and libraries and say to them, 'If you get nothing else from my talk, remember this: 'A pine plantation is not a forest.' " Longleaf trees in nature are widely spaced, sustaining wire grass undergrowth. The natural forests sustain creatures and plants such as the gopher tortoise, the red-cockaded woodpecker, and the blazing star. Slash pine or loblolly trees that are planted and grown like a row crop, however, are spaced so close together that the tops form a canopy that shuts out sunlight. Neither wire grass nor little else survives in such as setting that is manipulated by man.

"In the South, we have lived off pine trees," notes Janisse softly, choosing her words carefully. This gentle woman works hard to avoid offending even those whose opinions differ from her own. "Everybody cuts their pine trees. In the 1950s, there were almost no pine plantations. Now, in Georgia alone, we have more than 30 million acres.

"We're losing our natural forests rapidly," she continues. "For this to be such a logging region, you would think that I would be run out on a rail." Instead, she says, "I feel like I'm going to be loved to death in my community."