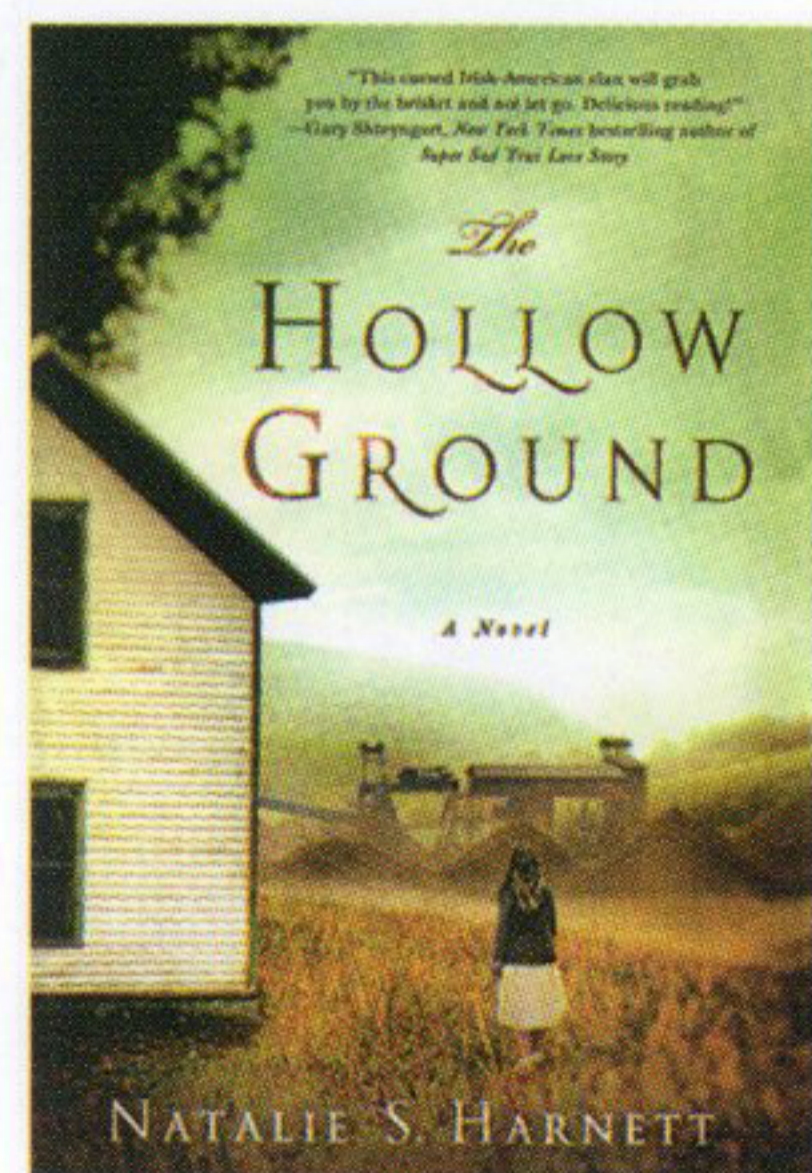




Natalie S. Harnett, taking a break in her backyard, remains grateful to the QC professors who helped her refine her craft.

Harnett, like Cheshire a Queens native, ranged beyond New York to research *The Hollow Ground* (St. Martin's Press), a coming-of-age story and murder mystery set in Pennsylvania's coal country. The novel won the John Gardner Fiction Book Award for 2015, putting its author in the company of such previous recipients as Jonathan Franzen and Meg Wolitzer, and was just named the 2014 Appalachian Book of the Year by the Appalachian Writers Association.



“Writing is what I wanted to do for as long as I can remember,” says the delighted honoree, who grew up in Elmhurst, daughter of a phone company employee and a homemaker/painter. At QC, Harnett majored in English, with a concentration in creative writing. “I took a lot of classes with Richard Schotter and Joseph McElroy,” she reports. “They were both very supportive of me. Once McElroy had to be out and called me at home, asking me to cover the class.

It was a total thrill.” Another memorable teacher was Susan Fox, who led an intensive honors seminar with fewer than 10 students. “I was very shy and hardly ever raised my hand,” continues Harnett. “It was terrifying but wonderful for me.”

On the recommendation of McElroy—an award-winning novelist himself—she entered Columbia’s MFA program. After graduating, she began teaching, primarily remedial classes and English as a second language. She married a restaurant manager, settled in Long Island, had a daughter, and kept writing despite repeated setbacks. “I dreamed of being published by a major publisher,” says Harnett, who completed three novels that remain unsold. “My first agent quit. I had to accept the fact that it might not happen. The joy had to be that I loved writing.”

Recalling childhood visits to her grandfather’s house in northeastern Pennsylvania, where she heard about insuppressible mine fires raging underground, she sketched out a multigenerational saga told from the perspective of an 11-year-old girl. “It’s so hard to know what they’re going to buy,” notes Harnett, referring to editors. “I thought people would be interested in this huge economic and environmental disaster. But my editor actually bought the book for its coming-of-age aspect.”

She recently finished the initial draft of her next novel, about a wealthy diamond dealer who fled to New York from Amsterdam, her descendants, and the indentured servant who accompanied her. “My gift is description—poetic, lyrical writing; I had to learn plot in school,” says Harnett, who feels comfortable with historic fiction and the research it involves. This time around, she may not have to do a lot of digging. The story is inspired by her great-grandmother’s experiences, and the setting is 1954 Elmhurst.