

COUNTRY QUEERS SEASON 1 EPISODE 7

DESCRIPTION: Silas House is a nationally best-selling author of 6 novels, 3 plays, and a book of creative nonfiction. Silas grew up on Adena, Yuchi, Cherokee, and Shawnee land in Laurel County, Kentucky. In this interview, recorded in July of 2018 at the Hindman Settlement School, Silas talks about growing up in the evangelical holiness church, how meeting his now-husband inspired him to come out at age 34, the lessons he learns from his children, how writing feels like prayer, and his faith.

For this episode, we're asking folks who have additional funds to donate to two fundraisers.

The first is a [funding campaign](#) for [Black Soil: Our Better Nature](#), whose mission is to reconnect Black Kentuckians to their heritage and legacy in agriculture. They represent over 60 Kentucky-based Black farmers, culinary artists, artists, and makers.

The second is a [GoFundMe to support](#) Jennie and Delaney's goal for stable housing in rural Tennessee. Jennie is a Black, vegan, agender Aries mom of a 2-and-a-half-year-old agender Scorpio child. In Jennie's words: "I'd like to build us a tiny home so that we'll have stability, can move when we need to travel, eat, sleep, and wash comfortably, and be active and present in community."

CREDITS: Host/Producer/Lead Editor: Rae Garringer. Assistant Editor/Composer-Performer of Acoustic and Electric Guitar Music: Tommie Anderson. Editorial Advisory Dream Team: [Hermelinda Cortés](#), Sharon P. Holland, and [Lewis Raven Wallace](#). Theme Song Composer/Banjo: [Sam Gleaves](#). Theme Song Pedal Steel: [Rebecca Branson Jones](#). Special thanks to Tommie Anderson, for help with the chimes! Most importantly, thanks to Silas House for sharing his story so generously with us all.

TRANSCRIPT

[Sound of running water]

LILL [Intro]: I'm Lill in the Coal River Valley of Southern West Virginia, and you're listening to Country Queers, the podcast.

[Theme Song]

RAE [Host]: Hey, I'm Rae Garringer and this is Country Queers, a podcast featuring oral history interviews with rural and small-town queer and trans folks in the U.S. Each episode features an interview I've recorded since founding this project in 2013. In this episode you'll meet Silas House.

Silas is a father, a husband, an activist, and a nationally best-selling author of six novels, three plays, and a book of creative nonfiction. Silas grew up on Adena, Yuchi, Cherokee, and Shawnee land in Laurel County, Kentucky. We sat down together in July of 2018 at the Hindman Settlement School, which is located in Knott County, KY on Adena, Shawnee, & Cherokee land. The Hindman Settlement School hosts the Appalachian Writers' Workshop each summer. That workshop is where I first met Silas in 2013—the same summer I started to gather interviews for this project. It took me five years to build up the courage to ask him if he might be up for sharing his story with the project, and I'm so grateful that I got the chance to talk with him.

Silas is an incredible writer, and thinker, and I'll just say, I love listening to him talk—the cadence and tone of his voice, his thoughtful use of words, his beautiful east Kentucky dialect.

The summer this interview took place, the Supreme Court ruled in favor of a Colorado baker who, citing the First Amendment's protection of religion, refused to create a customized wedding cake for a gay couple. That summer hundreds of thousands of people demonstrated across all 50 U.S. states against family separations, and the containment of children in cages, carried out by the United States Border Patrol & ICE, and then the highly contested and later very public very difficult conversation for a lot of folks, Trump nominated Brett Kavanaugh to the Supreme Court.

But on July 24, 2018, Silas and I climb the stairs to his room in one of the Hindman Settlement School's apartments. Silas is wearing jeans and a t-shirt that says "Defend Appalachia" over drawings of a mandolin, a banjo, a dulcimer, and a fiddle. We switch off the window AC unit and pull two chairs close together. I rest the Zoom H4n recorder on the foot of the bed between us. Silas talks about growing up in the Holiness Church and his long journey towards coming out at age of 34, and he talks about how he reconciles his own faith with the realities of Christianity's attacks on queer and trans people.

One more quick note, there's multiple people that Silas talks about in this interview who aren't out, and so we found a variety of ways to cover up their names. In one part you will hear two different chime tones and each of those tones represents a different person in the story. And at another point you'll kind of hear me come in and kind of summarize something Silas has said, and that's all out of wanting to protect the safety of some of the folks that he mentions in this story.

SILAS: I'm Silas House. I'm 46, and I live in Berea, Kentucky. Berea's about 45 minutes from where I grew up, but it's a whole different world in lots of ways, simply because it's this little blue dot in a big red sea. It's a college town, founded by abolitionists in the 1850s. It's a really small town. Just about everybody there works at the college. It has a long social justice history. I love it because it is that bluish dot, it's not as blue as I want it to be, but I can still see the mountains out my bedroom window. It's a different Appalachia than the one I grew up in.

RAE: How does it compare? It's not all that far away from where you grew up, but what are some of the differences about it?

SILAS: Well, the main difference is most people who live there aren't from the region. A lot of professors come from the Northeast. Sometimes that can cause some tension, you know, or all over the country really they're from. So sometimes there's culture clash.

When I go down home, what I love about going down home is, I don't know, I'm in a restaurant, then I hear everybody talking, and it's the language of comfort for me. I have often felt more of an outsider because of my dialect than because of my orientation. And so- I don't hear that accent and that cadence in Berea, like I would hear at home. The landscape is very similar but the people are just-not only the language, but the way people interact is real different. It's not as warm and familial. I think when you're Appalachian or you're rural, there's an immediate connection with somebody who's Appalachian or rural, the same way that if you're gay or queer or however you want to say it, we talk about family. There's an immediate recognition. You look out for each other to some degree.

RAE: So you were talking about where you grew up. Where were you born and what was your childhood like? You can sort of give as much or little detail as you want there.

SILAS: I was born in Whitley County, Kentucky, which is right on the Tennessee-Kentucky border, about an hour straight north of Knoxville. I grew up in a real tri-county area. It was Whitley County, Laurel County, and Knox County. When I was a child there was still a coal mine in there. By the time I was a teenager it had pretty much been mined out. Everybody in my family except for my father and me, every man worked in some capacity in the mining industry.

It's a really beautiful place to grow up. It was really near Cumberland Falls, which a lot of people go to, and near Cumberland Gap. I stayed outside all the time. I just roamed the woods. I was kin to just about everybody on my road. If I wasn't kin to them, we went to church with them, so you felt like you were kin. Everybody knew everybody. There was real generational knowledge, so it wasn't just that I knew my best friend growing up, Larry Carr, it's that my father and his father had been best friends growing up, and their father. There was this gestational sense of place that made it a really great place to grow up.

It was also a really judgmental place. I was raised in the Holiness Church. My mother was a really beloved, she still is, gospel singer. So even when we weren't at our church for the three or four-hour services three or four nights a week, we were often ... She would sing at nursing homes or revivals or tent revivals, camp meetings, brush arbors. It's like our whole lives revolved around church.

And I guess so, from the time I was 11 or 12 years old, I started really questioning all that, around the same time that I knew I was gay. Really, as I think back, that was really the only bad part of my childhood was knowing that people in my family were incredibly homophobic and that it was backed up by the church, which was all-powerful.

But, other than that I had a wonderful childhood. I had great parents, a great family. It was a small community in all the best ways, in that people really did ... It sounds so romantic and sort of precious, but I really do feel like everybody took care ... It was like a village raised you. It wasn't just your parents or your close family. The neighbors were part of that. It was very romantic in that way.

On the same token it was a very, it was a violent place in lots of ways. When I was little there was a really violent strike that happened in my hometown. My neighbor across the street was a scab. I was standing on the front porch when the picketers shot like 100 bullets into his bedroom wall, you know things like that, lots of families fighting outside.

I always said that everything was done in a big way there. You didn't do anything halfway. You loved really big and loud, and you fought really big and loud, and everything in between. So I'm really thankful for all of that, the good and the bad. It was an interesting, complex place to grow up. Those are the main things that came to my mind when you asked me that.

RAE: Yeah, no that's great.

Well, I guess I'm curious about two things from what you just said. One is about just how much the church was a part of your life, and then also knowing that you were gay when you were around 11 or 12. And so, some of this question I think is from just talking to you about your recent book, is that were there ways in which the church was also something that you loved as a kid?

SILAS: Oh yeah. I found so much love within the church from the people there. I knew everybody so well. As a child I was passed around. I would sit in everybody's lap. In retrospect it's because I was a little gay boy, but all those old women loved me, because I wasn't like the other little boys. I was really polite and things like that. They loved me for the very reason that they would come to find me suspect later.

I did not like going to church as much as we went. I was really lucky because I had an aunt—her name's Sis, I've written a lot about her—who never went to church. She and my mother were polar opposites in a lot of ways, although they were really close. Lots of times, Sis would beg for me to stay with her. She lived alone. Her husband had MS and was in a nursing home for 20 years. She traded off a lot on that, "I'm lonesome." Later, I realized that she would say that just to save me from going to church so much. She exposed me to a lot of stuff that I would've never been exposed to. She took me to the movies, which my parents would've never done. She took me trick-or-treating. She took me to all the things that were, quote, "of the world." My parents did everything of the church, and Sis did everything that was worldly, that might have sin about it.

I don't know how I would've turned out if it hadn't been for her, you know, because she let me know there was another way of being.

And so... This isn't even a generalization, I would go as far as to say it's a fact, that every little boy in Kentucky, maybe the whole region at that time... if you didn't love basketball, you were suspect. And I really did love basketball for a long time. Every man in my father's side of the family was a really, really great athlete. I was the first boy who wasn't. I wanted to be. I tried really hard, but I just wasn't.

I tried to get on the basketball team and carry that tradition on. I was in 5th or 6th grade, but it didn't matter. If you didn't get on in 7th grade, you were nothing. I didn't, so they made me the manager, which meant that I sort of cleaned up after everybody. At halftime I had to take the big mop over the gym floor and I had to get the new balls and I had to bring towels to the boys, and water. I was just sort of like their servant.

That's the first time I remember, I have a very clear memory of thinking, "Why do I think that that boy..."—that feeling of attraction to a boy. It was during basketball practice. I was the manager, sitting on the bleachers, and there they are in their little basketball shorts. I'm like, "What's wrong with me?"

RAE: Did you recognize it as attraction? Or was it like—?

SILAS: Yeah. I didn't have any kind of context for that. There was certainly no media representation at that time. This would've been 1982, '83. Any media representation would've been something making light of that. The only gay character I remember on TV was on the show called *Soap*. He was a total flamboyant stereotype. The only person I ever heard referred to as gay was Liberace. Everybody knew he was gay and they talked about that.

Also, my first cousin, [Chime #1], I guess I was a teenager before somebody told me that her best friend was gay. He was very tortured. One time, we were, I guess I was 11 or 12, and I was asleep with [Chime #1] in her bedroom. None of us had an air conditioner or anything back then, so the window was open and it was probably a box fan and I woke up in the middle of the night and I could hear somebody hollering [Chime #1]'s name. Of course, it scared me to death, and I woke her up. It turned out that this bunch of boys had gotten [Chime #2], beaten him up really badly, and threw him out in [Chime #1]'s yard, because they knew they were friends. I guess they realized they'd gone too far. She went out there and got him and took care of him. I guess that was the first time I thought about that and saw violence against a gay person.

People in my family then, after, I don't know I was 12 or 13 or so, I was way more conscious of people referring to [Chime #2]. They would say something like, "[Chime #2]'s queer, but he's great. He's a good guy," or they would usually say, "[Chime #2]'s funny." Sometimes people would say, "[Chime #2]'s a fag." I knew that word. Even I guess before I had proper knowledge of it, it just felt awful to hear.

I guess it was a long time, probably, I don't know, until I was 14 or 15, before I grappled with it really, just because I was trying to figure out what—what was going on. I think that my mother especially was wary of it pretty early on, because she often articulated things to me like, "It's wrong to be gay." And around the—It didn't help any that I sort of came into this realization at the same time that the AIDS epidemic started.

I don't hear people talk enough about the way that the AIDS epidemic held a whole generation of people from coming out, because there was this period there where, I don't know, the openness of the '60s and '70s and all that, but then it just all got torn away when AIDS started. By the time I was in middle school and high school, the number one way to insult somebody was to say they had AIDS. There was a rumor that there was an AIDS patient at the local hospital on the fourth floor and you better never go there, just all that sort of stuff. Besides the religion, also that consciousness, that awareness of AIDS really held me back from thinking that there might be a possibility of me living a gay life...So I'll let you ask your next question, or should I go on?

RAE: You can, well—did it just feel like it wasn't even a possibility? Or like?

SILAS: Yeah. I guess mostly because, mostly because, I knew the way my parents would react to it. I thought I would be dead to them. I thought I would lose my whole family.

I couldn't fathom that. I had grown up in such a tight family. It was just drilled out—drilled into us that family, blood, was the only thing that mattered. Growing up, I had friends in high school and stuff, but the main core was your cousins. You were expected to always do stuff with your cousins, first and foremost above anybody else. You were to be at family gatherings no matter what. So I would often think, would I rather like be happy in this way or happy in this way? Or stay in the closet and be sad or be out—or be sad because I can't be somebody I really want to be with or, be out and be sad because I can't be with my family? You know it was this choice between...really the choice I often—the way I often thought of it was I was putting myself before other people, which was the number one thing I had been taught to never do, to always be selfless.

Anyway, um...Then I guess about the time I was 15 or 16, I thought, "I can pray my way out of this. I can pray away the gay." I thought I was doing that for a little while. I mean I had a girlfriend that I really was crazy about. We had a lot of fun. We're still friends. She was so much fun. We both loved to dance and...

RAE [Host]: At this point, Silas begins to describe how he fell into his first gay relationship with a coworker.

SILAS: That's when I thought, "Oh, there's a whole other kind of happiness." Although I have had—I was happy in one way, with a girlfriend and all that, it was just like that felt like who I really was when I was with him.

I don't know how to explain it other than to say that in some way, even though I was, I felt pretty contented and all that, I never really felt like myself in that one scenario, but when I was with him it felt like, "I'm myself."

[BREAK]

[Music]

RAE [Host]: Hey, friends. Because we know the impact of colonization on people, land and resources in the U.S, we're encouraging our white listeners to engage in an ongoing process of reparations. So, during each episode break, we're asking our white listeners who have extra fund to donate to projects founded and led by, queer & trans, Black and Indigenous folks, and people of color.

Today we're asking you to donate to two fundraisers. The first is for a matching grant for Black Soil: Our Better Nature, whose mission is to reconnect Black Kentuckians to their heritage and legacy in agriculture. They represent over 60 Kentucky-based Black farmers, culinary artists, artists and makers.

The second is to support Jennie and Delaney's goal for stable housing in rural Tennessee. Jenny is a black, vegan, agender, Aries mom of a two-and-a-half-year-old agender Scorpio child. In Jennie's words: "I'd like to build us a tiny home so that we'll have stability, can move when we need to travel, eat, sleep and wash comfortably and be active and present in community."

The links to both of those fundraisers are in the episode notes and also over on our website at www.CountryQueers.com. Please give generously if you're in the position to do so.

Now, back to my July 2018 interview with Silas House. Just a note, Silas briefly mentions suicide in gay communities just after the 25-minute mark, and again just after the 27-minute mark. We just wanted to give folks a heads up, if you don't want to hear those sections just skip ahead ten seconds at both of those points.

[Music fades]

[END OF BREAK]

SILAS: So, I didn't come out to everyone till I was 34.

RAE: So do you want to talk about that? How—I guess anything you want to fill in on the way from college to there is fine...

SILAS: Yeah, so after things ended with [Banjo Strum], I don't know, maybe four years or so, and it was very sporadic.

RAE: Into college?

SILAS: From the time I was 17 until about the end of college, yeah. That was the only person I'd ever had any kind of gay relationship with at all. Then after I got in college I just decided, "I really want..."—This sounds so stupid, but it was the way I thought at the time. I thought, "I really want the American dream. I want the picket fence and I want kids and I want all of that." I couldn't have fathomed a gay family at that time. That would've never seemed possible to me. Again, I think a lot of that's representation. I just never saw anything like that.

RAE: Right, and the stories that were coming out were of AIDS.

SILAS: Right. At that point every gay character that you saw was suffering, they were miserable, they were suicidal. If there was a gay character, he was bound to die of AIDS or suicide in a movie.

And so, I was dating this woman that was really beautiful and smart. We had a good relationship. I thought that would work.

Just to make a long story short, we had two children, we were married 13 years, but it just didn't work out. That's just about all I can say about that really, out of respect for her.

During that time, I've put so much of myself into writing. All of my suffering that I had about being gay and all the confusion I had about that, guilt. I had guilt about everything. I was raised Holiness. It's like being raised Catholic. You feel guilty about everything. I've put that all into writing. My first three books, they're all about guilt.

I've put everything into my kids. I was over-the-top involved as a father. I always had one with me. And I just sort of resigned myself, then I met Jason, who was just such an incredible love. Just, I knew immediately that he was everything that I'd always wanted. And so that's when I really started to examine myself and think—I remember one thing, I thought, "What is the best thing for my children?" It was almost to the point also where if I didn't become who I really was, I was afraid I wasn't going to survive it. I mean, I don't know if I can say I was suicidal, but I sort of wished to be suicidal, if that makes any sense.

Then I would think, "I can be a much better father if I'm honest with who I am." Then I would think, "Oh, I'm just thinking that to justify."

Eventually I just thought, "This love is too huge to let go. I just can't do it." I came out to everybody. It didn't go well at all with my parents. It took them about 10 years. Now

they're great. Now they're really accepting of Jason. They love him. They come to our house, eat supper, sit around on the porch. Jason and my father work on projects together. They repaired the roof the other day together. And every time I see something like that, I'm like, "God, is this—am I really able to have both things?" I keep waiting for the bottom to drop out. You know?

I think there's something in the way that I was raised that, like, things can't be that good. Not that we have the perfect lives or anything, of course bad things happen and trouble. But, I mean the things I always wanted was to have somebody that I was really able to love completely in every way and also have my family. I've been able to have that over the last two or three years. And it's just the most amazing peace to have that. And for my children to love Jason and to have a real—We now have that family that I never thought could exist. It still is mind-boggling to me.

RAE: I'm curious too, when you were saying that you think that we don't hear enough stories about how the AIDS epidemic kept a whole bunch of people from coming out, was it on the news a lot?

SILAS: Oh yeah.

RAE: Because I think so much of queer history actually that we have is so much about cities. There's just so, so much of what we know about years and years ago is based in cities.

A lot of it, in terms of, I don't know, any kind of organizing, is around AIDS, which makes sense, because it was huge, but how were stories of AIDS coming into rural Kentucky?

SILAS: It was on the news all the time, and it was a panic.

RAE: It was very much seen as a gay—

SILAS: It was seen as the wrath of God on the gays, but that there was collateral damage, that the gays spread it to straight people too sometimes, like blood transfusions and things like that. So I never remember—I'm sure maybe that it happened, but I never remember hearing the preacher in the pulpit ever rail against gay people or anything until AIDS happened. Then he would talk about AIDS, and he would use it as an example of, I don't know, lack of morals in modern society and things like that. Of course, that led to a new kind of hatred for gay people. For me, at least in my consciousness, I noticed that hatred attached to AIDS in a way I hadn't ever noticed it before. 'Cause people really had that idea that you could just get it from touching somebody or whatever for a while. I mean, I'm sure some people still think that.

It seems so antiquated, and I guess it was in a way. I mean, the Reagan Administration didn't do a lot to educate people. They certainly didn't fund—give the proper funding and all that. It had a huge impact on me as a gay person for sure, and the way I thought about gay people. You only saw gay people on the news if they were dying of AIDS or if

they were in the Pride parades, and that burnt my parents up. Cause that was their only exposure. They didn't think about [Chime #2] that way, who was the only real gay person they knew. They knew he was gay, but he didn't exhibit that gayness. He just went to Lexington to the bars on his own.

RAE: And didn't talk about it at home.

SILAS: Right. He knew he couldn't.

RAE: Well, you also talked about how much you put into your writing. I'm curious, I don't know quite what my question is, but how writing has helped or supported, or has it—did it help you through and how, if it did?

SILAS: First of all, writing helped me to survive those hours and hours of church when I was really little. I wasn't allowed to take toys, but I was allowed to take a pen and paper, so I wrote. I remember, I don't know, being 7 or 8 years old and doing character sketches of everybody in the church. I would describe them in detail and write down stuff they said and keep a log of people in the church, as a way of entertaining myself in a 3-hour church service. Then as I went on, I still did that. I could live vicariously through characters. I could be "normal" by writing about a straight character who—that wasn't their trouble.

Also, part of it's just keeping busy, being really busy, because I worked a full-time job as a mail carrier. I was a very hands-on father. I wrote two or three hours every night. I just kept myself so busy. Writing's just always been a way of prayer for me. It's meditation to some degree, because I can zone out and I can live those lives. I don't think I thought of it that way until fairly recently. I don't think I was really conscious of that. Also, I got to live vicariously in some degree.

Now, if you look at my first novel, *Clay's Quilt*, from this point of view, I'm hoping somebody will write about this someday, because I'd love to see it articulated, but it's a very homoerotic novel. Clay has this best friend whose name is Cake. They sleep together. At one point, Clay undresses him. They're always riding motorcycles all hugged up. Jason calls it Gay's Quilt. It is a really homoerotic novel. I have had people ask me about that. They asked me about it on my first book tour. I could feel my face just going so red, thinking, "I'm exposed," because people would say, "Do you think Cake's in love with Clay?" I'd think, "No." I'd say, "No, no. They're just best friends." Then I started realizing, "Oh shit, they are. He is in love with him."

RAE: *[Laughs]* What are the things or the times when you feel the most proud about being gay? And also the most proud about being country, and are those ever the same or are they often really different?

SILAS: I don't know if I've ever felt proud until you put it that way about this. But I, yeah I guess that would be how I've felt. It feels good to me when I meet somebody and they're surprised to meet a gay person who doesn't have a deep hatred for a rural place

that they're from. That shocks a lot of people, and people are always like, "Why do you still live there?"

I guess it makes me feel proud to be part of changing people's perceptions, you know? For somebody to leave meeting me, having a different idea of what it means to be gay or what it means to be rural. Because those things tend to not go hand in hand for people, especially for somebody to be happily gay and rural.

I experienced that a lot on my very first book tour, because people are always so shocked that somebody from my background could publish a book and it be received. You know, they had this idea that you couldn't be raised working class and be first generation college and had been a mail carrier and write a book. It's so classist.

RAE: Yeah, it is. *[Laughs]*

SILAS: It's not that I set out to break people's expectations, but when that happens, that makes me proud, because I think assumptions of any kind are just so dangerous. So anytime we can chip away at those, it's a good thing.

RAE: Yeah, yeah. I have a question that I ask people depending on if they have kids yet or not. But for you, I mean, I guess, like maybe since you've been fully out, and living with Jason, how has it been to also be a parent through that, in a small town?

SILAS: Well, I'm sure there are people who talk badly about me and say I'm setting a bad example or whatever, but in a way my children helped me to accept myself. Because they had such a different way of thinking about all that than I did. And it's partly because they weren't raised to be bigoted. They weren't raised around people who were actively engaged in that, like I was, in the same way.

But it's also just generational. I think that their generation thinks about this much differently. Of course, not everybody, but from what I've seen across the board, their generation, it's much more often a non-issue for them.

However, when you come out, there is a new kind of honesty that you have that sets such a great example for them. But I mean, I've had people say to me, one of my best friends who—he has parents who are very accepting. It was never an issue for him to come out, even though we were about the same age. He wasn't raised religiously, et cetera. There were all these layers that made it much easier, for lack of a better word, for him. I mean, he would say that.

And he said to me one time, he said, "You know, sometimes, as much as I love you, it's hard for me to trust you completely, because you were married to a woman for 13 years." I had a long talk with him about that. I'm like, "You're assuming this, this, and this, and there are all these layers to this." And in fact, I think gay people, queer people, have been more judgmental openly to me about that than anybody. So I mean, like any community, there's...

RAE: Right. I feel like part of that is, again, all the examples we have up until very recently of queer life are based on cities where people left so that they could live this fully-out life. Right? And so it's just a different dynamic in rural towns, even if you are out. The way people sometimes navigate different spaces throughout their day in their small town is going to look really different than if you are never going to see that person again because you're in New York City. I feel like this is also part of the problem, our lack of rural queer stories is that there's this idea that there's a right way to be queer, and that that's always to be all the way out. Completely. At every moment. Or else you're like...failing.

SILAS: Exactly. Yeah. Or you're lying or you're not being a good representative or—

RAE: A role model.

SILAS: Yeah. I've been told all of that. My response is always, "I just want everybody to be happy." And some people have different ways of going about that and different levels of coming out, and et cetera. So just let people be and do their own thing. You can't rail against hetero-normalcy and all that if you're going to be judging people on the way they're being gay. You know?

RAE: Yeah, yeah!

SILAS: Yeah, it's exhausting, but the other level of it for me is that I'm pretty vocally a person of faith as well.

And so that's confusing for people sometimes. They're like, "What? A gay person who goes to church?" I'm like, "Yeah, there are lots of us."

RAE: Well, I wonder if you'd talk a little bit about that, about being a gay person of faith?

SILAS: Well, I go to Episcopalian church, which is totally accepting of queer people. In fact, the church split over that. And so I feel really comfortable being in the Episcopal church and sitting there with Jason, and everybody's treating us like a couple and going up to have communion together. We had the Holy Eucharist at our wedding...you know? Anyway, the short version of that is I feel really comfortable now and I feel so accepted and welcomed, but I don't think my parents—My parents sort of have the attitude that I might as well not even go to church if I'm going to an Episcopalian church, you know. So, it's not something I can talk about with my family. And the gay community, sometimes, not always, of course, but lots of times I feel people inwardly rolling their eyes when you even talk about that. And I think so much of that is because so much of modern Christianity's so awful and so abusive. And so if you identify in any way as being Christian, you're suspected as being part of that abuse.

And I mean, I understand that to some degree, but sometimes there are forms of Christianity that don't participate in that. But I think now when we say Christian, that has

done so much damage to so many people that it just automatically makes people tense up, and especially queer people, who have been—who are understandably traumatized by the church!

And that's also, I think, part of it for me was I was always—I've always thought, "You're not going to take this away from me. I'm not going to let you take this from me."

Because you know, there was so many people telling me that I wasn't worthy of God and I wasn't going to be accepted by church, or whatever. And I thought, "I'm not letting you take that. That's mine. You know?"

RAE: Yeah. I guess, I'm curious, when are you happiest in your life?

SILAS: When I have Jason and my children with me all at the same time. That's number one. When I'm reading. When I'm writing. What makes me happiest about being a writer is the writing. I don't feel as happy when the book is out in the world. I think a lot of people who want to be writers think that's the best part is like being in a magazine or being on a book tour. For me, that's just the part you have to do to get to keep having those moments alone of writing.

And again, it goes back to what I said earlier about it, it feels meditative to me, it feels peaceful, calming. It feels like survival. And I guess if I had to think of like a place in the world that I'm happiest, it's when I'm on the lake.

I love bodies of water and I'm always happier by a body of water and I'm always happier with an animal. And I think a lot of people who have felt damaged and, I don't know, often are drawn to animals, you know? You feel better when you're with an animal. For me, it's a dog.

RAE: *[Laughs]* Well, thank you so much.

SILAS: Thank you. You're a great interviewer.

RAE: Thank you so much you're great to talk to—

SILAS: *[Overlapping]* —You're easy to talk to, you're very easy to reveal stuff to.

RAE: Well, good. *[Laughter]*

[Music]

RAE [Host]: Since the time of our interview in 2018, Silas and his husband Jason Howard, who is also a wonderful writer, have moved to Lexington, KY. Silas's most recent novel *Southern Most*, about a preacher who goes through a conversion after rejecting his gay brother, became a best seller shortly after this interview, and eventually won many awards, including the Weatherford Appalachian Book of the Year.

He was the first openly gay man to win the prize. His first three novels were recently reissued with new editions and new introductions by musician Tyler Childers.

Next time on Country Queers, it's the season finale! We'll hear my 2016 interview with Robyn Thirkill. Robyn is a hospice nurse who also farms on land that has been in her family for four generations.

[Music fades]

ROBYN THIRKILL: My great grandparents moved here from West Virginia and bought 40 acres of land.

RAE: When was that?

ROBYN: It was in—at the turn of the century. Actually, if you think about it, my great-grandfather would have then been a Black man traveling from West Virginia, and he came here, and him and my great-grandmother bought the land on credit. Out of the original 40 acres, 35 are still here. My grandmother and her, I don't know, 14 brothers and sisters were born here. My mom and her five brothers and sisters were born here. Yeah, so, I mean, it's important to me, it's a lot of history here.

[Music]

RAE [Host]: This episode was created and produced by me, Rae Garringer. Audio editing support from Tommie Anderson. Our theme song was written and performed on banjo by Sam Gleaves. Pedal Steel versions were performed by Rebecca Branson Jones. Additional music on electric and acoustic guitar was written and performed by Tommie Anderson. I also need to give another shoutout to Tommie in this episode, because when I was trying to figure out how to bleep out the names of some folks who Silas didn't want to out, Tommie came in with a disassembled wind chime and recorded two different tones to represent two different speakers, so, thank you Tommie, for all of your magic and for being my landmate. I'm so glad you and Goo are here.

Endless thanks to our brilliant editorial advisory dream team: Hermelinda Cortés, Lewis Raven Wallace, and Sharon P. Holland!! And, thanks most of all to Silas, for sharing your story so generously with us all and for inspiring so many younger queer writers in the region with your work. I know I'm not the only one who's so grateful for you.

If you liked what you heard, please subscribe, rate, and review the Country Queers podcast wherever you get yours! You can find all our episodes and more about the project at www.countryqueers.com. And while you're there, you can also sign up for our mailing list.

So, I hate fundraising—it really stresses me out. I've gotten a little better at it over the 7 years of this project, but I really hate asking for support in this way. But, since this is the second to last episode in this season, I just want to say that if you'd like to hear a

second season, the best way to make sure that happens is to sign up over on our Patreon page and support us in gathering more interviews, I'd love to be able to pay more additional folks to support in the production of the podcast, and none of that happens for free! The link to sign up for our [Patreon](#) is also over on our website.

Alright, until next time...stay queer out there, friends!

[END]