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Seeing & Hearing St. Mary's

An Inspired Artifact of Land and Life in the Mother County

Story by Crystal Brandt

Merideth Taylor's new book about St. Mary's County opens with Lucille Clifton's "mulberry fields" gently turning our attention to curiosity about what we think we see. With "Listening In: Echoes and Artifacts from Maryland's Mother County" (George F. Thompson Publishing 2018), Taylor reimagines the lives of others and gives voice to walls that talk in a lost language.

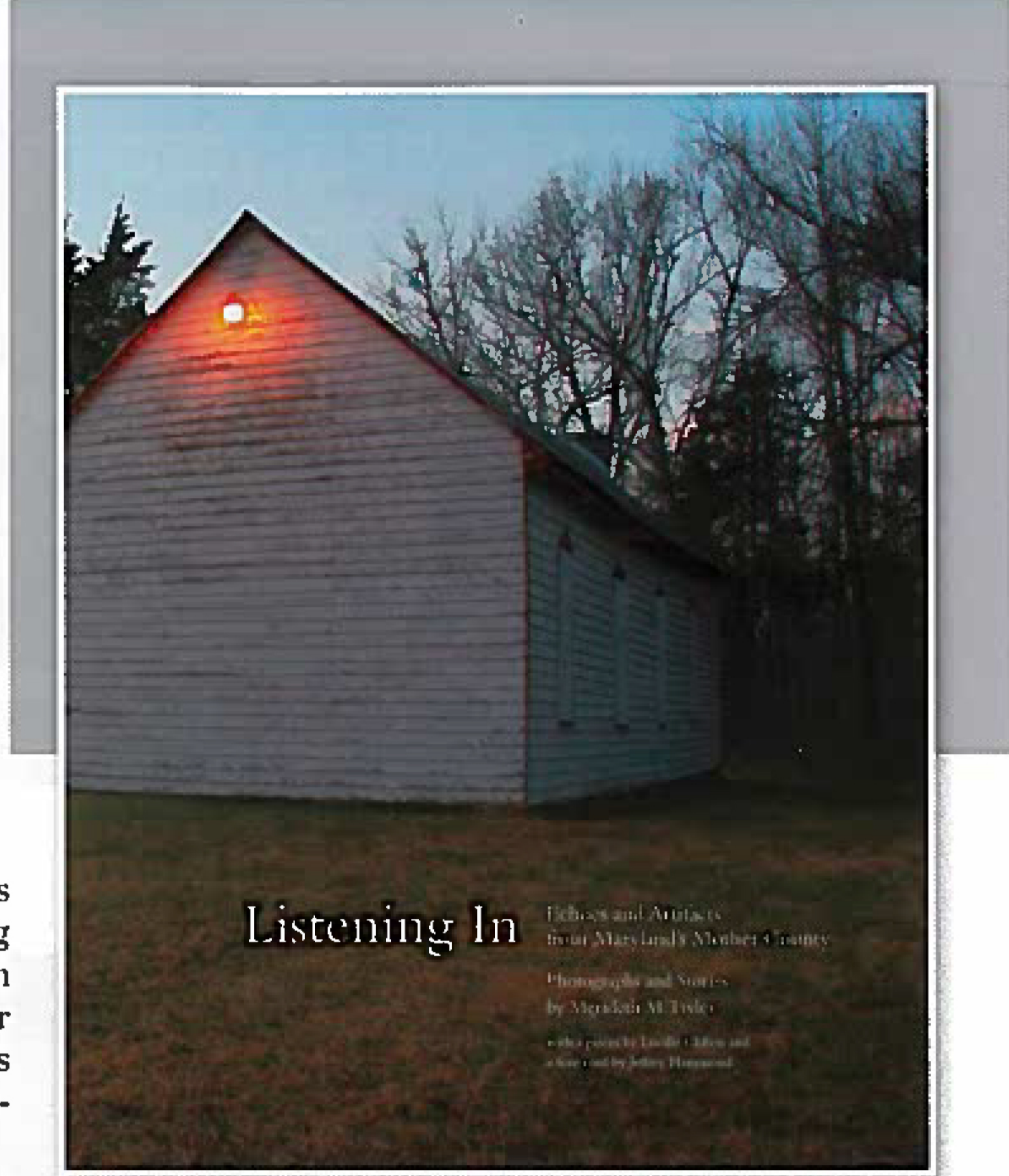
The subject may be fading lives and falling structures, but Taylor's form is distinctly alive and modern. "I did not have a model, it was more like playing to me – the key was that I had time to just play with ideas and that I enjoyed tremendously."

That serious play resulted in the invention of a hybrid genre – part photo essay, part fiction, part oral history -- reminiscent of the urgency of social media but without the ego. Taylor provides the image, story (description) and dialogue (comments) that work together to satisfy our shrinking attention span and growing appetite for information. Before we know it, we are engaged, our memories enhancing and underscoring what's on the page.

If the images of decay seem foreign and obsolete, Taylor's skillful dialogue feels familiar and necessary, like we've heard it before but need to hear it again. The houses are more than the sum of wood and plaster; they are part of the fabric of historical context surrounding what it means to be human, to establish one's self here, in this place, at that time. This subject and structure of "Listening In" also remind us of our role in the plod of creation and destruction: we rally and sweat to clear the ground; nature, with its slow comfort, reclaims space with grace and ease. No instant gratification here; nature and Taylor both work in nuance and subtlety.

References to the past

The cinematic structure of the book suggests a historical arc, fading in with the story of a slave boy before Emancipation. It fades out sometime today or is it last year, perhaps next week?



UNIVERSITY OF VIRGINIA PRESS

"It's an American story, here in St. Mary's County. The human experience is at once unique and universal, so thinking about birth and death, weddings and meals – those kinds of experiences that everyone has."

- Merideth Taylor

By the last page, we almost have a sense of progress past its prime and on the verge of wearing out its welcome. Almost. However, the final scene of a baptism offers a promise of hope and continuity.

Taylor's flourishes of precise detail – references to stuffed ham, spearing tobacco, maritime life, wisteria and kudzu – never cross into sentimentality or nostalgia. Instead, it hints at the points where we intersect and divide, where race, class, gender and more whisper about family, spirit and identity, about time, change and what it means to grow, thrive, survive and die.

Even though each vignette is set up the same way – image, dialogue and story working together to create a scene – the result never feels formulaic. Using a range of diction and topics, each page shifts the lens to offer an opportunity to learn about what it means to be human, and humanity itself, without feeling didactic. Taylor uses lyrics – and there are only three, carefully curated from a hymn, a pop song and a nursery rhyme – to help establish a sense of time and familiarity within these scenes. As we read, we feel like we are dipping into something broader and more established while sitting in the shade of a tree planted long ago. Here, Taylor has found a way to get these old trees to bear fruit again.

(Continued on page 32.)

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WHAT TO READ

(Continued from page 31.)

Personal narratives, real and imagined

Taylor weaves a regional history of personal narratives using threads real and imagined, and her treatment radiates respect for her subjects and their honesty. "People have shared stories with me and a lot of those stories make people vulnerable. I feel good about sharing [them] in a way that people feel respected and not attacked or criticized or [that they are] exposing something from their family background that is painful. [This work] appreciates who they really are and how they really feel," she says.

While the stories themselves are fabrications, Taylor based them on actual incidents that she learned about from oral histories and her research in St. Mary's County history. "I didn't want to write anything that I didn't feel was authentic, in terms of what actually happened," she says. "But I also didn't want to invade privacy or reveal people in a way that would be threatening or unfair."

Taylor's ethical concerns ensured that the book "did not indicate in any way that this happened in this building or house for obvious reasons. There was no way that I could have known the history of all these places. A lot of the stories just came to me for who knows why," she says. Not that Taylor believes she channeled the otherworldly; her approach is more practical than magical. "I'm not that into mysticism, but I did ask myself 'What if there was a presence or vibrations of sounds left in these building, what would I hear?'" she says.

The stories include elements from her childhood in Arkansas, too. "Some are about what happened to me or someone I knew, or my parents. My mother [was a teacher] and I learned about how things were in schools there from an early age. There were many parallels when I encountered stories here," Taylor says.

She continues, "Because I am aging, I feel a particular sympathy or identification with some of those characters, with the fading away of a way of life, fading away of a building, an awareness of time

passing.”

“It’s an American story, here in St. Mary’s County. The human experience is at once unique and universal, so thinking about birth and death, weddings and meals – those kinds of experiences that everyone has.” She says “Listening In” dovetails what is with what was and makes the past present. Within these pages, we are more than readers – we observe and participate.

“You folks aren’t put off by those old ghost stories, are you?” the book asks. On the contrary, Ms. Taylor – we can’t put them down. •



JACQUELINE PASIKOW

About the Author

Merideth Taylor is professor emerita of theater and dance at St. Mary’s College of Maryland, a prize-winning documentary filmmaker and coeditor of “In Relentless Pursuit of an Education: African American Stories from a Century of Segregation.”

She has been honored by the St. Mary’s County Branch NAACP with a Lifetime Achievement Award for her use of the performing arts to produce positive social change.

A Meet the Author reception will be held Sept. 22 following an oral history workshop from 9:30-11:30 a.m. with the Unified Committee for Afro-American Contributions at the U.S. Colored Troops Interpretive Center at John Lancaster Park in Lexington Park. The public is welcome to attend at no cost. Call 240-216-7286.

At 9 a.m. Sept. 27, Ms. Taylor will be a guest on E. Ethelbert Miller’s 89.3 WPFW radio show “On the Margin.”

A book launch celebration will take place at 4:30 p.m. Oct. 1 at St. Mary’s College of Maryland.

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