



# RORY KENNEDY'S ROAR

Plenty of movies and documentaries have set out to reveal the lives of rural families living on the economic edge—what sets Rory Kennedy's *American Hollow* apart is that she addresses her subject with so much heart and such a level gaze, without ever slipping into the trap of condescension

Interview by Leslie Camhi

**In a busy office** on the thirteenth floor of a TelleCa loft building, 164 pounds of canine love came bawling toward me. "That's Clementine," a young woman said, extending her hand. "I'm Rory." Her manner was brisk, but her mild, light eyes seemed oddly familiar. The daughter of Ethel and Robert Kennedy, she was born six months after her father's assassination in 1968. Today she's a documentary filmmaker and the director of *American Hollow*, a film focusing on another American family, the Bowlings, who've lived for generations in a remote Kentucky valley called Madlick Hollow. Seventy-year-old Iona and her tribe work the land, gather roots, and collect welfare, in a world of satellite television and Prozac slowly encroaches. *American Hollow* airs this month on HBO; the accompanying book (with a foreword by Robert Coles, interviews by Mark Bailey, and photographs by Steve Lehman) is published by Buffinck Press.

**Issue came:** In the book, you say this project was partly inspired by a trip your father took to West Virginia. What had you heard about that trip?

**nm szwzr:** When my father went down to Appalachia, it had a very resonating impact on him. He saw children who were malnourished, and families of ten living in one-room shacks. My mother and brothers and sisters often talked about how important it was to him. So it was an area that I had always heard about and been interested in. **cc:** The images I have of Appalachia date from the '30s, from James Agee and Walker Evans. It's not a place I think about as existing today.

**mc:** In some ways, it hasn't changed that much, though in other ways it has. A lot of people say the social programs of the '60s were a complete failure, but in truth people live better now than they did thirty years ago. There's more education and more support for people in abusive relationships. A lot of people who left the region have come back, so there's a broader range of influence and experience. More people have running water, telephones, bathrooms. You still come across pockets of extreme poverty. But to me, this film is really a celebration. Free Bowling, in particular, has such a stirring spirit, a great sense of humor, and pride in the land and her family. I was completely amazed by her.

**cc:** Did you meet her first?

**mc:** Yes, but a number of the kids were hanging around, so I met a whole bunch of them.

**cc:** You describe the Bowlings as a matriarchy. But many of the women have suffered from extreme domestic violence.

**mc:** So many of the women in the family have emerged from difficult situations. However small their achievements might appear in a broader context, they've done really extraordinary things with their lives. Whether it's Samantha, who's managed to step out of an abusive relationship. Or Iona, who grew up watching her mother being constantly abused by her father, in a family where there was alcoholism. (continued on page 62)

(continued from page 60) and still became this incredibly strong person. Or Wanda, who's takes it upon herself to get her high school equivalency diploma. And now she and Samantha are working at Mid South Electronics. They play such an important role in keeping their family together and rearing their children and growing fresh vegetables in their gardens. And I think there's a sense that the Bowlings wouldn't live in the Hollow as they do now if it weren't for Iona. She's the reason they continue to operate as a family in the way they do and to have the work ethic that they do, despite the fact that a lot of them don't have what we would consider real jobs.

**cc:** What is their work ethic, anyway?

**mc:** In Appalachia, there are very few job opportunities. A lot of people are faced with the decision of whether to stay with their families or to go to a city where they've never been and take on a different life. And that's really hard. I hope one of the questions the film raises is about the

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demand in our society to be as productive as possible in an economic sense. What you see are the consequences of that demand, the dying of a particular culture. Some people might say that it should die. But to me, there's something very important there that I don't want to lose hold of, which is their sense of family and community and working the land. And their dependence upon one another, in a nice way. To force these people out has real material consequences that we might not be able to gauge in the size of our gross national product, but that can be measured and felt in other important ways. Ultimately, though, I think the film asks more questions than it answers.

**cc:** You've been making documentaries for eight years. I got the impression that *American Hollow* is less pointedly political than some of your other work.

**mc:** Yes. I just came back from Washington, where we had a screening on Capitol Hill of a film I finished a couple of months ago, about AIDS in Africa. And there's a real sense that it's helping to influence a bill allocating millions of dollars for children with AIDS there. It's a fifteen-minute, educational advocacy film that hits its point home over and over again. But the kind of filmmaking that *American Hollow* represents is also incredibly important to me.

**cc:** Was your own sense of family a motivating force for this project?

**mc:** Well, I grew up in a family where I was one of eleven children, and there are thirteen children in this family. Certainly, family is the most important thing to me. When you're making a film, you have to have some level of identification and connection with your subject or it doesn't work. And I found that I connected with Iona and her children in a substantial way.

**cc:** One of the stereotypes that comes to my mind about Appalachian culture is its xenophobia. So I was amazed at how un inhibited the Bowlings were before your camera, and how intimately they let you enter their lives.

MC: I do think the family is very open and willing—they know they have something special to offer. Iree in particular is a documentarian; she has dozens of photo albums that span over a hundred years. And she'll go through them and tell you who everyone is, and what their relationship is to the others. She has a story for every one of them. She makes the quilts that you see in the film. She says, "My mother made them, and her mother made them, and her mother's mother made them, so I guess that's why I'm doing it." There's a sense that she's keeping tradition alive because it's very important to her. And she also sees the influences of television and prescription drugs and grocery stores and fast-food restaurants impinging upon this little hollow. So on some level, I think she feels this documentary may help preserve a lifestyle that she knows isn't going to carry on forever. And they asked tons of questions: "Why are you doing this?" "What is this film about?" At the beginning I had no idea what the film was about. They really led us. So it evolved into this constant dialogue that we're still having to this day.

LC: At one point, Iree says, "We never did think of ourselves as poor because we always had food to eat and a roof over our heads." It struck me that living in a city you see people going without those things quite often.

MC: I think you have to readjust your frame of mind to understand what it means to be impoverished in the country. In Mudlick Hollow, without a car you can't go to the grocery store. You can't get a job or an education. If there's a medical problem, it takes an hour and a half for help to arrive. So a car, which is a total luxury for somebody in the city, is completely essential to their way of life. Government programs often don't make allowances for that. Or they set up a social program and then they won't provide transportation, so nobody goes. The implications of living in that geographical situation are quite extreme. In winter, for example, when it snows no one comes up to shovel them out. They just wait for the snow to melt. The kids don't go to school. And they have to have enough food to last them. Two winters ago they were stuck up there for a month. Nobody left.

LC: I guess they have to get along, too.

MC: [both laugh] Yes. That's very important.

LC: Were there things you were attached to that you had to leave out in the end?

MC: Yes. We shot a hundred hours of footage over the course of a year, and we had to get it down to ninety minutes—so editing the film was a torturous process. There were often phrases that I just loved. For example, Neial said: "There's a fine line between fishing and looking stupid." I really wanted to include that. ■