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## FICTION

### ‘Whisper Hollow’ details struggles in coal-mining town

Posted: 12:00 a.m. Saturday, March 28, 2015

By Zane Jungman - Special to the American-Statesman

A metal elevator disgorges dirty men and mine carts into sunlight. Welcome to God's own country.

Verra is a town near a coal-stained West Virginia valley, a bleak home for mankind's most towering, biblically proportioned dilemmas. Through a half-century long tale, author Chris Cander conjures women with grave ethical and religious fractures, the kind only mendable over a lifetime.



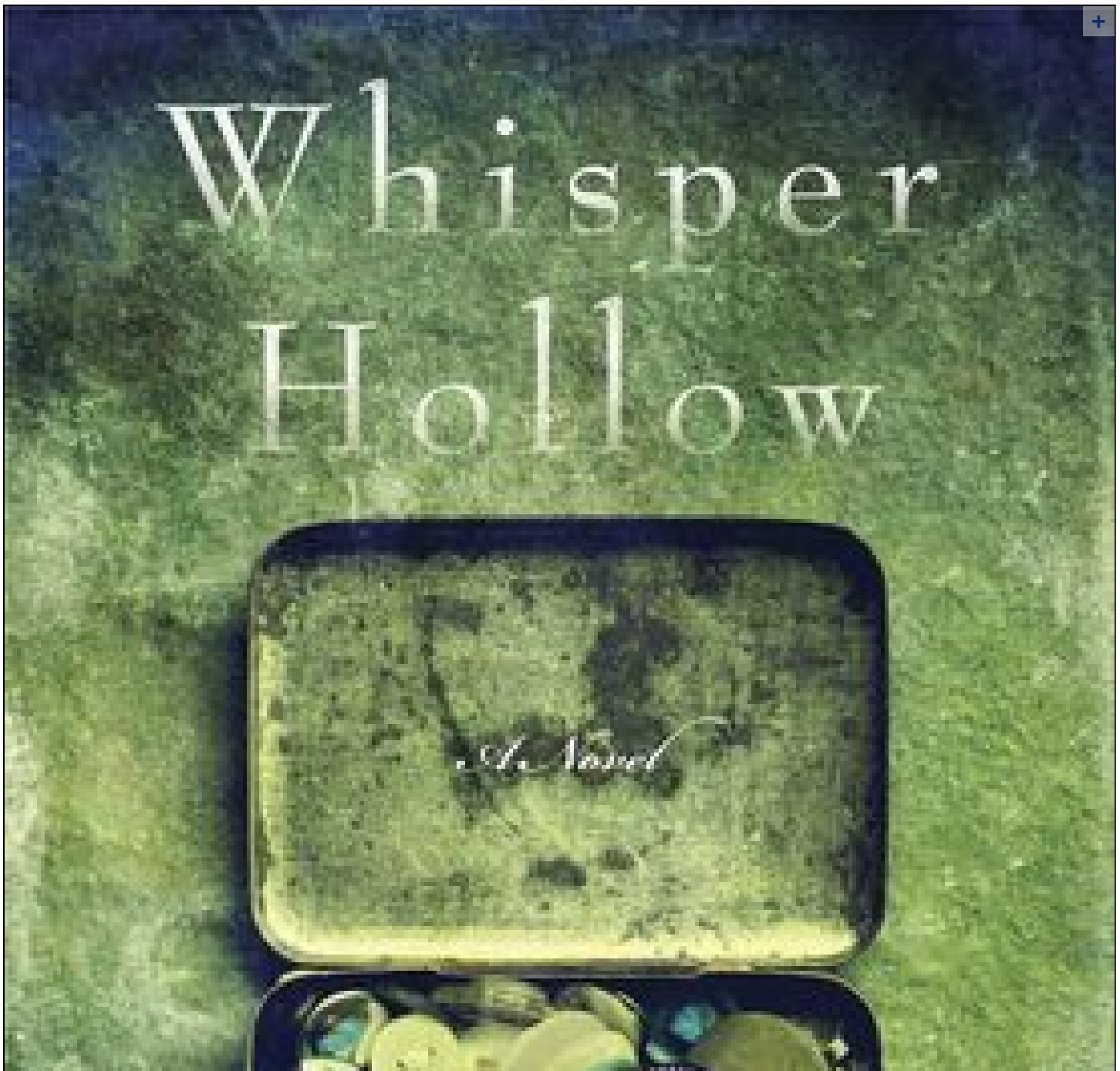
Houston author Chris Cander.

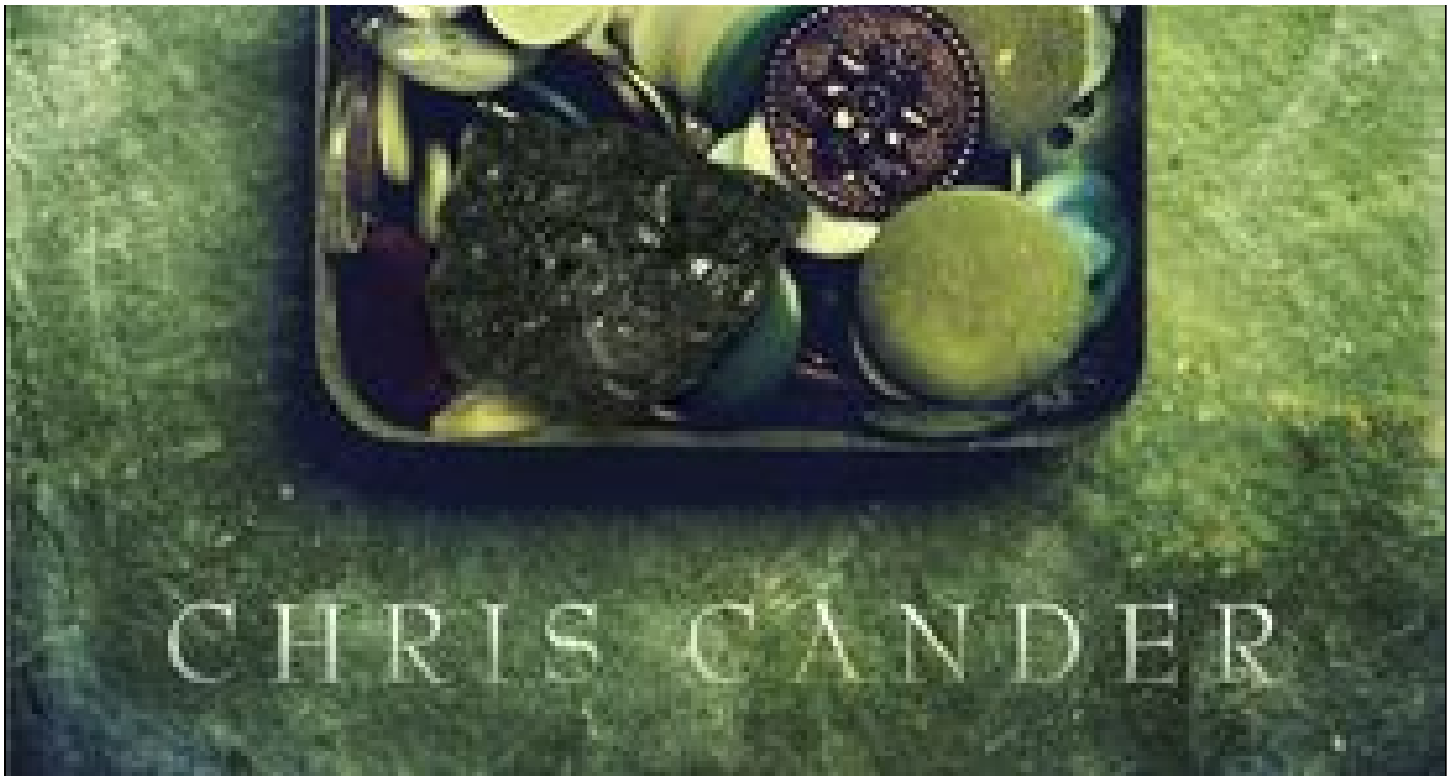
Unloving mothers. Slain husbands. Forsaking Gods. Cander's heroines tumble down a tree of gothic misfortunes.

But after finally hitting bottom, each goes through inner changes – each as unforgettable as black lung.

The novel opens in 1916 with two immigrant families raising daughters. It draws on novels like Marilynne Robinson's "Spring Cleaning." With a grander historical scope, "Whisper Hollow" details spiritual, sexual and personal awakenings up until 1969. The central figures take metamorphic paths as different as moths and butterflies.

The moth is Myrthen Bergmann, a zealous woman hoping to join the Carmelite nuns and flee a heinous past. At 5, Myrthen accidentally kills her twin Ruth during tug-of-war. Tragically echoing Cain and Abel's myth, Myrthen grows obsessed with reuniting with God and her lost sister, and the strain makes her misanthropic with everyone else. Myrthen lives the most inescapably biblical life; fear of sin makes her commit only darker and darker ones.





"Whisper Hollow," by Chris Cander

The butterfly is Alta Krol, who has a more colorful metamorphosis. As a teenager, Alta is smitten with Joe Esposito, who marries Myrthen under shady terms. Bereft of her greatest love, Alta flounders in servitude to the demands of other men: her hungry brothers and father, her lummoX miner husband Walter. Alta yearns to be liberated like Aunt Maggie, a cigarette-burning iconoclast with glitzy connections to a faraway world of artists. Through the decades, Alta learns to seize opportunity from the oppressive status quo, to paint as her idolized European artists do, to grow beyond servitude.

An unexpected protagonist, Lidia Kielar, appears decades later to unite both women's stories. Lidia is raped by her brother with an intellectual disability, and carries to term without telling her husband the truth of the pregnancy. Raising her son Gabriel out of taboo, Lidia is shaped by encounters with the elderly Alta and Myrthen. The two old recluses provide Lidia examples of how shame and repression utterly shape lives.

What makes the novel special is its steady progression though decades. Every chapter steps forward in time a few years, adding the rich historical subtext of America's maturation. From an adolescent land of pioneers, to a sexual revolution battlefield for modernizing adults, America is a richly growing being in Cander's words. Like a coal-powered rocket, "Whisper Hollow" rumbles upward with an unforgettable tempo.

So many levels of subtext and interrelated character growths are daunting to navigate at times, but Verra's coal mine stands as a huge sticky glue, a narrative center connecting every struggle.

The coal industry leaves every Verrite stooped, dirty, wedded to strict family and gender roles for survival. Every day the men descend to their suffocating workplace just as the women must face their own darkness each day. And under the cold bonds of church and community expectation, men and women suffer their secrets quietly.

The novel nods to the themes of "Life in the Iron Mills" and other industrial revolution literature, the ways dehumanizing labor stunts people's ethical growth.

The ambitions of "Whisper Hollow" could have easily fallen into oversentimental pieces. Cander thankfully cultivates an antidote; with enough period detail to pack Smithsonian, the novel re-creates the social mores of mine-town life. From the kielbasa lunches in every miner's coal pail, to Catholic church law shaping all prayers and aspirations, gritty realism brings down the ethos' volume.

So masterfully controlled is the pace and tone of "Whisper Hollow" that you can swing a pick axe without hitting any impurities. Only one element sometimes down drags the experience. Characters are near pathological in trying to fulfill their symbolic destinies. Myrthen goes so far as to wear a bloody crown of thorns for her unwanted wedding; sometimes characters feel like calculated ethical examples rather than living, breathing people. A little air could be injected into the tight narrative control.

But rhythmic and beautiful, "Whisper Hollow" collides Old Testament with sooty coal town Americana in steady harmony.

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Whisper Hollow

Chris Cander

Other Press, \$17.95

### Author appearance

Chris Cander, who teaches for Houston-based Writers in the Schools, will speak and sign copies of her new book at 7 p.m. Monday at BookPeople, 603 N. Lamar Blvd.

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